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Rural Students' Sense of Belonging at a Large Public University

by

Benjamin P. Heinisch

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
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Rural Students' Sense of Belonging at a Large Public University

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University of Nebraska, 2018

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This qualitative case study explored how undergraduate students from rural areas experience higher education environments and develop a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern public university. This study defined rural considering students' hometown population size and density as well as each individual participant's constructed reality of a rural identity (Crockett, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2000). The following questions guided this study: (1) How does students' identification with their rural background influence how they experience their college environment? (2) What do rural students see as key environmental factors affecting their sense of belonging? (3) Is the institution providing supportive environments for rural students and if so, how? Participants included 8 undergraduate rural students and 3 university administrators, all attending or associated with the institution identified as the instrumental case. Multiple data sources were collected at the institutional level and at the individual rural student level. Institutional level data included administrator responses, online public documents, and school newspaper articles. Individual level data incorporated a demographic questionnaire and two individual interviews utilizing artifact elicitation with each of the 8 rural student participants.

Data analysis and interpretation was aided by a conceptual model that included

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory of human development, Strange and Banning's (2015) four models of educational environments, and Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging. Inductive and systematic first and second cycle coding with triangulation resulted in the emergence of three patterns regarding the intersection of rural life identity and college belonging: (1) rural students alienated by rural life embraced college life, (2) rural students that strongly identified with rural life were challenged to belong in college, (3) some students could identify with rural life and experience both positive and negative implications for belonging in college. Interpretation of the findings indicated the importance of rural students' individual alienation or identification with rural life, subsequent congruence with the educational environment, and their ability to replace support structures from their rural community with new sub-communities in college, as being highly influential to their sense of belonging in college. Based on these findings, this study suggests implications for theory, practice, and research.

Dedication

For my wife Lorie:

Her life inspires me, her love moves me, and her sacrifice made it all happen.

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I have many people to thank for helping me get to this point in my academic career and in this study specifically. First I want to thank the amazing students that gave me their time and their stories to help further my work promoting rural student success in higher education. Without them, this study would just be speculation. I was particularly moved by their creativity in producing artifacts that provided intimate insights into their personal experiences. I also want to express my appreciation to the administrators who participated in this study and helped provide a layered and nuanced perspective of the environment at their institution. As a higher education professional, I recognize the sacrifice they made spending time to work with me on this.

I also would like to thank my advisor Dr. Elizabeth Niehaus for her continued inspiration and support throughout my journey as a doctoral student. I was fortunate to have her guidance while developing my program of study (and yes, I now agree the more research classes, the better). I really appreciate how extremely supportive and helpful she was navigating me through first the writing, then the publication process. My two independent study projects with her were probably the most impactful learning experiences I could have had for professional development in an academic setting. She gave me guidance but let me take the lead, which helped me learn by doing. I also appreciate the copious amount of time she spent reviewing my writing and wrangling my APA-style shortcomings. I was truly blessed with a patient, wise, and benevolent mentor.

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I also want to thank my employers and colleagues at UNL for their support and providing models of higher education professionals that I could look up to. The dedicated staff in the University Registrar's Office, including my first supervisor at UNL, Gail Meyer, made me appreciate how important higher education was. Gail had a deep-seated passion for her work at the university and I am forever grateful for her tutelage during my formative years as a professional. I also want to thank Assistant Registrar Juan Carlos Gutierrez for his assistance and contribution to this project, without him, I would not have had a sample of student participants.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Belonging is a basic human motivation (Maslow, 1943; Strayhorn, 2012). The importance of belonging is reflected in several seminal studies that focus on students' sense of belonging in college (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurdato & Carter, 1997; Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, & Alvarez, 2007; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). According to Strayhorn (2012), when students lack a sense of belonging in college, their self-esteem, emotional connection, social identity, and motivation are all negatively affected and undermines a student's academic performance and even affects one's plans to stay in college. Strayhorn (2012) conducted an extensive review of the literature on belonging in the educational context. Based on this research, Strayhorn described belonging as a driving force and motivation that becomes heightened depending on the context.

Belonging also intersects with one's social identities, relates to one's feeling of mattering, and must be constantly satisfied as environments change (Strayhorn, 2012). Research on sense of belonging in college has been done on a variety of student groups and sub-populations (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurdato & Carter, 1997; Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, & Alvarez, 2007; Kuh & Whitt, 1988), however there has been very little research pertaining specifically to students from rural areas developing a sense of belonging in higher education.

Rural Life

Crockett et al. (2000) used four ecological dimensions of rurality to define how youth from rural areas constructed their own individual version of rurality. These include, "population size and density, community ties, traditionalism, and land use" (p. 47). Although their work was focused more on rural student access to education than

belonging in higher education environments, McDonough, Gildersleeve, and McClafferty Jarsky (2010) recognized what they called “the rural life” (p. 191) was a collection of background experiences commonly shared by rural students that were different from those experienced by suburban and urban students. According to McDonough et al., the influence of rural communities and rural identity can affect rural students’ transition to college, development, and sense of belonging in college. The authors argued that higher education institutions do not recognize these cultural differences and “systems, institutions, and individual organizations are not congruent with rural students’ specific concerns...” (p. 191). This idea of a “rural life” being a unique experience of students from rural areas is supported by other research identifying issues common to rural students such as unique educational aspirations (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011; Hu, 2003; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Tieken, 2016), access to education (McDonough & McClafferty, 2001; Means et al., 2016), and social norms (Handke, 2012; Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004; Schultz & Neighbors, 2007).

Rural College Students

According to a recent article in the New York Times (Pappano, 2017), higher education institutions are now targeting rural students for recruitment in order to raise the numbers of educated individuals in rural areas and as a result, we have seen an increase in the number of rural youth enrolled in college. Rural student enrollment in postsecondary education has risen from 27.1% in 2004 (Provasnik et al., 2007), to 29.3% in 2015 (NCES, 2015) an increase of 2.2%. This growth is also due in part to the fact that more rural students are aspiring to attend college (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012;

Meece et al., 2013). These aspirations toward higher education are a response to increased unemployment and rising poverty rates in rural areas, which illustrate how difficult it is for some rural American youth to maintain job security without a college education (Meece et al., 2013; Tieken, 2016).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2013), in academic year 2010-2011 over half of the school districts of the United States were located in rural areas, representing almost one-third of all public schools and nearly one-fourth of all public school students. In 2015, 29.3% of all rural youth aged 18-24 were enrolled in higher education with 24.7% of males and 34.6% of females enrolled (NCES, 2015). While these enrollment percentages are below those of suburban and urban youth (ranging 41.2%-47.7%), they still indicate a large number of enrolled college students. Considering the large number of rural students, there have been few research studies focused on rural students' transition to, and belonging in, higher education compared to the extensive body of literature in these areas for the general college-going population (Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016).

Findings from the limited research have indicated that rural students are more likely than other students to come from lower-income families, have a less rigorous high school curricular preparation, and are more likely to choose public institutions over private colleges than their urban and suburban counterparts (Byun et al., 2012). In addition, being from a rural area often means that students are challenged by their lack of experience with large campuses and the diversity of populations, experiences, and perspectives often found in college (Schultz, 2004). Compared to the average American college student, rural students are less likely to have college-educated parents (Byun et

al., 2012; Provasnik et al., 2007). First-generation student status often means that students come to college unprepared due to their parents' lack of institutional knowledge (Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2011; Lightweis, 2014). As a result, many rural youth who are first-generation students may experience additional social and academic challenges.

Often college environments can be radically different from what rural students are used to. Research indicates that many rural students find it difficult to transition to college or develop a sense of belonging in their college environments (Byun et al., 2012; Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004). This can in turn inhibit students' academic interest and success (Strayhorn, 2012). With this in mind, along with evidence of increasing numbers of rural students, it is imperative that institutions recognize and address any common barriers and challenges to their sense of belonging that rural students experience. The goal of institutions should be to provide an environment where rural students can maximize their potential and succeed in college. To accomplish this, it is important to understand how academic environments are influencing rural students' experiences in college. The more deeply we understand how the higher education environment influences rural students' development of a sense of belonging in college, the better we can tailor our environment to attract and promote the success of students from this population.

Interacting with College Environments

As mentioned by McDonough et al. (2010), rural students' congruence with their academic environment is crucial to their experience of higher education. Much research has been done linking student success and the student's educational environment (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). For rural students, environmental factors need to be

explored to better understand how their rural status intersects with their educational context. Bronfenbrenner (1977, 2005) introduced the idea of four ecological components that interact to inform development: process, person, context, and time. Bronfenbrenner theorized that these components interact on various levels of the environment (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) and in the postsecondary educational context, those interactions could influence a student's development.

It is important to recognize how interrelated levels of environments relate to rural students' congruence with their educational environments. As seen in a similarly-designed study of Latinx students by Garcia (2017), one way to apply this ecological theory of environment to rural student experience is through Strange and Banning's (2015) four models of human environments. Each environmental model (physical, aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed) influences those individuals within it in a different way. Together they can explain the various aspects of higher education environment's influence on students. Rural students have to adjust to their new environment, which may or may not be congruent with their preferred physical environment, their beliefs and attitudes, organizational expectations, and views and experiences (Strange & Banning, 2015). These aspects can influence whether a rural student develops a sense of belonging within the educational environment and chooses to stay, or does not and chooses to drop out.

This congruence with and subsequent connection to one's environment is strongly linked to the concept of belonging. Based on educational environment and developmental ecology models (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), the

contextual factors that rural students experience at a large university will be crucial to their development as students. However, based on past rural student research (Heinisch, 2016; McDonough et al., 2010; Schultz, 2004) rural student identity may not be congruent with the educational context, particularly at a large urban university. This dissonance could negatively affect rural students' sense of belonging in college. Feeling one does not belong can lead to lower academic performance, a lack of confidence, and potentially a decision to leave college (Strayhorn, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

While there is an extensive body of research that looks at various sub-populations of students' sense of belonging in higher education, few studies focus on rural students. The limited rural research has examined college access and selection issues, but there are relatively few studies that focus on the experiences of rural college students while in college (Means et al., 2016). Due to the cultural and environmental differences between rural life and college life, many rural youth have a difficult time transitioning to college and feel like they do not belong in higher education, which can in turn lead to their poor academic performance or even dropping out (Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004). Previous studies have provided a solid basis for understanding that there are challenges for rural students related to the cultural divide between rural communities and large urban college campuses. However, more studies need to explore how rural students are experiencing this cultural dissonance and how it contributes to their sense of belonging at their chosen institution. This will inform higher education institutions to develop appropriate supports to promote rural student belonging and academic success. Strayhorn's (2012) concept of sense of belonging can provide a point of reference to help understand the alienation and

marginalization that rural students can experience. In addition, applying ecological systems theories of higher education environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Strange & Banning, 2015) would help provide an interpretive lens through which to examine how higher education environments influence rural students' sense of belonging.

The purpose of this case study was to explore how rural students experience higher education contexts and develop a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern university. The following questions guided this research:

- To what extent and in what ways do rural students feel a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern university?
 - How does students' identification with their rural background influence how they experience their college environment?
 - What do rural students see as key environmental factors affecting their sense of belonging?
 - Is the institution providing supportive environments for rural students and if so, how?

Definition of Terms

In order to examine rural student experiences and feelings of belonging at a large Midwestern university, the following key terms are defined including *rural*, *first-generation students*, and *sense of belonging*.

- *Rural* is a term used throughout the study to describe the background characteristics of the population of interest. It represents both a geographic designation and a way of life for rural individuals and their hometown communities. Crockett et al. (2000) drew on the themes of social change,

ecological risk, and their implications in rural youth's life changes; and defined the ecology of rural youth in a rural environment. Crockett et al. (2000) reviewed literature on rural youth's psychological adjustment and focused on their challenge of reducing attachments to family and place in exchange for education. They opined that in order to truly define *rural*, researchers need to recognize the individually constructed version of a rural individual's perception of place. There are four ecological dimensions of rurality that are commonly used in its definition: "population size and density, community ties, traditionalism, and land use" (p. 47). For the purposes of this study, the definition of rural utilized Crockett et al.'s population size and density dimension, as well as each individual participant's constructed reality of a rural identity incorporating community ties and traditionalism dimensions. The population density component was defined using the U.S. Census Bureau's parameters (Groves, 2011). Therefore, a rural student is one who has grown up in a community with a population lower than 2,500 people with fewer than 500 people per square mile and who also identifies as being from a rural area.

- *First-generation students* can be defined in a variety of ways with subtle variations, depending on how one wants to characterize a student's parents' prior involvement with higher education. For the purpose of this study, *first-generation students* are defined using the NCES definition as college students whose parent or parents never enrolled in postsecondary education at a baccalaureate level (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

- *Sense of belonging* is a concept that could be defined in a number of ways, however for the purposes of this study, Strayhorn's (2012) definition was utilized:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective response or behavior. (p. 3)

Methodology

The goal of this qualitative case study was to explore how rural students experience higher education contexts and develop a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern university. According to Stake (2005), case studies are appropriate for qualitative studies that require an in-depth understanding of a case, which in this study is Midwestern University (MU). It was important to provide a comprehensive description of student experiences and environmental constructs at this single institution. A case study's use of multiple forms of data collection provides a deeper, more comprehensive view of the multiple contexts influencing a phenomenon. In the current study, my goal was to select a case that best represents the phenomenon of interest; therefore I conducted an instrumental case study where according to Stake (2005), the case "is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else" (p. 437). I chose this particular case in order to illustrate how cultural

dissonance between rural life and life at an institution of higher education can affect rural students' sense of belonging.

Research indicates that often “students from rural backgrounds choose to attend smaller universities, a choice that seems appropriate and beneficial” (Ames et al., 2014, p. 213). In some cases, rural students misalign their educational goals and due to their preference to stay close to home, many choose 2-year community colleges when their occupational and educational goals would be better served through 4-year colleges (McDonough et al., 2010; Meece et al., 2013). As many rural students identify more with the academic environment at a smaller school, their identity incongruence and lack of a sense of belonging may be more pronounced at a larger, urban, 4-year institution. For this reason, I have chosen for my case to study a 4-year institution, Midwestern University (MU). I used a pseudonym to protect the identity of the case and participants. MU is a land-grant institution and contains majors commonly populated by rural students. MU was also chosen because it is the largest public institution in the state where there is a comparatively culturally diverse population providing a challenging context for rural students. This increased my opportunity to document and describe the issues rural students experience related to their belonging in an incongruent higher education environment. For these reasons, MU was an ideal case to study rural students and their academic environments.

I incorporated a three-component conceptual framework to frame the analysis and provide structure and interpretive perspective to the design and implementation of the study. This framework consisted of Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging,

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 2005) ecological theory of human development, and Strange and Banning's (2015) four models of educational environments.

Consistent with case study methodology, this study incorporated several types of data collection methods in order to provide depth to the description of the case (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). I chose data collection methods that represented institutional and student perspectives and addressed the various components of the aforementioned conceptual framework. For the institutional data, I conducted interviews of MU student affairs and academic affairs administrators in order to gain a perspective on institutional mission and resources offered to students. For the individual data, I asked rural student participants to complete a demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire provided baseline information about each participant and contextual information about their background for use in analysis and interpretation. I also conducted two interviews with each student participant. The interviews provided information about each rural participant's rural experience as well as their experience of MU's college environment.

It was critical to include both student and institutional perspectives to provide a comprehensive description of the case. Therefore rural student participants, MU administrators, university web pages, and student newspaper articles were the primary sources of data. I employed purposeful sampling to select rural student participants who self-reported a strong rural identity and who exemplified the rural student's experience of MU's educational environment. Based on responses on the demographic questionnaire, I utilized criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013) to identify and choose rural MU student participants. My priority was to select a diverse array of participants who represented various gender and college/major perspectives. This promoted maximum variation or

“purposeful maximal sampling” (Creswell, 2013, p.100) and allowed me to collect data from a diverse sample with a variety of experiences at the university.

To analyze the data and produce an in-depth description of MU’s environment (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009), I performed an embedded analysis (Creswell, 2013). This included a systematic and inductive analysis of each interview to identify units of meaning that could be further triangulated with my other collected data. I utilized a variety of coding methods to analyze the data from staff interviews, web pages, and student newspaper articles. This formed a baseline for my understanding of the environmental constructs that make up the educational environment at MU. I then compared these findings to the individual rural student responses and used an inductive first and second cycle coding process to systematically code the transcribed student interviews (Saldaña, 2016). I used the emerging themes to describe the case and identify larger themes that transcend the case itself (Creswell, 2013). My intention was to triangulate the findings across the student and administrator interviews, university web pages, and student newspaper articles and use member-checking and peer review to assist in providing trustworthiness to the emerging findings (Merriam, 2009).

Delimitations

I chose to delimit various aspects of the study in order to define the scope of the study. A key aspect of this study was understanding rural students’ experiences, therefore it was crucial to limit student participants to those who fit this study’s definition of rural. I limited the number of rural student participants to allow myself to maximize the amount of time and resources dedicated to each participant. This contributed to the

goal of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of each participant's perspective and experiences.

In this situation, the study of a single instrumental case allowed me to probe more deeply and provide a more nuanced and comprehensive description of student experiences and environmental constructs at this single institution. Bounding the study in this way meant that all of the limited resources were devoted to understanding this particular case. This occurred at the expense of gaining multiple perspectives on the issue, as would have been the case had I decided to study multiple cases or a collective case study (Creswell, 2013).

Another delimitation relates to my decision to utilize an interview-based approach to data collection. This choice allowed me to gain insight into a particular place and time pertaining to rural student experience, however this approach lacked the dynamic, developmental understanding of a longitudinal study. A longitudinal study, although not possible in the timeframe required for this study, would have better captured the process of students' development as they change over time.

Limitations

There are various limitations to my interview-based data collection methods. On one hand, the reflective nature of the interview protocols resulted in data that promotes a deeper understanding of student experience. However, with some interview questions pertaining to past events, self-reported constructed realities could have been slightly distorted when students attempted to remember past events, with some details possibly confused or forgotten.

Distortions could also occur regarding how questions worded by the researcher were interpreted by the participants. A misinterpretation could have led to question/answer bias where participants answered questions different than those asked by the researcher. I took this into account while I formulated the interview protocol and I also considered clarity of phrasing while I developed the interview questions.

Another limitation of interview-based data collection is the subjective influence of rapport on the depth of participant responses. Some participants may not have shared important details or gone into much depth about their experiences if they felt a lack of rapport with the researcher interviewing them. I did my best to address this by remaining cognizant of the importance of building rapport with my participants and attempted to connect to them by making it clear that they had something to contribute, their experience was worth talking about, and their opinion was of interest to me (Merriam, 2009).

Finally, based on past reports of rural populations in the Midwest being mostly racially homogenous (Heinisch, 2016; Provasnik et al., 2007), and expecting a mostly White racial/ethnic sample, I chose not to include racial diversity as an objective of sampling. In light of increasing diversity in both urban and rural areas (Lee, Martin, Matthews, & Farrell, 2017) this could be a limitation to the current study and future studies with rural participants may benefit from including racial diversity as a component of the sample.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to provide a rationale and context for this study. With increasing numbers of rural students taking an interest in pursuing higher education (Byun et al., 2012; Meece et al., 2013), it is important to understand the kinds of barriers

this population faces in order for institutions to find ways to alleviate cultural and contextual issues that rural students may encounter. There appears to be a potential for incongruence between rural student backgrounds and culture, and their new academic environments in higher education institutions (Heinisch, 2016; McDonough et al., 2010; Schultz, 2004), indicating a need for institutions to provide a supportive and accessible environment for rural students to develop a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Therefore, this case study explored how rural students experience the academic and social contexts of college and develop a sense of belonging within their educational environment, in light of potential cultural and identity dissonance.

In the next chapter I discuss the literature on rural students that pertains to their educational aspirations, common first-generation status, and cultural dissonance with higher education cultures. There I provide a more comprehensive view of the barriers and issues that rural students may experience in college. I also delve into the higher education environment theory and review literature that relates to contextual influences, higher education culture, sense of belonging, and ecological environments and their relation to rural students. In chapter three, I discuss the methodology for this study along with my epistemological approach and its influence on the study's proposed design and data analysis. In chapter four, I provide initial findings that serve as a contextual foundation for understanding the subsequent findings. In chapter five, I describe the findings through the interpretive lens of the theoretical framework and present emerging themes and categories after extensive analysis and triangulation of the full case data. In chapter six I discuss my conclusions and implications for practice and further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Rural students are increasingly aspiring to attend college (Byun et al., 2012; Meece, et al., 2013), however research has shown that some rural students have difficulties transitioning to that academic environment (Ginsberg, 1980; Murphy, 1984; Schultz, 2004). Some research on rural youth in America exists, however very little pertains to how rural students experience large university environments. This chapter provides a rationale for this dissertation's focus on higher education contexts and how rural students are experiencing them. This includes a review of the pertinent literature on rural students in order to provide insight on this particular population's unique perspectives. The chapter delves into research pertaining to rural student educational aspirations, access barriers, cultural dissonance between rural and college life, and first-generation status.

In many cases these aspects limit the degree to which rural students acclimate to their college surroundings and make it difficult for them to feel a sense of belonging on campus (Ames et al., 2014; Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004). This is why understanding how rural students develop a sense of belonging in college is so important to this examination of higher education environments. Therefore it is key to discuss the literature relating to sense of belonging and draw inferences about the importance of sense of belonging in general, belonging in higher education specifically, and highlight connections between higher education contexts and students developing a sense of belonging. In addition, two theoretical frameworks are described that act as a lens to better understand the contextual elements important to rural student experiences in higher

education: Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory of human development and Strange and Banning's (2015) models of campus environments.

Rural College Students

Rural youth make up a large percentage of American high school graduates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in school year 2010-2011, 57% of school districts were located in rural areas representing 32% of public schools and 12 million students, 24% of the total student population enrolled in public schools (NCES, 2013). In 2015, 29.3% of all individuals in rural areas aged 18-24 were enrolled in higher education with 24.7% of males and 34.6% of females enrolled (NCES, 2015). Compared to other minority and/or marginalized groups of undergraduate students (i.e. first-generation, racial and ethnic minorities, lower socio-economic status students), there have been limited publications about rural college students and their experiences in and access to postsecondary education (Means et al., 2016). This section separates the limited findings on the rural college student experience into educational aspirations and access to higher education.

Rural High School Student Demographics

According to the report of the *Status of Education in Rural America* (2013), in the 2010-11 school year, a larger proportion of rural students attending public schools were White (71% compared to the 52% total average). In an older, more detailed edition of the report, Provasnik et al. (2007) reported that in the 2003-04 school year more rural students were enrolled in smaller high schools than students from suburban areas and cities. Specifically, 40% of rural students were enrolled in high schools with 200 or fewer students compared to students from cities, towns, and suburban areas (24%, 21%,

and 15% respectively). In 2005, there were fewer 3-5 year-olds enrolled in center-based preprimary education programs in rural areas than children in suburban areas and cities (50% compared to 63% and 58% respectively). Fewer rural students experienced issues with English proficiency than those of other locales (2% compared to 14% in the city, 7% in suburbia, and 5% in towns). A smaller number of rural students had parents with a Bachelor's degree than those in suburban areas (15% compared to 21.7%). A higher number of students in rural areas reported having their parents take them to an athletic event, but fewer reported being taken to a library, art gallery, or museum than non-rural students in 2003. Additionally, the Midwest region had the highest percentage of students enrolled in remote rural areas with 15-35% of their public school students enrolled in remote rural schools.

Educational Aspirations

Recognizing background characteristics common to many rural college students is important in order to provide a comprehensive description of the rural student perspective. For this study, reviewing research on rural student educational aspirations provided a baseline for understanding rural students' initial connection to higher education. Several studies have focused on the educational aspirations of rural students (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011; Hu, 2003; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Means et al., 2016; Tieken, 2016) and found that youth from non-rural areas are more likely to aspire to higher education than youth from rural areas. Although rural high schools are varied in their geographical location and access to resources, there are several common elements that rural students experience that may affect their educational aspirations. Research on rural life indicates

several interrelated components that may influence the educational aspirations of rural students. These include limited college preparation through rural high schools, economic fluctuations, and having few educated role models leading to misaligned perceptions of higher education.

High school preparation. It is important to look at rural students' high school preparation for college as an influence on their educational aspirations, and their eventual sense of belonging in college. According to Hadre (2007), due to limited resources and a lower tax base compared to non-rural districts, rural high schools often provide fewer college preparatory and advanced placement courses than non-rural schools. Courses are taught by a limited number of teachers covering multiple levels and subject areas. Several authors have examined this aspect of rural experience to learn more about the ways rural high schools are preparing their students and their subsequent outcomes, with varying results (Battle, Grant, & Heggoy, 1995; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Griffin et al., 2011; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Rubisch, 1995; Talbot & Kuehn, 2002).

Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) used an ecological systems model of human development to examine the educational aspirations of rural Appalachian youth. Two hundred forty-two seniors in the most rural counties of West Virginia completed questionnaires designed to measure direct and indirect sources of influence on academic development, college aspirations, and school belonging. The authors found that factors related to academic preparation, such as grade point averages and engaging in college preparatory curriculum in high school, were the most relevant for predicting college decision-making. Subjective measures like perceptions of intelligence, comfort in school setting, and preparedness for college were also highly associated with college aspirations.

Students from rural schools who decided to attend college had been planning their academic future for many years. In many cases individuals had experienced high levels of “school belonging” (p. 2), where the students felt that individuals in the social environment of their school, such as teachers, counselors, or peers, supported and accepted them (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). These findings indicate that in rural high schools, students who highly identified with the academic elements of their schooling were more likely to aspire to higher education.

Rural high school influences were also apparent in Tieken’s (2016) study that looked at rural students ethnographically in the context of a private, selective liberal arts college in New England. Tieken focused on the messages students received from high school guidance counselors and college admissions officials about the value of higher education. These influential individuals were encouraging students with messages based primarily on the economic benefits of college such as a focus on careers, the declining rural economy, and how college was a good investment.

Economic issues. In addition to high school influences, Tieken (2016) identified economic motivations as an important factor influencing some rural youths’ decisions about higher education. Traditionally degree completion for rural students lags behind that of non-rural students (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). However due to changing rural economies, rural youth in America are more likely to aspire to pursue postsecondary education now than in the recent past (Meece et al., 2013; Tieken, 2016). According to Tieken, after the recession of 2008-2009, rural unemployment reached nearly 10% and the poverty rate increased to 16.6% for nonmetropolitan areas, compared to 13.9% in metropolitan regions (Economic Research Service, 2011). This economic downturn has

affected rural areas and made it difficult for youth in rural areas to maintain the same job security today that their parents previously experienced without a college education. The reduction in career opportunities is forcing rural youth and their families to think more seriously about attending college in order to increase their earning potential (Tieken, 2016).

Rural youth expectations for life after high school are in part based on limited rural career options. This influences their decisions regarding pursuing higher education. As Heinisch (2016) found in a study of rural first-generation student experiences at a large university, many rural students came to college because their family had always expected them to attend, in part because their parents wanted more opportunities for their children than they had themselves. For example one student noted, “With my parents and how they raised me, it was never *if* I was going to college, it was always *when* I was going to college. I think that played a pretty big role in my decision to go to college” (Heinisch, 2016, p. 25).

Misaligned perceptions. Another component influencing rural student educational aspirations is their misaligned perceptions of education and careers. In some cases, rural youth have an inaccurate perception of higher education and the career trajectories that it can produce (Crockett et al., 2000). This can affect individuals who want to attend college, as well as those who want to stay and work in their local rural area. Meece et al. (2013) looked at rural youth aspirations and found that 60% of participants had misaligned educational and occupational aspirations. Of these, 46% overestimated the amount of education needed to attain their career goals.

One aspect affecting misaligned perceptions is family income. According to Meece et al., “perceptions of limited family income decreased youth’s aspirations for a four-year college degree and for a job requiring postsecondary education. These results indicate that family income continues to constrain the future prospects of rural youth” (p. 184). Those who wanted to stay in their hometown tended to perceive their local job opportunities positively and underestimate the amount of education needed for the jobs they wanted (Meece et al., 2013). This indicates that as the economy continues to affect rural areas, youth who want to remain need more information about the amount of education needed for the occupations they aspire to.

In a qualitative study pertaining to rural students’ limited knowledge and misaligned perceptions of higher education and vocational opportunities, Battle et al. (1995) looked at three cases of gifted rural females and the influences on their choice whether or not to pursue higher education. The authors hypothesized that rural life was creating conflict for gifted females considering whether to attend college. They experienced a lack of family support, were less involved in school and extra-curricular activities than their rural peers, and perceived themselves as being unlikely to succeed outside of their rural community. The authors concluded that their rural participants would benefit from an expanded perspective. The students needed more knowledge of their post-high school educational and vocational options, as well as environments that would support their strengths and identity development as successful students.

One issue that leads to misaligned perceptions, in addition to geographic isolation, is the lack of educated role models for rural students. Rubisch (1995) looked at issues affecting rural high school students and recognized that the level of educational

attainment in adults is lowest in rural areas. In addition, many of the highest achieving students at those schools left for college without the intention of returning to that town. Rubisch found that high achieving students leaving rural areas was happening in conjunction with the fact that few careers in rural areas, with the exception of teaching, require a college education. Rubisch called his phenomenon “academic run-off,” and it has been subsequently coined “Rural Brain Drain” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014). Many of the college-educated individuals from rural areas relocate to urban clusters or urban areas where their college education is more viable for their career and take their educated perspectives with them. This leaves few models of educated individuals for rural youth to aspire to. A lack of educated adult role models can significantly influence rural students’ educational aspirations and negatively affect their confidence regarding their potential success in college (Handke, 2012; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Petrin et al., 2014; Rubisch, 1995).

These different aspects of rural life such as high school preparation, economic issues, and misaligned perceptions are all interrelated and combine to create a complex web of decisions for rural youth regarding higher education. Economic issues affect school funding, which influences the amount of college preparatory material provided to students (Hadre, 2007). High school educational contexts in turn highly influence students’ decisions and may or may not be adequately preparing them for higher education (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Demi et al., 2010). Economic issues also affect the job market in rural areas, which encourages students to look outside of the rural area for employment (Tieken, 2016). However, having few educated role models in their rural communities (Rubisch, 1995) limits rural youths’ scope and understanding of the

educational requirements of non-traditional careers (Battle et al., 1995; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Meece et al., 2013). It is beneficial to understand the complex influences on rural students' aspirations to attend college. This helps to illustrate rural students' connection to higher education and provides an important conceptual foundation for interpreting their experiences in a college environment.

Access to Higher Education

For rural students, it is not enough just to aspire to attend college; they also have to combat the various access issues they may encounter when pursuing their education. Access issues happen to be one of several other aspects of rural life that also affect rural students' enrollment in higher education. Similar to educational aspirations, issues related to reduced access to higher education can be complicated and interrelated, with some of the access issues most common to rural students relating to their unfamiliarity with the college environment and poor academic preparation (McDonough & McClafferty, 2001; McDonough et al., 2010; Means et al., 2016). While economic pressures, misaligned perceptions of education and careers, and high school academics influenced rural youth's aspirations to attend college, additional logistical issues act as barriers for rural students to actually enroll once they decide to attend. For instance, some rural students and their families, particularly first-generation students, have little knowledge of the application process, the importance of scholarships, and higher education in general (Forbus et al., 2011; Lightweis, 2014; McDonough et al., 2010; Means et al., 2016; Schultz, 2004).

Means et al. (2016) conducted a case study that examined African American rural high school students to better understand the importance and influence of high school

preparation on rural students' access to higher education. After interviewing 26 high school juniors, the authors concluded that the students did not have an adequate number of school counselors or other resources to successfully provide them with enough information about how to access college. The rural students did not know how to navigate the application and enrollment process and they needed more tangible information about how to prepare for college. This information was also needed earlier in their high school career. It was a challenge for the rural African American high school students in that study to get this information on a consistent basis, and since they had little or no family history with higher education, more resources were required from the community to provide these students with the information needed to apply for college and requisite scholarships (Means et al., 2016).

Another study that showcased the importance of rural environmental factors on rural student access to higher education was conducted by McDonough and McClafferty (2001). The authors used a case study to assess the current college culture in 15 rural county high schools in order to identify the major obstacles to increasing their students' college participation and to learn about the status of college outreach in that area. Their goal was to provide a description of the current situation of rural college student access in that area and to recommend to university officials several ways the university could work to increase rural student college access. The authors interviewed principals and counselors to get their perspective on college access for students in their region. Their results made up a description of what they call "The Rural Life" (p. 5). This rural life concept included barriers made up of geographic remoteness, academic constraints, the cost and financing of college, and a narrow view of academic options due to the

prevalence and influence of local community colleges. Regarding geographic remoteness, participants in this study had often never been out of their rural county and there were no major four-year institutions within a 4-hour car ride. This produced high levels of unfamiliarity and anxiety regarding the college environment, which seemed very culturally and physically distant from what the students were used to. The local community colleges had several connections to rural high schools and many students were easily funneled into the 2-year institutions, to a point where students were provided with a very narrow view of their options after high school. The local high schools were also limited in resources and high school leaders had to make curricular decisions that would meet the most student needs. Their decisions did not always promote advanced college-preparatory courses so students were often ill-prepared for the rigor of four-year college courses (McDonough & McClafferty, 2001).

Research on rural student access to higher education has provided some suggestions for institutions to implement. Some rural students have had success enrolling in higher education institutions when institutions put forth resources to help expand students' knowledge and comfort with four-year postsecondary education. According to Heinisch (2016), students that encountered institutions that emphasized college visits and facilitated discussions between current students and prospective students claimed to be able to make informed decisions about their education. These measures may provide prospective students with a real-world perspective on college before they enter the institution. Due to the lack of knowledge about the academic system in their early stages of planning, many rural students and their families particularly benefitted from university outreach during the application process (Heinisch, 2016).

Rural Life vs. College Life

Literature on educational aspirations and access to education for rural students provides a solid foundation for examining rural student connection to higher education. In order to better understand rural student experience, it is also important to look at research on rural student experiences after they have enrolled in college. This literature illustrates a clear cultural distinction between life in a rural community and life at an institution of higher education. When rural students leave their hometown community, they can experience a scary transition to a new lifestyle. According to Ticken (2016), cultural distance is created when rural students leave the community because “pursuing college signifies a break from whatever rural industry – farming, logging, millwork – has sustained the community and traditionally defined the path to adulthood” (p. 206). Therefore, the new college environment can represent a significantly different cultural context for rural students. The culture shock that can result makes it necessary for higher education officials to address these contextual differences in order to provide a welcoming environment for rural students. When rural students come to college, there is usually an adjustment period during which students experience a certain disconnect between their rural high school’s social norms and the common lifestyle in their new environment. Several cultural and social differences have been examined by researchers looking at how rural students experience this transition. Topics include how the institution type influences the transition, the common social norm variances between rural and college life, and the process of adjusting to college life.

College culture depends on the institution. While rural life and college life certainly contain different social norms and cultural experiences, the type of institution a

rural student enters can exacerbate these differences (Tieken, 2016). Ames et al. (2014) measured demographic information and several aspects of student adjustment by surveying 2,823 Canadian college students at 6 universities. They compared rural versus urban student adjustment and looked at academic, social, personal-emotional, and institutional attachment aspects of adjustment. Their findings indicated that rural students chose to attend smaller universities and reported better social adjustment and institutional attachment in their first semester than urban students did. This is in stark contrast to much of the other research on rural college student adjustment, which indicates that in general, rural students experience more stress pertaining to academic preparedness, interaction with faculty members, and social marginalization than urban students (Ginsberg, 1980; Murphy, 1984). This distinction could be due to the fact that for the students studied by Ames et al., smaller institutions felt more like the rural communities the students came from. Varying results like these indicate how important it is to note the size and scope of institutions in rural college student research and further examine the specific issues that may or may not be experienced by rural students depending on the type of institution they attend.

At a large urban institution, rural students may feel the cultural differences between rural life and college life even more profoundly. Coming from a mainly homogenous environment, many rural students experience a social shock when experiencing the views and perspectives of such a diverse population as that found at a large urban university campus (Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004). Heinisch (2016) uncovered several challenges that rural students experienced adjusting to their new campus life. Most participants noted that the relative anonymity provided at a large

university was very different from their experiences in high school in a small town. Rural students felt like a small fish in a large pond in their over-size classes. In fact, several students even mentioned that some of their large lecture courses contained more people than their entire hometown. It was difficult for them to get individualized attention like they were used to in their small rural classrooms. Rural students additionally found the academic adjustments jarring because they were being compared to so many other students in their large classes. One participant indicated, “I went from the top of my class in high school to ‘I don’t know anything’ here” (Heinisch, 2016, p. 26). An urban setting could also cause difficulty for some rural students. As discovered in Schultz (2004), and later in Heinisch (2016), some welcomed the change from their hometown and enjoyed city life, but those that did not found the larger city oppressive and threatening.

Varying social norms. While contextual differences may depend on the type and size of the institution, there are a few common distinctions between rural social norms and those experienced in college across many types of colleges and universities. One example of this is alcohol consumption. Due to a perceived increase in alcohol use in rural areas, Schultz and Neighbors (2007) looked at the perceived social norms and levels of alcohol consumption in college students who came from both rural and urban high schools. The researchers surveyed participants in order to gain insight into students’ intake of alcohol and their perceived social norms. The results indicated that students from rural high schools drank more and perceived of drinking more favorably. Rural students were initially consuming alcohol at higher rates than non-rural students, which was potentially having a negative effect on their academic success. However, Schultz

and Neighbors concluded that while students from rural areas were initially drinking more heavily in college as a result of their rural background and their perceived positive social norms associated with drinking, they adjusted to drinking norms on campus quickly. Perception was the key, as rural students' perception of typical college student drinking behavior began to override their rural background social norms. The timing of this adjustment could be considered a crucial determinant of a rural drinker's successful transition into college (Schultz & Neighbors, 2007).

Another social norm that has been examined is rural students' social expectations regarding interactions with others. In her dissertation *Rural Identity in a Mixed Rural-Urban Social Environment: Investigating Rural College Student Identity and How it Changes During the College Experience*, Handke (2012) concluded that rural students exhibited a strong orientation to others, which manifested itself in student interest in others and in feelings of accountability to serve others. Rural students desired communal connections in college similar to those found in their hometown. Handke indicated that during interviews with rural students, they portrayed their rural hometowns as being highly communal environments. They felt a strong obligation to their parents and family unit and spoke of being nervous and unsure when interacting with strangers. According to Handke,

The rural students were not used to meeting strangers because they had known almost everyone in their home communities, for basically their entire lives. This is, again, very collectivistic; the participants were unsure of how to talk to strangers because they had no shared background or relationship history to guide the interaction. (p. 86)

This response coincides with a similar result from Heinisch (2016) where several students commented that there seemed to be different social rules for city/college life and rural life like when to talk to a stranger, and even who to consider a stranger at all. One student noted,

It's strange how that definition of who's a stranger and who you should trust really shifts. Back home, I would meet someone walking on the street, and I would talk to them once and be like, "Ok, that was a stranger. They're a passerby." But I come to college and sit down and talk to that person in lecture once, and then I see them on the sidewalk, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, you're my friend; I know you." (p. 27)

For that student, in her rural community a stranger was someone you haven't known for most of your life, whereas at the university, someone you had a 10-minute conversation with once was now considered a friend (Heinisch, 2016).

Adjusting to college life. It can be difficult to adjust from rural life to college life. In spite of some initial barriers, many rural students have seen the benefits of higher education and found ways to become acclimated and succeed in college. According to Heinisch (2016), experiencing physical distance between family and friends in their community back home, some rural students took action to quickly develop support systems in their new environment. Students developed support systems through residence halls and social media (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012) and were successful, although in some cases this new way of making friends was directly opposed to their previous rural experiences of making friends based on proximity. Being used to building very close relationships with people from their hometown, rural students felt that they

were better equipped than other students to do so in their relationships in college (Heinisch, 2016).

Many rural students also recognized that higher education environments provide them with resources that they may not have had access to previously. Many students coming from small rural schools do not have a wide variety of classes to choose from and the vast range of courses offered at a large university can seem empowering and overwhelming at the same time (Hadre, 2007; Heinisch, 2016; Provasnik et al., 2007). These benefits can extend to opportunities for internships, various extra-curricular activities, discussions with knowledgeable faculty members, social events, and enjoying the passion that other students and professors have for their areas of interest.

Navigating the cultural divide between rural life and higher education is one area where institutions can help rural students in their colleges and universities. According to the literature, rural students need help to reconcile different social norms (Handke, 2012; Schultz & Neighbors, 2007), the diversity of perspectives that can come at a large urban institution, and the alien urban backdrops that commonly make up campus life in general (Hadre, 2007; Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004). It is important for leaders in higher education to recognize the cultural and identity adjustments inherent in coming from a rural area to a large educational institution. It is also crucial for colleges and universities to distinguish the salient contextual elements regarding rural students' educational aspirations, access to higher education, and first-generation student status as well. In order to improve rural students' enrollment, retention, and graduation, it is important to consider all of the common characteristics of rural students. Higher education institutions need to allow rural students to feel promoted and supported in their

educational environment. Institutions need to provide an environment that helps rural students feel like they belong in college.

First-Generation Student Status

Along with difficulties relating to educational aspirations, access to higher education, and rural life/college cultural dissonance, many rural students also experience challenges that are linked to their parents' lack of experience with higher education institutions. According to Provasnik et al. (2007), rural students are less likely than non-rural students to have college-educated parents and are now entering higher education with their own unique experiences and barriers. Many rural first-generation students are coming to college unprepared, in part due to their parents' lack of institutional knowledge. This can create challenges for students academically and socially as they transition into an unfamiliar environment (Forbus et al., 2011; Lightweis, 2014). The goal of this section is to provide a better understanding of the first-generation component of many rural students' identity. While there is a significant body of literature on many aspects of first-generation students, this study is best informed by primarily focusing on the areas of first-generation student experience and support systems.

Although few studies have looked at the experiences of students identifying as both rural and first-generation students, studies have been published that explore the experiences of first-generation students experiencing various other multiple identities (ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc.) including White, working-class, first-generation student experiences (Thering, 2011; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Stuber, 2011). Knowing that rural areas in America tend to be made up of mostly homogenous

working-class, ethnic majority populations (Provasnik et al., 2007), this combined demographic research may have some overlap with the rural population as well.

Many first-generation students have limited perspectives on higher education and approach college focused more on employment than education. Thering (2011) examined narratives from first-generation students and found several themes related to their approach to college. Many first-generation students' primary purpose for college was as a means of vocational advancement, not necessarily the educational benefits. Another emergent theme indicated that White working-class first-generation students were motivated to attend college because doing so meant they could obtain employment that would allow them to live beyond the means of the working-class socioeconomic status. It was important for them to live more comfortably than their parents (Thering, 2011).

College-specific social supports are also important to college student experience. When students attend college, in many cases they need to replace or extend their local support systems because the people who directly supported them in high school may not remain in close proximity. Several researchers have explored how first-generation students utilize support systems in their transition to college. According to Jenkins, Belanger, Londono Connally, Boals, and Duron (2011), first-generation students reported less local social support from friends and family, which coincided with higher levels of stress and lower life satisfaction. York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) compared perceived family support in attending college between first- and second-generation college students. This quantitative study revealed that second-generation students believed that they were being supported by their families, more so than first-generation

students. The authors hypothesized that the lack of perceived support led to first-generation students needing alternative opportunities to talk to someone about stressful college-life experiences as first-generation students had fewer targets or individuals to disclose information to than non-first-generation students (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

An important support system that first-generation students may not know to utilize comes from university and college faculty members. Faculty member interactions, expectations, and support have an important effect on all students, however some first-generation students may lack the knowledge of just how important these supports can be. According to Collier and Morgan (2007), knowledge of the student role is diminished when one's parents have not experienced college, which could result in a first-generation student's limited predisposition to respond to faculty members' expectations. In their study, Collier and Morgan compared first-generation and traditional students' expectations for faculty members and found that although many students were intimidated by professors, first-generation students in particular were resistant to getting support from faculty members. This was in part due to the fact that first-generation students were unaware of the importance of developing a relationship with their instructors (Collier & Morgan, 2007). With a lack of knowledge on relating to faculty members, first-generation students, and by extension many rural students, are oftentimes intimidated by the idea of seeking out faculty members for support (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). This results in students having insufficient support from faculty members, which in turn could negatively influence their persistence and academic success outcomes.

Rural First-Generation Students

The research describing first-generation student experiences in higher education is very beneficial to understanding the rural student experience because rural students are also often first-generation students (Provasnik et al., 2007). Understanding the way that first-generation students in general approach college and their social supports helps us understand many rural students as well. Their parents' lack of experience with higher education and the fact that rural students have few educated role models leads them to enter into this environment less prepared than non-first-generation students (Forbus et al., 2011; Heinisch, 2016; Lightweis, 2014; Schultz, 2004). First-generation students may be less likely than other students to seek out relationships from faculty members (Collier & Morgan, 2007). They may also be serious and motivated to succeed in college for vocational advancement purposes rather than their educational beliefs (Forbus et al., 2001; Thering, 2011).

While there is a large body of literature focused on the challenges of first-generation students, there have been few studies that have specifically looked at first-generation rural students, the intersection of these identities, and what that means for them in higher education. Two studies in particular (Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004) have illustrated how rural and first-generation student statuses combine to create two sets of barriers for rural students, those that are shared with other first-generation students, and those unique to rural first-generation students alone. For instance, other first-generation students were reported to have low perceived social support from friends and family (Jenkins et al., 2011). However, through a phenomenological study examining rural first-generation student experience at a large Midwestern university, Heinisch (2016) found

that rural first-generation students actually had an incredibly strong network of social support from their families and rural communities and it was very tempting for them to go back home frequently to try and reestablish support from that area. Those expansive support systems back home were so ingrained in each rural student's identity that it was difficult for an individual to replace that in college. However, their rural community's social support could act as a double-edged sword. While community members were very positive and motivating, some students felt highly pressured to succeed because their entire community was invested in them (Heinisch, 2016).

The strong social supports many rural students experience may also affect the choices they make about how to spend their time in college. While rural first-generation students may approach college like other first-generation students by limiting engagement on campus, the multiple identities and statuses they experience may influence their choices differently. Thering's (2011) study indicated that first-generation students cite vocational advancement and living beyond the means of the working-class as motivations for higher education. While this may also be the case for many rural students, according to Heinisch (2016), students identifying as first-generation students and individuals from a rural area were oftentimes conflicted about how to spend their limited time outside of class. On one hand, they could be motivated by their student identity to immerse themselves in campus life by engaging in on-campus activities. On the other hand, they would feel the pull of their hometown social supports and want to stay true to their rural identity by going home when they had free time to visit their family. In choosing the latter, students then exhibited lower participation rates and engagement on campus (Heinisch, 2016; Lowery-Hart & Pecheco, 2011).

Rural first-generation students may also have a difficult time making the choice to meet with their faculty instructors. According to Heinisch (2016), similar to Collier and Morgan's (2007) findings for other first-generation students, rural students did not recognize the importance of relationship-building with professors. The students liked having an accessible point of reference, but took longer to utilize faculty members as a resource because they were intimidated and initially had a hard time relating to their professors. Almost every participant in Heinisch's study indicated that professors were a critical resource, however it took an adjustment period for many of them to understand just how critical. One student indicated that she had a difficult time understanding how to get individualized attention from professors. She did finally decide to reach out and come to a professor's office hours and ask questions. She explained,

The first time [I visited a professor] I was really nervous, I was like 'what am I going to say? Is this going to be super awkward?' but the professors all loved it.

They were like, 'Oh my gosh, thanks so much for coming to my office; this is so nice'...I wasn't expecting that, so I really enjoyed it, actually. (p. 27)

While it may not have come naturally for rural first-generation students to reach out to intimidating professors in their large classes, it proved to be highly beneficial for students once they did. In this case, the rural student benefitted more than other students from relationships with faculty members. The individual was sorely feeling the loss of the strong rural hometown support systems and supportive faculty members could help shore up a new college support system (Heinisch, 2016).

As a precursor to Heinisch's (2016) study, Schultz (2004) conducted a phenomenological study that specifically focused on the first year transition experiences

of first-generation rural students at a large university. Schultz employed in-depth interviews with first-generation rural students and uncovered several themes. For instance, first-generation rural students were highly influenced by their family in their college decision-making. In addition, there was a significant breadth and depth of experiences that came as a complete surprise to the rural students. According to Schultz,

By and large, the participants found themselves unaware of the need to build new relationships, and to cope with a college environment and culture which proved to be extremely dissimilar to that which they had known all their lives. In a few instances these aspects of the first semester (i.e. cultural diversity, dorm life) were a very difficult and emotionally charged process. Others had the requisite socialization skills necessary to aid in their assimilation. Their agricultural background seemed to be either a help, or a hindrance. But, in all cases, that background had an effect on the phenomenon. (p. 49)

First-generation rural students were particularly challenged by their lack of experience with large campuses and the diversity often found in college. Similar to others with first-generation status, students were frequently ignorant of costs, their parents had a lack of information, they did not recognize the importance of relationship-building with professors, and they were surprised at the rigor of their courses. However, their rural status added another dimension to their transition because students from rural areas had less experience with the diverse environments and populations associated with life in large towns and college campuses. Rural first-generation students took longer to develop support systems in college because their background had provided them with a lifelong set of local friends and acquaintances. Therefore, they were not familiar with the need to

build new relationships to help offset the stress of their novel surroundings (Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004).

Exposure to Diversity

As illustrated by Heinisch (2016), Provasnik et al. (2007) and Schultz (2004), rural students often came from environments where the population was relatively homogenous and individuals had little exposure to diverse racial/ethnic, religious, or sexual identity/preference perspectives. There have been a number of studies that explored the impact of diversity on educational outcomes that provide a foundation for understanding how rural students' lack of precollege exposure to diversity might affect their experience at a large Midwestern university.

Much research on how diversity affects educational outcomes stems from the seminal work of Gurn, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002). Their study compared different types of diversity experiences across differences in educational outcomes for students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Their theory included two broad categories of educational outcomes: learning outcomes (i.e. active thinking skills, intellectual engagement, etc.), and democracy outcomes (i.e. perspective-taking, citizenship engagement, racial and cultural understanding, and compatibility judgment). The authors asserted these areas were likely to be impacted by exposure to racial and ethnic diversity particularly during the developmental stage of late adolescence that many college students experienced. Students would benefit from being educated in diverse institutions because this exposure would help them be more motivated and able to navigate a progressively heterogeneous society. Using two longitudinal databases to test their theory, Gurin et al. found that particularly for White students, experiencing diversity was

positively connected to increased learning outcomes. Both informal and classroom exposure to diversity were beneficial for learning outcomes and democracy outcomes and the amount of variance accounted for by diversity experiences was significant.

Bowman and Denson (2012) used Gurin et al.'s (2002) theory and examined interracial interactions based on an individual student's precollege exposure to diversity. Bowman and Denson used a longitudinal sample from 28 colleges and found interracial interactions have a positive effect on college satisfaction, positive attitudes about other races, and getting along with individuals from other races. Interestingly, these positive relationships were stronger for those who had more precollege exposure to racially and ethnically diverse populations. The authors argued that students with more precollege experience with diversity were more comfortable encountering it in college than those with less precollege exposure to diversity. Therefore, students with more exposure to diversity were able to embrace the diversity in college and get more out of their college experiences with diversity than those less comfortable with it. Park and Chang (2015) confirmed that precollege experiences with diversity mattered in how students approached meaning-making in college with their ethnographic case study of racial divisions in various high school settings. Students from more homogenous high schools were so oblivious to issues of race that they did not even realize there were students from other races in their classrooms. Students with few precollege experiences with diversity were not seeking out and benefitting from diversity when they got to college.

Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, and Oseguera (2008) studied diversity experiences and transitions within the context of student sense of belonging. These authors also found that White students who grew up with less experience interacting with peers of another

race were less likely to engage with students of another race in college than White students who had experienced more racial diversity prior to college. In addition, White students with previous experiences of racial diversity who had positive interactions in college with peers from other races were more likely to have a more developed sense of belonging in that environment. Previous experience with racial diversity reduced the amount of racial tension students experienced and increased their level of comfort engaging with a diverse range of peers. According to Locks et al., “The nature of interactions with diverse peers in college is affected by the demographics of students’ precollege environment, students’ predisposition to engage in diversity-related activities, and frequency with which students socialize with one another” (p. 280).

Theoretical Frameworks

When considering a theoretical framework to guide this study, it became clear through literature review that it was important to focus on three areas of theory: sense of belonging, higher education environments, and ecological models for understanding environmental contexts. The following section examines literature on belonging theory, discusses higher education environment theory in general, and highlights two ecological theories of understanding contextual interactions and influences. These two theories are Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological theory of human development and Strange and Banning’s (2015) four models of higher education environments.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging is a basic human motivation. When students lack a sense of belonging in college, their motivation is negatively affected and a lack of belonging can undermine a student’s academic performance and even affect one’s plans to stay in college

(Strayhorn, 2012). Based on the author's extensive review of the literature on belonging in the educational context, Strayhorn described belonging as being a basic human need, a driving force and motivation that becomes heightened depending on the context. Belonging also intersects with one's social identities, relates to one's feeling of mattering, and must be constantly satisfied as environments change (Strayhorn, 2012).

Research on sense of belonging in college has been done on a variety of student groups and sub-populations (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurdato & Carter, 1997; Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, & Alvarez, 2007; Kuh & Whitt, 1988), however there has been very little research pertaining specifically to rural students' sense of belonging. This section will discuss the background of the study of sense of belonging and review literature that pertains to belonging in higher education.

The background of belonging. A sense of belonging has been recognized as being a major component to individual development since the early 20th century. In his article *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Maslow (1943) outlined his theory for a hierarchy of needs. He described The Love Needs, including needs of belongingness, and placed belonging in the center of his hierarchical pyramid of needs, right above "safety needs" (p. 8) and below "esteem needs" (p. 14). At this point in the hierarchy Maslow claimed,

Now the person will feel keenly, as never before, the absence of friends, or a sweetheart, or a wife, or children. He will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal. He will want to attain such a place more than anything else in the world and may even forget that once, when he was hungry, he sneered at love. (p. 13-14)

Maslow went on to describe needs of esteem and the need for self-actualization, and indicated that in accordance with his hierarchical model, an individual will have difficulty achieving esteem or self-actualization without a sense of belonging.

Contemporary researchers focusing on belonging refer to Bollen and Hoyle's theories of perceived cohesion as being influential to guiding their own work (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Bollen and Hoyle (1990) introduced the idea of "perceived cohesion" (p. 482), a theoretical definition of feeling like part of a group. Prior to that, an individual's perception of one's own group membership was not recognized as an aspect of cohesion. Bollen and Hoyle claimed that a sense of belonging was a fundamental component of groups, and group norms and values would not apply to those individuals who did not perceive themselves to be members of the group. The authors were interested in specific elements of group members' perception of their group membership that led them to be more likely to cohere to the group. Their formal definition of perceived cohesion indicated, "Perceived cohesion encompasses an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group" (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990, p. 482). Bollen and Hoyle concluded that an individual's sense of belonging to a group and their feelings of morale related to their membership were positively related and used their findings to develop their Perceived Cohesion Scale. Bollen and Hoyle used the Perceived Cohesion Scale to measure 102 undergraduate students' and 110 non-student citizens' sense of belonging and feelings of morale toward their membership in a particular group. They found that perceived cohesion for the college students was much higher than the non-students they measured. Bollen and Hoyle concluded that although several explanations exist, participating in shared

activities within an institution of higher education could be a contributor to developing a sense of belonging there.

Another group to contribute to the research on sense of belonging was Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, and Collier (1992), who broke down the components of belonging and recognized sense of belonging as having two defining attributes:

- (1) the person experiences being valued, needed, or important with respect to other people, groups, objects, organizations, environments, or spiritual dimensions; and
- (2) the person experiences a fit or congruence with other people, groups, objects, organizations, environments, or spiritual dimensions through shared or complementary characteristics. (p. 174)

Hagerty et al. (1992) theorized that belonging should be considered from psychological, sociological, physical, and spiritual perspectives. Belonging could be perceived psychologically as an affective and emotional feeling, sociologically as membership in groups or systems, physically as belonging relates to possession, and spiritually as a metaphysical relationship. The authors went on to conclude that in order to feel a sense of belonging, one must have energy, desire, and potential to get involved, and share common qualities with others in one's environment. According to Hagerty et al., feeling a sense of belonging included psychological, social, and physical benefits; attributed meaning to those experiences; and even influenced emotional and behavioral responses.

To extend this theoretical model, Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, and Early (1996) conducted a study to examine how sense of belonging relates to psychological and social functioning and compared participants' overall sense of belonging with their personal traits and psychological and social functioning. They also wanted to compare women

and men across the same categories. They found after studying 379 community college students that age, gender, marital status, education, and ethnicity had no direct relationship with sense of belonging. What did positively influence belonging was one's perception of positive social supports. In general, sense of belonging was more strongly related to both social and psychological functioning for women than men. This result may reflect stronger interconnections for women. Perhaps most appropriate for this current study, the authors concluded that "It is probable that sense of belonging, as a cognitive, affective, and behavioral experience, interacts with or is a product of a host of variables within the individual and the environment" (Hagerty et al., 1996. p. 243). Multiple variables make up a person's likelihood to develop a sense of belonging and include both personal internal components, as well as external environmental components. This current study seeks to better understand these variables within the context of higher education.

Belonging in higher education. With a body of literature supporting the importance of studying belonging, several researchers have gone on to examine the development of a sense of belonging in college environments, with a variety of implications for higher education institutions. Strayhorn (2012) proposed a model of college student sense of belonging derived in part from Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. Strayhorn's model recognized social spaces and contexts such as classrooms, residence halls, academic departments, and the campus at large as foundational and crucial to the development of students' sense of belonging. This model designates that in an educational context, when students feel a sense of belonging, their outcomes tend to be positive. Positive outcomes include increased involvement/engagement in learning,

overall happiness in life, academic and vocational achievement, and staying in school. When students do not experience a sense of belonging in their academic environment, students could experience negative outcomes ranging from withdrawing and dropping out of school to depression and contemplation of suicide (Strayhorn, 2012).

Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory of student persistence and integration relates belonging to staying in school. Tinto believed that when students feel integrated into the college environment they tend to stay, and this idea has been formative for other researchers examining retention and sense of belonging (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). In his description of principles of effective retention, Tinto (1993) referred to student integration in the social and intellectual community of a higher education institution claiming, "Effective retention programs are committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members" (p. 147). Tinto emphasized the importance of institutions providing an environment where the communal nature of education can thrive. He stated that,

Effective programs concern themselves with the integration of all individuals into the mainstream of the social and intellectual life of the institution and into the communities of people which make up that life. They consciously reach out and make contact with students in a variety of settings in order to establish personal bonds among students and between students, faculty members, and staff members of the institution. (p. 147)

Tinto (1993) indicated that it was crucial for institutions to provide a supportive learning environment where students could either individually, or in groups, feel comfortable and compelled to actively participate in the learning process.

Like Tinto (1993), Hurtado and Carter (1997) believed in the power of belonging and developed a conceptual model of belonging after studying background characteristics and experiences of Latino students in their first few years of college. The authors referred to Tinto's (1993) model of students' persistence and retention and developed a similar path model. Hurtado and Carter's model reflected that students' background characteristics (such as gender and academic self-concept) affected their college choice. This in turn influenced the students' ease of transition to college in their first year. All of these components combined to influence students' perception of a hostile racial climate in their second year, which then affected their sense of belonging by their third year of college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Hurtado and Carter (1997) referred to Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) Sense of Belonging Scale as an influence on their study that combined data gathered from the National Survey of Hispanic Students (NSHS) as well as a precollege data instrument called the Student Descriptive Questionnaire (SDQ). They also incorporated data from a follow-up of the NSHS that utilized instruments that contained measures from several other instruments including the Sense of Belonging Scale. They found that when students discussed course content with others outside of class and belonged to on-campus student organizations, this was strongly related to their development of a sense of belonging.

Applying Hurtado and Carter's (1997) theory and conceptual framework, Johnson et al. (2007) examined the following variables in order to predict student sense of belonging: first year student background characteristics, college selectivity, residence hall environments, perceptions of college transition, and perceptions of racial climate. They recorded 23,910 student responses and found that overall, students of color felt lower levels of sense of belonging than White students. One finding consistent across all racial ethnic groups was that when students perceived that their residence hall climate was socially supportive, their development of sense of belonging was positively affected. The authors concluded that individuals and their higher education institutions share mutual responsibility for their successful integration and development of sense of belonging. According to Johnson et al., "Rather than placing the burden on students to adapt to an unalterable campus context, this study's findings reinforce the importance of understanding students' perceptions of their college environments and experiences" (p. 537).

That same year, Hausmann et al. (2007) published their results of a systematic study that examined how different characteristics and variables affected White and African American students' sense of belonging to their university. They defined belonging as the "psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" (p. 804). The authors surveyed 220 White and 145 African American first year university students in their first and second semesters in college and found that students who reported higher perceived faculty member concern for their academic and intellectual development, indicated higher level of belonging than those with less perceived academic integration.

Variables most closely associated with sense of belonging at the beginning of the year were mostly social in nature (peer-group interactions, interactions with faculty members, peer support, parental support, etc.). Essentially, variables that occurred in the university setting affected sense of belonging, whereas background variables had little impact. This suggests that

The early social experiences students have when they first enter college and the social support they receive during that time are likely to be better determinants of initial levels of sense of belonging than are demographic characteristics or academic experiences. (Hausmann et al., 2007, p. 829)

Hausmann et al.'s (2007) study illustrated how environmental factors such as social supports and experiences in a student's new educational environment can influence a student's development of a sense of belonging to that institution.

This research pertaining to belonging in higher education environments illustrates the importance of students developing a sense of belonging in college (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993), and also outlines several areas institutions can emphasize in order to aid students in belonging. Johnson et al.'s (2007) research points to the importance of institutions providing a socially-supportive climate in residence halls in order to increase students' sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter's (1997) work included findings that identified student organizations as having a positive influence on students developing a sense of belonging. Institutions can foster this by providing opportunities for students to organize. Hausmann et al.'s (2007) study identified that social environments were important to student belonging and indicates that when institutions provide socially-

supportive environments for transitioning students, their sense of belonging is positively affected.

The above studies each featured a primary racial/ethnic component. While there are differences between the experiences of racially minoritized students and rural students, there are also some parallels between the two groups. For instance, racially minoritized students often experience cultural differences with the primary majority that inhibit their sense of belonging. One could argue that rural students also experience cultural dissonance when they come to college, which prevents them from developing a sense of belonging as well (McDonough et al., 2010). There are limits to these parallels however, and while privilege and marginalization dynamics exist for both populations, the scale and scope are quite different. This study is necessary in part to isolate and identify some of the experiences unique to rural students as they experience a sense of belonging in their educational environment.

Higher Education Contexts

As indicated above, individuals' perceived level of belonging in their educational environment is influential to their experiences. In order to better understand how rural students develop a sense of belonging in college, it is helpful to focus on environmental theory specific to higher education. While there is little research that focuses specifically on rural student experiences in higher education contexts, much research has been done linking general student success and the educational environment (Patton et al., 2016). For rural students, environmental factors need to be explored in order to better understand how their rural background interacts with their college context.

One way to consider higher educational environments as they pertain to student development is through Chickering's seven developmental vectors and educationally influential environments theories. Chickering (1969) proposed that there are seven inter-related vectors that contribute to student development in general. Chickering and Reisser (1993) postulated that while students moved through vectors at different rates and in different patterns, vectors built on each other in their levels of complexity and integration. "Each step from 'lower' to 'higher' brings more awareness, skill, confidence, complexity, stability, and integration but does not rule out an accidental or intentional return to ground already traversed" (p. 34). The seven vectors include developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy and interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering, 1969).

In addition to the initial seven developmental vectors, Chickering and Reisser (1993) proposed that there were also seven key elements to the higher education environment that influence student development. These factors included: "(1) institutional objectives, (2) institutional size, (3) student-faculty relationships, (4) curriculum, (5) teaching, (6) friendships and student communities, and (7) student development programs and services" (p. 265). Chickering and Reisser put forth three admonitions, or recommendations for higher education institutions to implement to ensure that the educational environment facilitated student development. The authors suggested that higher education institutions need to recognize individual student differences, focus on helping students integrate learning and work, and understand how learning and development are related (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Patton et al., 2016).

Another aspect of higher education contexts includes the idea of college culture. Kuh and Whitt (1988) wrote about the various aspects of culture and subcultures in higher education. Their work is important when conceptualizing the multi-dimensional intersectionality of cultures that influence and are influenced by the higher education environment. The authors claimed that at each institution of higher education three important subcultures are highly influential to the institution's culture as a whole: faculty culture, student culture, and administrator culture. According to Kuh and Whitt, these cultures

...are created through interactions with peers, mediated to a certain extent by institutional structures and processes. Preferred approaches to negotiating persistent problems faced by the group are passed to succeeding generations of students, thereby creating and maintaining a set of beliefs, attitudes and values shared by many students in a particular institution. (p. 7)

Kuh and Whitt describe these subcultures as being dominant to the extent that while the subculture might not reflect the values and beliefs of the entire institution, they still substantially influence the overall culture of the institution.

According to Kuh and Whitt, culture and environment are intertwined where culture relies heavily on context to the point that "the meaning of events and behavior cannot be fully appreciated apart from the institution in which they occur" (p. 8). Similar occurrences in different environments can be interpreted to mean different things. Recognizing these cultures and their influence on the institutional environment is crucial to understanding how students experience a cultural connection to, or dissonance with a particular institution. This is why faculty, administration, and student subcultures are so

important to studying how rural students experience the dominant culture at their institution as it relates to their rural background and influences their sense of belonging.

The cultural and contextual components written about by Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Kuh and Whitt (1988) reiterate how imperative these elements are when considering a student's development of a sense of belonging and the subsequent educational success an individual enjoys. It is important to examine how rural students are reacting to the environments provided by an institution of higher learning. To most successfully identify and analyze these multiple contextual aspects, it will be crucial to employ a theoretical framework that recognizes the complex ecological interactions of these contexts and provides structure to the investigation.

Ecological Systems Frameworks

The variety of cultural and contextual elements that make up the higher education environment make it difficult to pinpoint which components are most salient to the experiences of rural students. Therefore utilizing a theoretical framework that identifies how environmental elements interact expands the researcher's ability to describe and interpret these influences. An ecological systems framework is a theory that does just that, it categorizes the systems that individuals interact with in the contexts of their community and wider society to provide a structure that allows researchers to illustrate the contextual influences on the depth and breadth of these interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

An ecological systems framework has been employed in many studies of rural students (Crocket, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2000; Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010; Elder & Conger, 2000; Meece et al., 2013). Studies have applied this

ecological framework to “explain variations in educational and occupational attainment of rural youth” (Meece et al., 2013, p. 176). Demi et al. (2010) used an ecological framework to look at how individual, family, and school contexts influence rural students’ higher education enrollment. They used data collected for the Rural Youth Education (RYE) study and compared college enrollment to variables such as rural high school climate, parental bonding, parental income, parental college education, parental college expectation, high school achievement, and self-efficacy. They found that the biggest predictor of whether rural students enrolled in college was the students’ perception of their high school environment. If students’ high school environment supported higher education, there was a greater likelihood that the students would enroll in college. Examples of high school environmental influences include guidance counselor and teacher support, high school academic performance, and a culture that fostered educational aspirations. These findings reflect how various interacting contextual components in students’ environments influence their perceptions about higher education. This evokes the interacting components of ecological theory and supports the decision to use ecological theory as a framework to study the contextual components of educational environments (Demi et al., 2010).

In order to frame the current study, two ecological theories were used: Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological theory of human development, which applies to understanding all human environments, and Strange and Banning’s (2015) four models of campus environments theory, which pertains to college campus environments in particular.

Ecological theory of human development. Bronfenbrenner (1977) introduced a perspective called “the ecology of human development” (p. 514) based on the idea of a progressive lifespan development affected by an individual’s relationships within and between the changing immediate environments in which they live. When using the ecological approach to interpret data or examine an issue, it is important to consider the “joint impact of two or more settings or their elements. This is the requirement, wherever possible, of analyzing interactions between settings” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 523). Essentially, this theory implies that human development is heavily reliant on the environment in which it occurs. The contextual component is key to understanding rural student experience and can be broken down and analyzed at the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Bronfenbrenner suggested that the levels were nested and were each contained within subsequent levels. The microsystem is the most personal level of the ecological environment and includes the complex set of relationships between the developing person and their immediate environment. The next level is the mesosystem, which contains the microsystem but also includes interrelations between the individual and major settings in their life; examples would include interactions with family, school, or peer groups. The exosystem is the next layer and acts as an extension of the mesosystem. The exosystem encompasses specific social structures that do not themselves contain the developing individual, but influence and contain the immediate settings that person inhabits. Examples include the work environment, neighborhood, mass media, government agencies, etc. Finally, the macrosystem is the largest and last layer that contains the others and represents the “overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture”

(p. 515). Macrosystems can include economic, social, cultural, educational, legal, and political systems and are more abstract, where the other layers are the concrete manifestations of these systems.

Regarding the postsecondary context, the environment of a higher education institution contains each of these nested levels and the way students interact with them can influence their development. The ecological layers represent the types of relationships between the individual and their environment, and each have their own considerations. The microsystem is very personal and highly variable across individuals. This variability can involve components of a student's personal background, which would in turn influence how they interact with their direct environment. This is the level where individuals shape their personal constructed realities and these background variables filter how individuals interpret and experience their reality. As such, it may be important to consider how students' rural background influences the way they directly interact with and experience their college environment. The mesosystem focuses on interactions between an individual and multiple settings. The mesosystem in higher education settings might represent where various microsystems interact, such as student groups and faculty members. The exosystem that exists in a postsecondary ecological environment represents the student development that goes beyond the immediate environment. This is the first level where students do not have a direct active role in the environment, where interactions occur that influence the interactions that take place in the lower levels of the microsystems and mesosystems. One example could be the interactions of the university President and the Faculty Council developing policies that influence student experiences.

Macrosystems are the overarching environmental contexts. For rural students, macrosystemic contexts include the interactions of rural culture/life/identity and the overall institutional objectives and mission of higher education institutions.

In addition to the nested levels of the ecological theory, Bronfenbrenner (2005) identified the process-person-context-time model (PPCT) made up of four developmentally ecological components that interact to inform development. This model of an ecological environment influencing development is key to examining the environmental contexts of higher education for rural students because it focuses on rural individuals and the various levels and interactions of the educational environment that they experience.

Process refers to the progressively more complex shared interactions that individuals have with their immediate environment. The more commonly occurring processes are termed “proximal processes” (p. 6), which Bronfenbrenner identified as the “primary engines of development” (p. 6). These processes are contingent on the characteristics of the developing person, happen within particular contexts (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems), and occur over time. Person refers to the role individuals’ personal characteristics play in social interactions. Bronfenbrenner splits these into three types: demand characteristics (physical appearance, age, or gender), resource characteristics (past experiences, intelligence, material wealth), and force characteristics (temperament, motivation, persistence). Context refers to the interconnected systems of the original model (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems). Time is considered crucial to development and is broken down into three levels: micro, meso, and macro. Micro-time refers to specific episodes of proximal processes. Meso-time looks at processes over

days, weeks, etc. Macro-time refers to the processes across the wider culture, across generations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

Macro-time is also referred to as the chronosystem, the historical context in which an individual exists (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). This can also be considered the fifth dimension of the ecological systems theory. Chronosystem is an important element to consider for this study as rural/urban dynamics are currently of particular interest and the contextual elements contained within the current generation of rural students are unique to this time. The current economic climate, technological advances, priorities of higher education institutions, and other historically significant contextual influences will need to be considered as they affect the processes and interactions that this current generation of rural students experience with their educational environment.

Models of campus environments. Another way to conceptualize postsecondary educational environments is through Strange and Banning's (2015) four models of human environments. Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 2005) theory relates to how the overall environment influences human development. Since this study pertains to students in the context of education, it is helpful to incorporate an ecological theory that relates specifically to higher education environments. Each of Strange and Banning's environmental models (physical, aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed) influences individuals within it in a different way. According to Strange and Banning, "The concept of place is foundational to the human experience and can serve as a heuristic device for understanding the dynamics of the college campus" (p. 12). Therefore, their concept of physical environments includes not only the man-made environment (buildings, landscapes, etc.) but also the cultural objects and artifacts that

represent and interact with those who come to campus. According to Strange and Banning, “Components of the campus physical environment, natural and synthetic, serve functional and symbolic ends, defining spaces for various activities, functions, and events and sending out nonverbal messages containing a range of possibilities” (p. 5).

In addition to physical environments, aggregate environments in higher education also influence students. Aggregate environments encompass the collective characteristics of those that inhabit the environment including their demographic composition as well as their typological components such as personalities, learning styles, strengths, and other activities. According to Strange and Banning (2015), “such aggregates accent and reinforce their own characteristics over time and exert a powerful influence on the degree to which others are attracted to, satisfied within, and retained by them” (p. 6). Therefore the specific cultural qualities of a campus are going to attract those that share traits with the dominant group. Strange and Banning also asserted that the quality of a student’s experience is based in part on their fit, or congruence, with the common aggregate identity and culture of the campus. Those that do not resemble the primary or dominant culture may have a difficult time fitting in and as a result may be less satisfied with their experience and choose to leave that environment. In the current study, aggregate environment is a key component to the higher education context experienced by rural students. As research suggests (Heinisch, 2016; McDonough et al., 2010; Schultz, 2004), rural students’ beliefs and attitudes may set them apart from the dominant culture of a large urban campus.

Another component to the higher education context that will be key to examine is the organizational environment provided by the institution. According to Strange and

Banning (2015), it is important to understand who is in charge, how important decisions about resource allocation are made, and what the goals of the institution are. These concepts compose “the arrangements and structures that, in turn, define the organizational dimensions of an environment” (p. 7). This can result in a highly centralized campus with a few powerful decision-making individuals, or one that distributes authority across the campus creating more flexible and dynamic environments. This distinction can then go on to influence the campus’ innovation, efficiency, production and morale (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Socially constructed environments is the last of Strange and Banning’s (2015) four models of campus environment theory. Strange and Banning claimed that “Socially constructed models of the environment recognize that a consensus of individuals who perceive and characterize their environment constitutes a measure of environmental press, climate, or culture in a setting” (p. 115). This concerns the students’ perceptions of their environment and how perceptions contribute to their experience of reality taking into account the subjective opinions, experiences, and collective social constructions made by individuals and perceptions’ influence on behaviors. When students are comfortable in certain environments, their perception and evaluation of the environment is positive. On the other hand, if their perceived reality in that environment is negative, it can influence their level of comfort and congruence with the environment.

Taken together, Strange and Banning’s (2015) four models of campus environments and Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological environment theory can help explain the various aspects of higher education environment’s influence on rural students’ sense of belonging at a large university. Rural students have to adjust to

interactions within their new environment, which may or may not be congruent with their preferred physical environment, their beliefs and attitudes, organizational expectations, and views and experiences. These aspects can influence the comfort level rural students feel with their academic environment and even determine whether a rural student connects to the educational environment and chooses to stay, or does not connect and chooses to drop out.

Conclusion

There is a pool of literature pertaining to sense of belonging in higher education and educational contexts' contribution to student development (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Strayhorn, 2012). However, little has been published that examines college contextual influences on rural student experience in higher education. The aim of this chapter was to provide a rationale for studying higher education contexts and how rural students in particular experience their academic environments. The pertinent literature on rural students was highlighted and discussed, including educational aspirations, issues pertaining to access and enrollment, cultural disparities between rural life and college life, and the impact of first-generation student status. This literature depicted the barriers that rural students often experience in college. It also provided a foundation of knowledge for the current study to use in examining higher education structures and interventions to see how they address the existing issues.

The idea of belonging was explored with a section dedicated to examining the foundation of the theory of sense of belonging, its general application, and its applicability in the context of higher education as well. The literature informs this study

of the importance of belonging and identifies just how imperative it is for rural students to have an academic environment where they can develop a sense of belonging in order to thrive in their postsecondary education. Belonging can be used to explain many of the struggles and barriers students from rural areas experience and provides a conceptualization of what rural students strive for when they come to college. When it is achieved, a sense of belonging is a key element to rural students' decision to stay and persist in an initially unfamiliar environment.

Higher education environments were also explored and discussed as complex and multi-faceted contexts for students to have a wide range of experiences. Finally, two ecological theories related to development and belonging were identified, and their applications to higher education institutions were described. It is important to frame this study with Bronfenbrenner's (1977) and Strange and Banning's (2015) theories as a lens to better understand how the multiple components and varied elements of college environments are affecting rural students' sense of belonging and development.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Purpose

Due in part to economic challenges in rural areas and the increasing necessity of postsecondary education, the number of rural students aspiring to attend college is on the rise (Tieken, 2016). Over the last decade, the number of rural youth enrolled in college has increased 2.2% (NCES, 2015; Provasnik et al., 2007). These students often experience barriers to their postsecondary education that non-rural students may not (Heinisch, 2016; Meece et al., 2013; Schultz, 2004). While there is some research documenting the experiences of rural students (Ames et al., 2014; Crockett et al., 2000; Ginsberg, 1980), much of it pertains to rural youth's college aspirations and very little focuses on how rural students experience the educational environment at a large university. There is a cultural divide between rural communities and many institutions of higher education. College students from rural areas may need assistance navigating the differences in social norms, unfamiliar physical spaces, faculty member interactions, and diverse populations at large, urban institutions (Heinisch, 2016; McDonough et al., 2010; Schultz, 2004). Many of the issues that rural students experience when coming to a large university stem from their sense of alienation and marginalization that comes from feeling like they do not belong in that environment. Lack of belonging has been shown to affect the college experience of many students in a variety of marginalized populations such as African American students (Hausmann et al., 2007), Latino college students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), and Asian Pacific American students (Johnson et al., 2007). Strayhorn (2012) pointed out a wide range of outcomes students experience based on their sense of belonging in a particular educational environment. Students' sense of

belonging in their college environment can contribute to feelings of overall happiness and achievement. When lacking a sense of belonging, students have been shown to exhibit disinterest in college and even symptoms of depression (Strayhorn, 2012).

Up to this point, there have been few in-depth analyses of individual institutions and their approach to supporting rural students specifically. There have been case studies that examine rural student experiences, however these focus more on the student aspirations and issues pertaining to their access to college and less on their experience once they get to college (McDonough et al., 2010). These college experiences are important to understand, especially since many rural students feel a cultural divide between rural environments and college environments (Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004). This can result in students feeling like they do not belong in higher education, which then can lead to poor academic performance and even dropping out (Strayhorn, 2012). We need more studies that examine higher education environments in order to inform the development of more culturally sensitive environments for rural students to feel like they belong. The purpose of this case study was to explore how the higher education environment influences rural students in developing a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern university. The following questions guided this research:

- To what extent and in what ways do rural students feel a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern university?
 - How does students' identification with their rural background influence how they experience their college environment?
 - What do rural students see as key environmental factors affecting their sense of belonging?

- Is the institution providing supportive environments for rural students and if so, how?

Researcher Positionality

To protect the integrity of this qualitative research, it is important to recognize the researcher's position and as the researcher, to utilize reflexivity to reflect critically on the self (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), "Investigators need to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken" (p. 219). This includes a researcher's experiences, worldview and theoretical orientation. This clarification "allows the reader to better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data" (Merriam, 2009, p. 219).

As the primary researcher I recognize that I have subjectivities and viewpoints that readers should consider when reading my interpretations of the data provided by participants. My primary educational background is in psychology and counseling. Having worked as a therapist, I believe it is important to understand the world from my client's perspective and to understand that my reality is not necessarily that person's reality. This has influenced my views regarding the subjectivity of research. As a result, my worldview reflects the interpretive/constructivist worldview described by Neuman (2011), an approach that Neuman claims "emphasizes meaningful social action, socially constructed meaning, and value relativism" (p. 101). According to this view, every person's constructed reality is subjective and unique to that individual. Therefore, my constructivist worldview influences my methodological approach to research where I will interpret and synthesize multiple individuals' constructed realities.

A description of my background will hopefully provide a contextual reference for my analysis. I am a Caucasian male originally from a Nebraska town with a population of approximately 20,000. As a White man belonging to the race that is most represented on campus, I experience the privilege of not having to explain or have others understand my cultural perspective as belonging to the racial majority. I am also of the same race as most of my participants and can relate to their descriptions of racial diversity or cross-racial interactions that they have encountered due to my own experiences with majority privilege. Although the majority of individuals where I work are White, I still commonly have interactions with individuals of different races, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs. This occurs much more frequently for me at UNL than it did in my Nebraska hometown. As such, my own experiences with a diverse population at UNL overlaps with those of my student participants, creating a subjective lens in which I filter those experiences. Having similar experiences as some rural student participants coming from a homogenous background and living and studying in a much less homogenous environment predisposes me to co-construct a reality similar to my own, which I must work to bracket out of my analyses and interpretation. Due to my being White, non-White participants might have been less inclined to speak about experiences of discrimination because they might not have felt as comfortable bringing up issues of race with someone that could become offended or at the very least would not as accurately interpret their experiences.

I grew up in a middle class family with one parent working as an educator at a local community college and the other parent working part-time as a social-worker. Both of my parents have completed master's degrees. My father was a first-generation college

student from a highly populated Midwestern city. My mother was a first-generation rural student from a hometown with a population of approximately 300. She has told me stories about how her upbringing and how rural life for her involved a close community with an intense familiarity and reliance on others. Many youth in her hometown did not attend college and those that did rarely came back. These stories oriented me to assume that individuals in rural areas were likely less educated than those in non-rural areas and would benefit from more education.

I was a high-achieving student in high school and also experienced success in my undergraduate degree program at a small, private Midwestern university. During my undergraduate program, I also had the opportunity to study abroad for a semester in England. I have since earned a master's degree at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), and currently work as an academic advisor at the same university. Due to my experiences and my parent's influence, I am predisposed to see the value in higher education. As an individual who grew up in the middle class, I have experienced benefits and privileges where the choice to attend college was not a struggle and my ability to pay for it was never in doubt. Therefore, academic struggles due to lack of resources were less familiar to me when interpreting statements from student participants from low-income families who had fewer choices about attending college and experienced more challenges in their college experience.

My personal experience as an undergraduate student does not directly match that of my participants, as I am not from a rural community and I had much prior knowledge of higher education institutions before I embarked upon my own education. However, having grown up in a state where agriculture is a common way of life, and with close

relatives and friends sharing the rural student experience, I feel I have a certain informed perspective on this population. The stories I've heard about life in sparsely populated towns and rural areas I've visited extensively have contributed to my baseline understanding of rural life and helped me construct my own tentative idea of rurality. In addition, my advising role pertains specifically to students enrolled in UNL's College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR), an extension of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, which has a land-grant mission. As a result, many of the undergraduate students I interact with on a daily basis are from rural areas.

I come to this project invested in the future of rural students and biased regarding life in a mostly rural, agricultural state. As a native Nebraskan, I understand the culture of an agricultural area. I see the consolidation of small rural schools requiring high school students to travel great distances to attend school. I know that small communities want the best for their young people but see more and more of them leave and not come back. I see previously thriving communities board up their main street businesses because the local economy does not support homegrown shops. I feel strongly about the future of Midwestern rural communities and the wellbeing of the youth that grow up there. I also see students from rural areas struggle because they have a hard time adjusting to their non-rural educational environments. Therefore I am motivated to study this population in order to find ways to help students from these areas.

My interactions with administrators on campus are common and I serve under many layers of administration including my direct supervisor, department chairs, deans, and the Chancellor and Vice Chancellors. Therefore my interviews with administrators at MU were informed by my past positive and negative experiences interacting with

professional staff at UNL. Prior to my current role as an advisor, I worked for the university in the Registrar's Office, giving me the advantage of knowing how the institution operated university-wide. I saw how each college in the university had a different approach to student development. That general knowledge, combined with my current in-depth knowledge of how CASNR operates, gives me broad as well as specific knowledge of the inner-workings of a large urban university. My professional experience provided me with an informed perspective on recommendations for practice as I have seen various retention projects succeed or miss the mark depending on the implementation and population targeted. Therefore I have a preconceived idea of what practices would work and which would be difficult to implement successfully.

Although my experiences add a layer of subjectivity to my interpretations, I tried to bracket my own perspective during all phases of this research project, whether it was data collection, analysis, interpretation, or discussion, in order to provide the most accurate representation of the participants' own realities. I have not technically experienced being a rural undergraduate student first-hand. In addition, the power and privilege I have experienced as a middle-class, White male, second-generation student at times made it difficult for me to accurately co-construct a reality that involved marginalization, discrimination, or challenges related to sex, sexual preference, or socio-economic status.

Epistemological Perspective

When conducting social science and education research, it is important to consider the various philosophical frameworks or paradigms that exist. Researchers' personal worldviews affect their adoption of a philosophical framework, which affects their

research efforts from the ground up and informs their research questions and methodology. I identify with the interpretive/constructivist paradigm, which influences my views regarding the subjectivity of research. Individuals that share this view recognize that some things just are not generalizable due to the subjective lens through which everything is interpreted. According to Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011), paradigmatic worldview can be broken down into three major components: ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Ontology is the most overarching element that encompasses a researcher's assumptions about the very nature of reality. With a constructivist view, multiple relative realities exist, rather than the single identifiable reality assumed with a positivistic view. Epistemology refers to the researcher's beliefs about the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Creswell, 2013). For instance, the constructivist epistemology uses an approach that identifies the researcher's subjective point of view as the lens through which the other's perspective will be interpreted (Lincoln et al., 2011). Methodology makes up the third and final component of a worldview and represents the process of seeking new knowledge. This selection is influenced by a researcher's ontology and epistemology, and as a constructivist, I used a hermeneutic and dialectic approach. This means I inductively created new knowledge based on my interpretations of the discussions and opinions of my participants during the collection of data (Guba, 1990).

The goal of interpretive research is to gain understanding and meaning of lived experience through a collaborative process of construction (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). According to Guba (1990), the constructivist nature of knowledge involves individuals creating their own understanding of reality. With this approach, knowledge accumulation

is based more on informed and sophisticated reconstructions and vicarious experiences than other approaches (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Constructivists value understanding and strive for trustworthiness, authenticity, and agreement among researchers and participants through shared dialogue. It is important to gain perspective from participants and act as a co-creator of knowledge and to frame the participant data as a reconstruction of their experience (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In reporting research, it is important to utilize a voice that represents the participants. Contextual information is often needed to provide a rich description of the participant experience. This may mean that my reporting of the data is subjective, however it is important to remember that all research will eventually be interpreted whether it is by the researcher or by the public consuming the results. I intended to frame the results in a way that accurately represented the collaborative process of meaning-making undertaken during the study. However, this co-construction was informed by my previous experiences as mentioned above pertaining to my positionality. Therefore, my majority White privilege, male privilege, and middle class experience affected my lens for constructing reality and must be considered when reading my interpretations of the constructed realities of lower income, racial minority, and female students.

In addition to my interpretive/constructivist worldview, I also believe in pragmatism as it contributes to my personal research efforts. Pragmatism as an approach focuses more on the applications and solutions to the research problems than the methods themselves (Creswell, 2013). This approach focuses on finding methods that work to solve the problems created by the research questions. According to Cherryholmes (1992), pragmatists agree that there is an external world outside of themselves and recognize that

the world exists without absolute unity, therefore questions about reality and the laws of nature are less important than the truth of what works at the time. Pragmatists are interested in the “what” and “how” of research, and recognize the importance of context. Pragmatists often utilize a variety of methodological approaches (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016), and this project featured a variety of data types collected and used for analysis and interpretation.

When considering the methodological approach to these research questions, I recognized the importance of the constructed meaning of each participant’s experience and how they each experience higher education contexts independently. It was important for me to understand the individual experiences of rural students in a large university environment in order to provide a thick, rich, description of the students’ experience through collaboration and meaning making. Therefore, my constructivist worldview influenced my methodological approach to my research project as there were multiple realities to evaluate, with multiple components, and methods decisions were made pragmatically based on what worked the best for my research problem. This illustrates how the pragmatic viewpoint could operate in tandem with my paradigmatic worldview as an interpretive/constructivist.

Conceptual Framework

Since I employed an interpretive, inductive approach to this study, much of the focus was on exploration of student experience and college environment. I needed to keep an open mind to most accurately gather and interpret the qualitative data, considering multiple realities and alternative explanations. Therefore relying too heavily on theoretical frameworks would have limited the scope of my qualitative research.

However, it was imperative that this investigation had a structure and a starting point to guide my inquiry.

A review of the literature provided direction for approaching this research problem. The previous work of Heinisch (2016) provided guidance for studying rural students and influenced several elements of the research design, including participant selection, discussed later. The design and conceptual framework of Garcia's (2017) study informed the framework and methodology of the current study. Garcia used an ecological framework to study Latinx college students' sense of belonging within primarily White institutions (PWIs). Garcia examined the concept of belonging within the context of educational subcultures and utilized the ecological and environmental theories of Bronfenbrenner (1977) and Strange and Banning (2015) to frame the study. Using these theories to frame her findings, among other things, Garcia was able to identify characteristic influences on an individual's sense of belonging from physical, organizational, socially constructed, and human aggregate dimensions at the campus microsystem level.

Literature pertaining to rural youth also provided some support for the use of an ecological framework. Past studies of rural youth have used an ecological theoretical framework to either explain how rural youth aspire to occupational attainment (Meece et al., 2013) or define the rural environment (Crockett et al., 2000). The current study focused on the educational environment instead of the rural environment, however an ecological approach was appropriate to assess student experiences of higher education institutions' environmental contexts.

In addition to environmental ecology, research on sense of belonging has contributed much to the understanding of student experience and integration with the educational environment (Strayhorn 2012). There are three components to my conceptual framework: Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 2005) ecological theory of human development, Strange and Banning's (2015) models of campus environments, and Strayhorn's (2012) work on sense of belonging and how it is influenced by the environment and in turn, how it informs a student's congruence with their educational environment.

The primary objective of this study was to explore how rural students experience higher education contexts and develop a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern university. To guide this effort, it was helpful to consider the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 2005) ecological theory of human development. There were two particularly useful components for framing this study: the four nested levels of contextual components (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem), and the ecological components that interact to inform development (process, person, context, and time; i.e. PPCT).

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 2005) ecological theory of human development, while very helpful in examining individuals, their development, and their relationships with their environment, does not specifically implicate higher education environments. Therefore it was also helpful to utilize Strange and Banning's (2015) theory of models of campus environments and to consider rural students' perception of their congruence with the physical, aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed components of the higher education environment.

Much literature has increased our knowledge of how sense of belonging influences a student's perception of their environment and how environmental factors such as residence halls (Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012), faculty member interactions (Hausmann et al., 2007), student organizations (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), and other campus and social environments (Hausmann et al., 2007; Tinto, 1993) influence how students integrate and experience their environment. Through this case study I looked for elements of the educational environment that were conducive for rural students to develop a sense of belonging. My goal was to identify these elements and note the contextual constructs that may be influencing sense of belonging and environmental congruence for rural students at a large university. Consequently, it was important to note whether rural students have developed a sense of belonging, and to what degree this influenced their perception of their educational environment. All of these contextual levels, environmental components, belongingness constructs, and proximal processes are interrelated and helped frame the research methodology of this case study on rural student experience at a large urban university.

Research Design

The goal of this project was to explore how rural students experience higher education contexts and develop a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern university. In order to best examine the contextual elements of the higher education environment, I employed a single case study design. A constructivist approach was appropriate to better understand the multiple constructed realities that existed within the case and allowed me to inductively identify themes embedded in the data specific to my research questions, as they pertained to the particular case I chose to investigate.

Qualitative Inquiry

Since this study involved a researcher interpreting and doing in-depth analysis of the views and experiences of individuals in their natural settings, a qualitative research methodology was the best fit. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), where quantitative research measures the quantifiable causal relationships between variables, qualitative research stresses how social experiences are given meaning and “the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (p. 8).

This study looked at the social construction of experiences for students from a rural area attending a large urban Midwestern university. It examined the institution’s educational environment and what this means to rural students in an attempt to gain a better understanding of what these individuals experience. I employed an interpretive social science epistemology that emphasized social action, socially constructed meaning, and relativism. Participants experience their own version of truth and this study aimed to provide insight into the perspectives of its participants using thick, rich descriptions and data collected in the participants’ natural environment. It was important for the researcher to have the ability to go in-depth in data collection and analysis and a systematic qualitative research methodology supports this epistemology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Case Study

To fully understand how rural students experience the higher education context and assess how institutions are addressing this issue, I chose to study an institution that

acts as an instrumental case, or one selected to best represent the problem (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) defines a case study as:

a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case)...over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes. (p. 97)

In the current study, my goal was to select a case that best represents the phenomenon of interest; therefore I conducted an instrumental case study where according to Stake (2005), the case “is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else” (p. 437). My intent with this study was to choose a case that illustrated how cultural dissonance between rural life and life at an institution of higher education can affect rural students’ sense of belonging.

Due to the level of detail and depth involved in a qualitative investigation such as this, it was important to limit the scope of this study to a single case. I decided to mask the identity of the institution in order to protect the identity of the student and staff participants. Therefore I refer to the case as Midwestern University (MU). MU is an ideal case to study for several reasons. First of all, the identity incongruence experienced by rural students may be more pronounced at a larger, 4-year institution.

MU is located in an urban area with a diverse student population and wide variety of colleges, majors, and instructors. This is in direct contrast with many environments rural students may have been accustomed to (Ginsberg, 1980; Handke, 2012; Murphy,

1984; Schultz & Neighbors, 2007). According to Ames et al. (2014), often “students from rural backgrounds choose to attend smaller universities, a choice that seems appropriate and beneficial” (p. 213). Therefore, studying rural students at a larger institution that exacerbates their identity incongruence was beneficial because it made the issues rural students experience more pronounced. Undergraduate classes are often quite large, with 24 percent having 40 or more students enrolled (Institutional Research, Analytics & Decision Support, 2017). Due to MU’s status as the largest public institution of higher education in its state and being located in a non-rural area, there is potential for cultural challenges and identity inconsistencies for rural students, thus making this site ideal to illustrate the perpetuation of higher education contexts’ influence on rural students transitioning to a large university.

Secondly, it was crucial to select a public institution with a land-grant mission in order to gather sufficient and appropriate data regarding rural students. An institution with a land-grant mission has a responsibility to assess and meet the needs of its local constituents, including rural students. MU is a public university with a total undergraduate enrollment of 20,182 students and has several units dedicated to agriculturally-related disciplines. According to their website, the “land-grant tradition creates for [Midwestern University] a special state-wide responsibility to serve the needs of [the state] and its citizens.” Rural student enrollment data is not collected at MU so it is difficult to know the exact number of enrolled rural students (J. Joy, personal communication, January 19, 2017). However with the many applied and agriculturally-focused programs offered, there was an adequate number of rural students at this institution to provide a sufficient sample for exploration.

MU also has a large infrastructure of student supports and activities with multiple units facilitating student organizations, undergraduate research, and other engagement opportunities. The many student outreach opportunities support MU's claims of its dedication to student development and engagement. It was beneficial to see how faculty, staff, and policy-makers at such an institution understood rural student needs and how rural students experience these engagement outlets and opportunities to connect.

MU was a useful instrumental case to study because it has a combination of qualities commonly found in other Midwestern universities of its size and scope, which may contribute to this study's utility for comparison to other institutions. The large size and urban location of MU are also qualities shared by many other higher education institutions that may benefit from this research project highlighting experiences of rural students in an educational environment that may be experiencing a pronounced identity incongruence due to the large size and/or urban setting of their university.

There are 75 public land-grant institutions in the United States with at least one in each of the fifty states (Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities, 2017). The fact that MU is a land-grant institution not only means that rural student participants are more abundant, it also means this study provides a useful example for leaders at other land-grant institutions to consider. The fact that MU's resource allocation and service provision hints at a dedication to student development and engagement means that the results of this study will also likely resonate with other leaders of institutions dedicated to promoting success for a diverse population of students, including students from rural areas.

Data Collection

A defining characteristic of case study methodology involves the collection of many types of data in order to portray an in-depth description of the case (Creswell, 2013). Commonly, case studies incorporate interviews, observations, and document or artifact data in order to produce the depth of description required for the study (Merriam, 2009). The purpose of this study was to produce an in-depth description of rural students' experience of the environment of an individual institution of higher education, and consistent with case study methodology, multiple data collection methods were utilized. All data collection procedures were chosen specifically to address various components of the conceptual framework including Bronfenbrenner's (1977) levels of ecological environments (microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems), Strange and Banning's (2015) four environmental models (physical, aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed), and Strayhorn's (2012) definition of belonging.

Table 3.1 below illustrates how each data collection method relates to this study's conceptual framework.

Table 3.1

Primary Goals of Data Collection

	Institutional Data	Individual Data	
	Staff Interviews	Student Interviews	Demographic Questionnaire
Physical Environment*		-Questions pertain to participant perspective on the physical environment -Artifacts represent physical environments	
Aggregate Environment*	Questions pertain to common student characteristics and experiences	-Questions pertain to common student characteristics and experiences -Artifacts allude to common characteristics	
Organizational Environment*	Questions pertain to organizational structure and mission	Questions pertain to student perceptions of the institution's organization	
Socially Constructed Environment*	Questions pertain to campus culture	-Questions pertain to social constructions and campus culture -Artifacts illustrate cultural influences	
Microsystem†	Questions pertain to student interactions with faculty members and staff	-Questions pertain to student interactions with faculty members, staff, peers, programs, etc. -Artifacts reflect student-level interactions	
Mesosystem†		Questions pertain to overlapping microsystems	
Exosystem†	Questions pertain to the institution as a whole		
Macrosystem†		Questions pertain to rural identity vs campus life	
PPCT	Questions pertain to common interactions between student and environment	-Questions concern proximal processes between student and environment -Artifacts allude to proximal processes between student and environment	
Sense of Belonging		-Questions pertain to sense of belonging -Artifacts relate to sense of belonging	Responses used to triangulate and provide context for interpretation of belonging

*Strange & Banning's (2015) four models of campus environments

†Bronfenbrenner's (1977) four levels of environment

PPCT = Bronfenbrenner's (2005) interactions that inform development: process, person, context, and time

Studying nested levels of environment. I examined constructs at all the nested levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory of contextual components. For instance, microsystems represent the relationships between the developing person and their immediate environment. Essentially, through in-depth interviews I explored the relationships between rural students and their peers, retention programs, residence halls, student organizations, and other campus-specific environments (i.e. library, study spaces, individual college programming, etc.). At the mesosystem level, I examined what Bronfenbrenner (1977) considered the "joint impact of two or more settings or their elements" (p. 523). This was accomplished by looking at the overlap in influence and interaction between experiences in two or more of the microsystems I explored. At the exosystem level, I considered the mission and policies of the various institutional bodies that make up the university and how these relate and interact with one another and how they affect the larger culture of the institution. At the macrosystem level, I considered how rural culture/life and campus climate and campus life were perceived and influenced rural student development and sense of belonging.

Studying proximal processes. In addition to recognizing the relationships between rural students and their subsequent levels of environment, it was also important to examine the interactions and processes that occur at these levels. This allowed me to identify the contextual interactions that influence a rural student's development in general, and specifically, their development of a sense of belonging. The PPCT model guided the data collection and analysis to help me identify the more commonly occurring reciprocal interactions between student and environment or "proximal processes" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 6) and to see how these interactions shaped rural student

experiences in higher education. I examined these processes and their influence on the students while considering the characteristics of each individual participant (person), the contextual level (context) (i.e. microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, or macrosystem), and how they occur over time (time).

Studying campus environments. Regarding Strange and Banning's (2015) four models of campus environments, I looked at how rural students experience their physical, aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed environments at a large urban Midwestern university. I examined physical environments such as classrooms, residence halls, learning commons, and campus layout, in addition to rural students' reactions to the physical spaces of a city in general. I also considered the influence of aggregate environments on students by discussing with both students and staff the specific cultural qualities of the campus and what traits are shared by the dominant group. This contributed to my understanding how rural students' beliefs and attitudes cohere with the dominant culture on a large urban college campus. It was also critical to examine the organization and goals of the institution in order to understand the institution's goals, priorities, leadership structure, and how important decisions are made. My interviews with students and college staff provided insight into the institution's organizational components and how they are perceived by students. I also wanted to understand the socially constructed components of the institution's educational environment. This was crucial as it pertained to student perceptions of their environment and how this influenced their experience and constructed reality. Examining these reactions to and interactions with the various environmental constructs helped me determine to what degree the

participants felt a congruence with their higher educational environment and whether this affected their sense of belonging at the university.

Studying multiple components. For this study, the overall data collection needed to represent two embedded components: rural students and their experience of MU, and MU as an institution. For this embedded single case study, each participant represented an individual subunit in the overall case (Yin, 2017). Strange and Banning's (2015) four models of college environments conceptually explain and bridge the idea that in these four specific contexts, college environment can affect a student's sense of belonging. It was important to investigate how each aspect of MU's environment affects rural students in order to gather the evidence that would allow me to answer the research questions pertaining to rural student success, belonging, and retention in higher education institutions. This also allowed for more structured analysis and interpretation of that data. The institutional data in particular needed to be representative of physical spaces and artifacts that rural students experience, potentially supportive resources and student groups, aggregate, or collective characteristics of MU students, and organizational mission and policy information. Data collected from rural student participants focused on the students' socially constructed perceptions of their environment and how these perceptions contributed to their experience of reality. In order to gather data that covered all factions of the conceptual framework, data collection included demographic questionnaires and interviews that were relevant to this exploration of MU and its rural students' experiences.

Institutional data. According to the precedence set by Garcia (2017) in her study of Latinx students' experience of belonging in higher education environments, it was

important to collect as much institutional data about MU as possible before focusing on the collection of rural student individual data. This was crucial because the information gained about the institution informed the questions that I asked the rural students about their experience. Institutional data collection procedures consisted of staff interviews to gain a perspective on institutional mission and resources offered to students. While staff interviews provided excellent context in their scope and responses, I felt it was important to provide a balanced view of the institution so I collected additional institutional data from various pages on the MU website and stories from the MU student newspaper.

There were four primary goals for staff interviews. The first was to clarify and provide depth to the university's position on services directed at marginalized student populations. The second goal was to provide information regarding on-campus resources and student groups that can support rural students. The third objective was to shed light on environmental factors that lead to students developing a sense of belonging at MU. The fourth goal was to identify institution-specific cultural norms that influenced the overall student population's culture and development, which in turn was affecting how rural students experienced congruence or incongruence with the educational environment at MU.

In order to best provide this information, I purposefully selected to interview a sample of academic affairs and student affairs professionals employed at MU. It was important to gain the perspective of these individuals in order to best understand the university's position on services directed at marginalized student populations and those services designed to assist students in the process of acclimating to their environment and developing a sense of belonging at MU. Questions for the interviews were designed to

touch on aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed components of the campus environment and pertained to common student characteristics, organization structure, and campus culture. In addition, questions were drafted to touch on proximal processes students experience at the microsystem (faculty and staff interactions) and exosystem (institution as a whole) levels. See Appendix A for this interview protocol.

In order to better understand the priorities of administration in their mission to serve rural students, I interviewed the Senior Vice President and Dean of Undergraduate Education. This individual oversees several units that support academic departments and colleges and also oversees the Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management, which focused on the areas of admissions, financial aid, and the University Registrar. I also interviewed the Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs. This individual directs the Civic Engagement Office, provides leadership for a comprehensive response to high-risk behaviors, collaborates with the campus and community to help keep students safe from alcohol and drug use, directs the Student Affairs Office assessment initiative, and provides co-leadership for a student employment learning program.

In order to gain more information about how student outreach units functioned at MU, the above administrators also recommended I interview the Director of the university's Office of Student Retention. This person works with the various branches of the university's upper administration to provide vision and to direct the implementation of retention programs for the general student population. This individual also oversees a team of academic coaches and assists in the vision and direction of those supports that target students of various previously underserved populations such as first-generation students. All of these individuals were able to provide a good perspective on the

educational environment that the university tries to cultivate for supporting rural student belonging and success.

Individual data. Individual data was a crucial component of this study where rural students acted as subunits of data embedded into the overall case and provided me a comprehensive understanding of their experience at MU (Yin, 2017). This data made up a large portion of the socially constructed component of Strange and Banning's (2015) four models of campus environment and explored students' proximal processes interacting at microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem levels. Participants also responded with their perceptions and interpretations of the physical, aggregate, and organizational environments they experience. My primary goal was to collect data to provide insight into the constructed reality these students experience coming from a rural area to an urban educational environment and how this influences their sense of belonging at the institution. Similar to Garcia's (2017) study on Latinx students' sense of belonging, individual data collection for rural students included a demographic questionnaire intended to provide baseline information about each participant and provide contextual information about their background for use in analysis and interpretation. Individual interviews were also a major component of the individual data collection. These provided much information about each rural participant's rural experience as well as their experience of MU's college environment.

Demographic questionnaire. In my initial correspondence with rural students, potential participants were asked to complete a 20-item demographic questionnaire via Qualtrics (see Appendix B). This occurred prior to the date of the participants' first interview. The questionnaire was developed in part to ensure that the participants met all

of the sampling and demographic requirements to satisfy the research goals. After utilizing this measure as a screening tool, I discarded the data for individuals who did not meet the sampling requirements and did not participate in the study. I did however, keep the data for individuals that were chosen to participate. This data informed my interviews and interpretation of student data by providing me with some contextual information about each participant regarding their sense of belonging, educational background, rural background, and college experiences that influence their belonging and constructed reality of their experience at MU.

The questionnaire probed four areas of participant demographics: general personal information, past rural- and rural-education-specific background information, data pertaining to their current college experience, and their general sense of belonging at MU. General personal information included: age, gender, race/ethnicity, and whether or not they claim status as a first-generation student. Rural background information included questions pertaining to whether they identify as being from a rural area, their hometown population, number in their graduating class, details of their high school involvement, academic success, how many of their graduating class are attending college, and how many attend MU. College-specific demographics included: their current college, major, specific housing choice, how long they've been enrolled at MU, whether or not they transferred in and if so how many credits they transferred, how many credit hours they were currently taking, their current estimated GPA, whether and how much they work outside of school, and their college activities or level of involvement on campus. Sense of belonging was measured using a 5-point Likert scale where

participants indicated their perceived level of belonging at MU based on Strayhorn's (2012) definition (see Appendix B).

Interviews. My goal with the individual data collection was to gain a deeper and more comprehensive perspective on rural students' perceptions of their physical, aggregate, and organizational environment. I also wanted rural students to report on their socially constructed reality of their experience of higher education. To accomplish this, I conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with several individual students from a variety of rural areas. I wanted to cover both a breadth and depth of college experiences so I conducted a set of two 30-60-minute interviews with participants from a variety of academic majors and colleges. I sought out multiple interviews with students in order to gain a full understanding of each participant's context and details of their experience. According to Seidman (2013), "The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experiences. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs" (p. 21).

In a study also examining rural student experiences at a large university, Heinisch (2016) found saturation with eight participants. That number became the basis for my decision to start with eight rural student participants in this study. My goal was to select participants that represented the larger colleges at MU including the colleges of Agriculture, Arts and Sciences, Business, Engineering, and Education. Based on the participant responses and the amount of new data created with each interview, I determined that eight participants was indeed enough to gain saturation and provide a full and comprehensive description of the rural students' experience of the institution's environment. As recommended by Fusch and Ness (2015), when the existing data

produced by the interviews reached a depth and richness that allowed for a detailed and nuanced description of the issues and new data becomes scarce, I knew that I had reached saturation and required no further interviews.

The questions for the first semi-structured interview (see Appendix C) were designed to provide context and address the research questions regarding rural student development of a sense of belonging at MU and specifically: what do rural students see as key environmental factors affecting their sense of belonging, and how does their rural identity/background influence how they experience their college environment? It was important that the interview questions allowed participants to elaborate on what could be interpreted as the proximal processes outlined by Bronfenbrenner (2005) pertaining to the various levels of environments (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem). Questions were developed with the intention of providing open-ended options for participant response, to avoid leading a participant by influencing them to answer in a certain manner, and to allow the participants to elaborate on their experiences.

The goal of the second interview was to elicit more details about participants' experiences. This interview stage combined semi-structured questions and artifact elicitation. Questions for each participant's follow-up interview were based on my goal of confirming and clarifying their previous responses and asking them to expand on themes or ideas that pertained to their experience and personal perspective (See Appendix D). In order to do this, I asked student participants to bring artifacts to the second interview that represented their experiences on campus, things from home that spoke to their rural background, or photographs of people or places that related to their belonging

in some way. See Appendix E for the correspondence to students relating the instructions for artifact elicitation.

I approached this artifact elicitation in a similar manner to Garcia (2017) who used photo elicitation, a technique that utilizes photographs provided by the interviewer or those brought by the interviewee to facilitate discussion (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Harper, 2002). I chose artifacts instead of photographs to give participants maximum flexibility in bringing items that related to their sense of belonging. I felt that using photographs alone was limiting and in fact, most participants chose to bring items other than photographs to use to facilitate their second interview. See table 3.2 for a listing of artifacts each participant chose to bring. These artifacts provided a focal point for discussions to explore micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem interactions within the physical, aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed environments of higher education. Additionally, these artifacts provided richer insight into who these participants were, and deepened the overall individual level data collection. All interviews were audio recorded for later transcription and analysis.

Table 3.2

Participant Demographics

	Aaron	Alyssa	Erin	Ian	Kevin	Kylie	Tessa	Wes
Sex	Male	Female	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male
Race/ Ethnicity	White	White	White	Hispanic /White	White	White	White	White
Age	20	20	21	20	21	20	20	21
Hometown Population	560	1,400	200	400	1,200	300	190	500
Graduating Class Number	20-50	26	21	<20	30	13	14	20-50
Semesters at MU	5	5	7	5	5	5	5	1
College	Arts & Sci.	Education	Agriculture	Arts & Sci.	Agriculture	Business	Arts & Sci.	Engineering
Major	Physics/ Comp. Science	Family Science	Animal Science	Political Science	Water Science	Management	Psych	Mechanical Engr.
First- Generation Status	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Greek Affiliation	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Artifact(s) of Belonging	Photo of friends	Prosthetic eye	Photo collage	D & D dice	Football receiving glove	Family photo Bible verse	Photo collage Work badge	Cowboy boots
Level of Belonging at MU (out of 5)	4	4	2.95	5	4	4	4	1

Participant Selection

Since this was an instrumental case study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2005), I chose to examine MU's environment, programs, and rural students themselves to gain a more in-depth understanding of how rural students experience higher education environments and how they develop a sense of belonging at MU. As such, I employed purposeful sampling to select rural student participants who self-reported a strong rural identity and exemplified the rural student's experience of MU's educational environment. As indicated previously, rural students can experience barriers to their postsecondary

education in terms of educational aspirations (Handke, 2012; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Petrin et al., 2014; Rubisch, 1995), access (McDonough et al., 2010; Means et al., 2016; Schultz, 2004), first-generation status (Provasnik et al., 2007), and cultural differences (Ames et al., 2014; Handke, 2012; Heinisch, 2016; Schultz & Neighbors, 2007).

Therefore, it was important to use criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013) to identify and choose rural MU student participants that best represented this population by either currently experiencing, or having recently experienced many of these issues.

Maximum variation. Based on past research on rural students (Heinisch, 2016), the approach to choosing a sample was to provide maximum variation or “purposeful maximal sampling” (Creswell, 2013, p.100) of student experiences. The goal was to collect data from a diverse sample that have had a variety of experiences at the university so implications could be focused at a university-level. If students were all selected from the same gender or major, the findings would have been less useful as an instrumental case because of the narrow range of perspectives being examined. Therefore, I intentionally selected even numbers of male and female student participants in order to study the perspectives of each gender. In addition, it was a priority to select participants who represented a variety of different colleges within the university, specifically those colleges with the highest undergraduate enrollment including the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Education, Business, Engineering, and Agriculture. This provided an opportunity to illustrate participant experiences in large colleges within a large university, maximizing the difference in population from their hometown to their college environment. Based on past reports of rural populations in the Midwest being mostly

homogenous (Heinisch, 2016; Provasnik et al., 2007) and expecting a mostly White racial/ethnic sample, I chose not to include racial diversity as an objective of sampling.

Limiting student status. In a prior study on rural students, Heinisch (2016) included second-semester first year students in order to study rural student transition to a large university. For this study, it was more appropriate to examine experiences of students who had been in college longer and had already been through the initial transition to college. Therefore, I chose to limit participants to those with Junior status at MU as of the fall semester of 2017. This also aided my study as it limited the number of potential participants and provided a sample of students who had mostly finished transitioning to the university.

Participant recruitment. I utilized the Office of the University Registrar to help me identify and recruit potential participants. Although data on rural status is not collected by the university, the registrar's office did provide my Advisor a list of email contacts for all undergraduate students with Junior status from areas of lower population. An Assistant Registrar generated a list of permanent addresses for all MU students with Junior undergraduate status. I then selected 132 highly-populated cities to exclude from the query, eliminating students with permanent addresses from highly populated areas from the list of potential participants. This meant students from the most highly populated areas did not receive the participant recruitment email. My Advisor sent an initial recruitment email to all other undergraduate students at MU with junior student status explaining the study and asking them to complete the demographic questionnaire. Although students who received this email were not exclusively rural, the completed demographic questionnaires were used as a screening tool to ensure that all individuals

selected for participation were indeed from a rural area and did meet all of the sampling criteria (see Appendix B).

This method of participant recruitment was adequate to provide enough participants to reach saturation for this study. Neither snowball sampling nor gatekeepers (i.e. academic advisors, ag-related student organization leaders, etc.) were necessary in this case. The students that completed the questionnaire, qualified with rural student status, and satisfied my maximum variation sampling requirements were chosen for participation and contacted by me via email to set up a time and place for interviews.

Individual participant selection. The initial recruitment email was sent to 1,788 individuals and within 18 hours, 100 had completed the demographic questionnaire. I used this initial set of responses to act as my pool of potential participants and set about purposefully selecting individuals for participation based on their responses. First I removed from consideration all respondents who did not identify as being from a rural area. Next, I removed those who indicated their hometown had a population greater than 2,500 people. I then removed from inclusion those who had not filled out the survey completely. I then sorted respondents by gender, creating two pools of students from which I would choose four participants each (four women and four men). In order to further specify selection, I chose my participants considering their college major, number of classmates attending MU (the fewer the number, the more likely selected), size of graduating class, number of transfer credits, and population of hometown. In order to maximize variation, I chose a number of individuals with a wide range of majors, transfer credits, and class sizes. In order to control for the amount of time each participant spent at MU, all things considered equal I chose to prioritize individuals who were currently in

their fifth semester at MU. One student, Wes, was technically a junior, however he was in his first semester at MU as he was a transfer student from a smaller college. Wes was selected for participation in spite of this discrepancy due to his transfer experience and low indication of belonging at MU, supporting my goal of maximum variation in participant selection. Wes's perspective was noteworthy and the study benefitted from his inclusion.

Data Analysis

Consistent with the common practices of case study qualitative research, my goal was to produce an in-depth description of the case using multiple types of qualitative data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). After the institutional and individual rural student data was collected, I systematically and inductively analyzed each component to identify units of meaning that could be further triangulated with my other collected data. I performed an embedded analysis (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2017) of the case specific to my research questions pertaining to how rural students experience the higher education context of MU.

I began with an analysis of the organizational data including the transcribed staff interviews. This provided a baseline for my understanding of the environmental constructs that make up the educational environment at MU and provided information regarding the level of understanding that student affairs professionals have of rural student experiences. I then used this knowledge of MU's educational environment to compare to the individual rural student responses about their experience. Although institutional data provided an appropriate context for analyzing individual student data, it was important to objectively bracket the perspectives and reports of the administrators

while analyzing and interpreting data from student interviews in order to preserve the trustworthiness of the findings (Merriam, 2009). Following the precedent set by Garcia (2017), I transcribed my student interviews and coded them systematically using an inductive first and second cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2016). I used the emerging themes, supplemented by demographic information to describe the case and identify larger themes that transcend the case itself (Creswell, 2013). As with many qualitative case studies, my goal was to triangulate the findings across the multiple data collection methods and use member-checking and peer review to assist in providing trustworthiness to the emerging findings (Merriam, 2009).

Institutional Data

As a major component of my research question, the data collected pertaining to the educational environment at MU gave me a perspective on the various levels and proximal processes involved in being a student at the university. I compared and triangulated the university web pages, student newspaper articles, and transcribed interviews with student affairs professionals in order to produce a comprehensive understanding of the environmental factors that could influence a rural student's experience at MU. Staff interviews, university web pages, and student newspaper articles played a key role in providing context for interpreting the findings and insight into my research question: how is the institution providing supportive environments for rural students? Regarding the staff interviews, I employed a systematic approach to understanding the essence of MU administrators' responses (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

First cycle coding. After reviewing the transcription of the interviews in depth, I compiled a comprehensive list of every participant's response line by line under each interview question. I then identified significant statements and listed them with an equal importance placed on each. This provided a balanced and equal value to each participant perspective (Merriam, 2009). I used in vivo coding, the process of classifying each statement by a word or phrase from the participant's actual language to honor the participant's voice, and values coding to identify statements made that represent participant values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldaña, 2016). I also incorporated descriptive coding where it was appropriate to describe physical attributes and structures of the MU campus and various student groups and resources. The use of descriptive coding for this data was appropriate as according to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013) "Descriptive codes are perhaps more appropriate for social environments than social action" (p. 74). Considering their individual meanings and thematic qualities, I distilled the responses down to a number of meaning units/theme statements.

Second cycle coding. Considering the context of each meaning unit, I utilized second cycle pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016) to reorganize the theme statements into a matrix-like outline under the main theme categories. These categories emerged as: MU's environment, student resources, and administrators' knowledge of rural issues. According to Saldaña (2016) second cycle coding is utilized to reorganize and reanalyze data from the first cycle of coding in order to "develop of sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of first cycle codes" (p. 234). Pattern coding is a specific type of second cycle coding that allowed me to group the sub-

themes into overarching categories. These codes pulled together information from the first cycle to provide the emergent themes (Saldaña, 2016).

Synthesis. After reviewing the codes and second cycle matrix, I recognized overarching themes and used these as a framework to construct a synthesis. I utilized all of the key codes to write a synthesis of staff responses, which can be found in the next chapter. I then re-coded the summary into a model matrix that represented the various levels of the theoretical framework to identify how staff responses fit into the model. I then used the matrix to synthesize and summarize the administrator responses with the rest of the institutional data as it pertained to each component of the theoretical framework model.

Individual Data

The data collected from the individual rural students was very useful in providing a deeper understanding of first-hand accounts of rural student experiences at MU and addressed the following research questions: what do rural students see as key environmental factors affecting their sense of belonging, and how does their rural identity/background influence how they experience their college environment? I first used the data from the demographic surveys to provide context while analyzing the transcripts from the individual interviews. I then applied first and second cycle coding to each individual's data to better understand each student's personal experience and then compare these subunits of data to produce a holistic essence of their combined experiences at MU (Saldaña, 2016).

Demographic surveys. I used attribute coding in the first cycle where I labeled various responses to identify unique characteristics of each participant (Saldaña, 2016).

These characteristics were then used to both compare student demographics across the case, as well as to inform my interpretation of each individual participant's interview. See table 3.2 for a listing of the most pertinent participant demographic attributes. Demographic information was also used to provide context for each rural student's individual summary and coded attributes can be found in the first paragraph of each student's section in the next chapter.

Individual rural student interviews. I analyzed interviews with individual rural students in much the same way that I coded the staff interviews. I used *in vivo*, values, and descriptive codes in two cycles of coding resulting in emergent themes and a final synthesis.

First cycle coding. In the first cycle, I systematically utilized *in vivo*, values, and descriptive coding to identify significant statements made by each participant after listing each participant's every response line by line. *In vivo* coding allowed me to portray the participant's voice, values coding helped me identify statements that represent the participant's worldview, and descriptive coding helped me identify and describe contextual environmental elements (Miles et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2016). I then broke down each participant's responses into a number of meaning units and compared these codes to the attributes I gathered from the demographic surveys.

Second cycle coding. These units of meaning provided crucial context for me to use second cycle pattern coding to reorganize the codes and emerging theme statements into several main theme categories for further analysis (Saldaña, 2016). I used pattern coding to place units of meaning into a matrix-like table under main theme categories. Main themes that emerged included: college planning, rural life, transition to MU,

student descriptions of MU, navigating differences, campus engagement, sense of belonging, and artifact elicitation.

Individual summaries. I then recognized overarching themes and used these as a framework to construct a synthesis. I utilized all of the key codes from the second cycle coding matrix to write an approximately 3,000-word synthesis for each student, essentially a summary describing the student's attributes and experiences. These individual summaries acted as embedded subunits of data and provided excellent context for the collective emergent findings and are reported in the next chapter (Yin, 2017). Before conducting additional analysis, I performed member-checking to confirm and correct for accuracy.

Collective synthesis. After receiving positive feedback from participants, I then consolidated the second cycle coded data and individual summaries in order to reexamine the emerging themes and compare across participants. The goal was to produce a synthesis of individual experiences into a holistic collection of viewpoints. I took each student's summary and re-coded that into a model matrix that represented the various levels of the theoretical framework to identify how participants' experiences fit into the model. I then separated the matrix into individual components and broke those codes down further into categories. Those categories were used to synthesize and summarize the student portion of the model.

To address the research question regarding how students' rural background influenced their experiences of MU's environment, I had to identify which elements from rural life related to each student's subsequent connection to or alienation at MU. I reviewed the summaries to put together a belonging/alienation matrix for each student

indicating elements of MU and rural life that they were connected to and alienated by. This helped develop a more clear idea of elements making up sense of belonging and was later used to develop a diagram describing these elements and their interactions (see Figures 4.1-4.8). At the end of this extensive coding and comparison process, I had a result that described the rural students' experiences in the educational environment of MU, summarized how the components of the theoretical model applied to rural student experience, and addressed the research questions pertaining to MU's educational contexts and their influence and interaction with the students' rural status.

Combined Analysis

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the data as it pertained to this study's research questions, I combined and triangulated the individual and institutional subunits of data to produce a set of full case findings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). I compared the individual and institutional theoretical model summaries side-by-side one component at a time (i.e. physical environment, microsystems, belonging, etc.) and wrote notes about similarities, discrepancies, and other important ideas. This allowed me to compare the perspectives on the same level. This was important because as analyses progressed, themes emerged differently and questions for the individual students and the administrators were different. This approach allowed me to see distilled results at each level and compare them more effectively, which was one of the benefits of having a model framework. I then used my notes to establish a complete model case summary and develop diagrams to illustrate my findings (see Figures 5.1-5.3).

I also compared responses on my belonging/alienation matrices across participants and then consolidated the codes to reduce redundancies. I then wrote up a synthesis of the combined connections and alienations and identified the differences and similarities between the student responses and administrator responses. I also designed Venn diagrams to illustrate the connections and alienation at MU indicated by students and staff (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). Using the diagrams and comparisons, I was able to produce a synthesis of common and discrepant experiences relating to rural student belonging and alienation in rural life and at MU.

By comparing responses of administrators, rural students, and the demographic questionnaires, several important themes emerged that allowed me to make connections and produce findings that addressed the research questions. I then wrote up a full case findings section that reflected the following important themes and categories: rural life identity, common belonging and alienation experiences, the role of athletics, breaking MU down into “smaller pieces,” rural students expanding their horizons, the importance of faculty and staff, ag campus versus city campus, organizational issues, assessing the rural footprint at MU, and overall sense of belonging.

Trustworthiness

I employed several strategies common to qualitative case study research to ensure that my methods, data collection, analysis, and interpretations were trustworthy. In an earlier section, I noted my researcher positionality and epistemological perspective. This clarification of my potential biases as a researcher is important for the reader to understand. According to Merriam (2009), this process makes explicit a “critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical

orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation” (p. 229). I have tried to indicate all of the experiences and biases that would shape my interpretation and approach to this topic (Creswell, 2013).

Triangulation of Data

This case study utilized multiple sources of data including interviews from multiple perspectives and demographic questionnaires with the goal of bringing this data together and triangulating the information provided in order to confirm the findings that emerged. Triangulation was an important strategy that allowed me to more accurately produce a comprehensive and authentic report of this complex set of contexts and constructed perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). This triangulated data was reported using rich, thick description and contained detailed accounts of the case and in-depth descriptions of the contexts and participants that led to the development of the salient themes. This allows the reader to determine whether and how the data transfers to other settings based on shared characteristics (Creswell, 2013).

Peer Debrief and Review

To ensure that I did not impose my own perceptions and expectations on the data, I utilized a peer debrief and review of my research process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). This consisted of my having a colleague review and discuss with me my research methods and findings to provide an impartial perspective on my research process. My peer reviewer has been a higher education professional for almost ten years serving in various capacities working with undergraduate students. This individual has a masters degree in education and is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in educational studies.

My peer reviewer was asked to consider every component of the project in order to identify any biased or flawed interpretations or methodology and ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the results (Creswell, 2013). The peer who reviewed and discussed my process and findings with me felt that the research design, implementation, and analysis were appropriate for the goals of the study and did not indicate any biased interpretations.

Member-Checking

I also employed member-checking to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. Member-checking is often considered “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). My goal was to portray the experiences of rural students, the knowledge of MU staff members, and the environment of the case as accurately as possible. I introduced the idea of member-checking to the student participants before their second interview with me to ensure that participants were willing to provide the required feedback.

Staff member-checking. After I analyzed administrators’ responses and developed a rough draft of emerging themes, I contacted the staff members I interviewed and asked them to review a draft pertaining to MU environmental constructs and themes regarding resources, services, and staff perspectives relating to rural student experiences at MU. Their feedback on the draft were very beneficial as it confirmed the authenticity of my findings and interpretations regarding that aspect of the case (Creswell, 2013).

I heard back from one of the three participants and received the following feedback:

- “Thanks for sharing your preliminary results with me. I enjoyed reading your summaries and the students’ perspectives. I did recognize my direct quotes and yes, I feel that you quoted me correctly and that you interpreted the meaning in line with my intent. Overall, you represented our conversation and experiences accurately. Good luck with the rest of your writing process!” – Jordan

Student member-checking individual findings. At a similar stage in the analysis and reporting on individual rural student data, I contacted my student participants and asked them to read a draft description of their individual summary. I asked them to assess my interpretations of their experiences and the emerging themes relating to their experiences at MU. They were given an opportunity to judge the accuracy of my report and provide feedback regarding the plausibility of my tentative early interpretations (Merriam, 2009).

I heard back from seven of the eight participants and received the following feedback:

- “It looks great. The only thing I can think of is to add that when you say I thought I would be surrounded by the same kind of people I grew up with, I would add that I thought it would be a lot of the same people I grew up with. Other than that it looks really good.” –Wes
- “Yeah, that is right along with what I said. I apologize for the awkward wording in some of the sentences, I have trouble moving my tongue as fast as my mind. The quotes were the only times I noticed anything strange, and that is just from the way I talk.” – Kevin

- “I just finished reading it. The quotes sound just like I said them so they all seem pretty good to me. I like the end especially and I think you really got across how I felt. I think most of it pretty much is how I feel. One part that I could clarify was that the troubles I had in high school. I thought that felt a bit vague even in the interview, and it sounds like I’m contradicting myself. I somehow felt ostracized and accepted? What I meant when I said that was that the town in general wanted me to succeed and was very accepting, but in the school, my peers, it was different, and that was where my depression stemmed from, that and my troubles at home, which you mentioned. Other than that, I think everything seems pretty accurate to me.” – Ian
- “Everything looks great! I feel like you captured what I felt for sure.” – Kylie
- “Everything looks good to me! Good luck with the rest of your project.” – Erin
- “I’ve read the report and believe that it’s an excellent summary of our interviews. I recognized all of my quotes and didn’t see any misrepresentations in the body text. Overall, the writing correctly represents my thoughts and intentions.” – Aaron
- “I really enjoyed this piece, and I thought you did a fantastic job of quoting me correctly. It felt like *déjà vu* as I was reading what I had said! I also thought that you interpreted the quotes very well! Thank you so much for allowing me to be a part of this study for you! Sorry for taking

so long to get back to you as I have been dealing with some personal things this last couple of weeks. Again, this sounded absolutely perfect and exactly what I have experienced!” – Tessa

Student member-checking collected findings. At a later stage in the analysis and reporting on the collected rural student data, I contacted my student participants again and asked them to read an updated draft description of their collected rural student findings as well as the full case findings. I asked them to assess my interpretations of their experiences and the key themes relating to their experiences at MU. Student participants were given another opportunity to judge the accuracy of my report and provide feedback regarding the plausibility of my more developed interpretations (Merriam, 2009).

I heard back from six of the eight participants and received the following feedback:

- “Everything checks out...All of the direct quotes are correctly represented, and I think my experience was very well summarized.” – Aaron
- “Everything looks good!” – Kylie
- “I think it sounds great!” – Wes
- “Wow that was a mouthful! That all looked good to me, and had me interested. I don’t remember if I told you, but I have had some classes with guys I played football against in high school, so that was kind of neat. I have no idea where you could find space for that, but I thought I would throw that out there if you want to use it.” – Kevin

- “I like what I see here. I feel that what I saw that I think I remember saying was represented accurately. I think it looks good to me. I enjoyed being part of the study. Good luck.” – Ian
- “Everything looks good to me.” – Erin

The feedback I received throughout the process of member-checking was very beneficial to my interpretations and the accuracy of this study. The positive feedback was encouraging and helped confirm the trustworthiness of the study as well.

Ethical Issues

Authenticity and accuracy are not only important to the study’s trustworthiness, but they also represent an ethical responsibility to provide an accurate representation of the university, its representatives, and rural students. This is why verification using member-checking and providing thick, rich descriptions and direct quotes from participants was such a crucial aspect of this study’s implementation (Creswell, 2013). Another concern was researcher objectivity and the ability to bracket my experiences when collecting and analyzing data. Without any prior perceptions and knowledge of individual student participants, I was equipped to more accurately analyze their responses and represent their constructed realities. While my constructed reality no doubt bled through my analyses and interpretations of this case study, I still attempted to focus on constant awareness and the reflexivity of my positionality so I could most accurately describe the position and experiences of students and university staff (Merriam, 2009).

Another important ethical consideration was to protect the identity of the research participants and to provide a transparent process that accurately documented their perspectives and experiences. Having informed consent was crucial to participant-

understanding of the project and helped clarify their rights as interviewees and as participants. An informed consent form was utilized with the intent to provide participants with detailed information about the study and what would be required of them. This form was approved by MU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the study was conducted. Development and approval of this form was an important aspect of receiving institutional permission for conducting the study. Receiving IRB approval before the study is imperative when doing research using human participants. To protect the identity and confidentiality of the individuals participating in the study, the digital recordings, transcripts and any field notes from interviews were stored in a secure location.

When considering the relative specificity of some sparsely-populated rural areas, protecting student anonymity was a concern. By masking the identity of the case under examination, I have limited the risks to participant identification. In addition, pseudonyms were assigned to participants for use throughout every step of the data collection, analysis, and reporting process and nothing will be published that could be potentially damaging to a participant or anyone connected to them. Even though participants' names were protected and kept anonymous, students might still be identified by those from their hometown if too many details were divulged during the composite description. This was considered and noted during reporting and member-checking. No participants indicated that they felt like their identity was at risk after reading a composite description and therefore no data was removed from the study.

Summary

In this chapter I have provided a rationale for the importance of this study, indicated my purpose for this project, and stated the research questions driving this inquiry. I reflected on my positionality as a researcher and described at length my epistemological perspective and how both informed my research decisions. I described my research design in depth and provided a rationale for why these research questions required qualitative inquiry to address them. I presented an argument for why a case study was the most appropriate method for examining this issue. I also described Midwestern University and provided several reasons why this case was ideal to represent the broader issues regarding higher education environments and rural students. I discussed my process for and justification of participant selection. In addition, I described my various methods of data collection and explicitly integrated my conceptual framework with my methodology. I took this opportunity to report my data analysis approach and concluded with a discussion of my strategies for validating this study, promoting trustworthiness, and addressing ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: Context

During data collection, certain contextual elements of the institution and rural student participants began to emerge. This contextual content is an important foundation for better understanding the findings of this study. Therefore it is beneficial to organize and present institutional and individual context as a singular chapter before examining the findings. All participants, the institution itself, and units within the institution will be referred to using pseudonyms. This chapter will begin by focusing on the institutional background and information regarding Midwestern University (MU). This will include a description of the institution based on administrator responses to interview questions, information from the university website and articles from the university newspaper. Topics include the institutional environment and student resources at MU. The chapter will then focus on each rural participant as an embedded sub-unit within the larger case and provide a summary of each student's rural background and experiences at MU (Yin, 2017).

Institutional Context

MU is set in an urban area with a diverse set of students, colleges, majors, and instructors. MU is located in a city with a population of 277,348 (United States Census Bureau, 2016), sits on 622 acres of land, and boasts 150 majors for selection. Often, undergraduate classes are quite large, with 24 percent having 40 or more students enrolled (Institutional Research, Analytics & Decision Support, 2017). Forty-one percent of the total student population lives in college-owned housing facilities and all first year students are required to live on-campus at the university where the primary residence

halls are located on the university's downtown campus in the center of the city's business district.

MU is the largest public institution of higher education in its state. It is made up of nine colleges including the College of Agriculture, College of Architectural Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, College of Business, College of Education, College of Engineering, College of Fine Arts, the College of Journalism, and the College of Law. MU has a land-grant mission with a responsibility to assess and meet the needs of its local constituents. MU is a public university with a total undergraduate enrollment of just over 20,000 students with several units dedicated to agriculturally-related disciplines. The mission of this institution is focused in part on practical applications of agricultural sciences and according to their website, the "land-grant tradition creates for [Midwestern University] a special state-wide responsibility to serve the needs of [the state] and its citizens."

According to the MU fact book, the institution has two primary campuses across the city. The main campus (Main Campus) is located in the city center and sits on 280 acres of land right in the middle of downtown. This campus houses most colleges, which makes up 86% of the total enrolled students (22,374 of 26,079) and utilizes 11,922,495 square feet of building space. The agricultural campus (Ag Campus) is located approximately two miles east of the city center and sits on 342 acres of land. This campus houses several units including the College of Agriculture and the MU College of Law, which makes up approximately 13% of the total enrolled students (3,459 of 26,079). Ag Campus has more open spaces and fields dedicated to agricultural research and utilizes 2,818,967 square feet of building space.

MU also has a large infrastructure of student supports and activities, which contributes to its 84 percent freshman retention rate. According to *U.S. News & World Report* (2016), this rate compares favorably to the average freshman retention rate reported for universities in the Midwest region of the United States, which is 73 percent. According to its website, MU has many opportunities for students to get involved on campus with over 500 student organizations representing a large variety of student interests including many rural and agriculture-related organizations. Such organizations include Agricultural Communicators, Agricultural Business Club, Agriculture and Education Club, Agronomy Club, Agricultural and Biological Engineering Club, Equestrian Team, Large Animal Veterinary Club, National Agriculture and Marketing Association, Tractor Club, Rodeo Club, and Soil & Water Club. Through the support of the Office of Student Involvement, these student organizations function in addition to the more than 40 fraternities and 16 sororities that support the 5200 students involved in MU's Greek community. Nineteen percent of male and 22 percent of female undergraduate students are represented in these fraternities and sororities respectively.

MU is also committed to athletics. According to their website, MU student athletes compete at a high level within their athletic conference and nationally. Students compete nationally in NCAA Division I and field 22 varsity teams (9 men's, 13 women's) in 15 sports. Men's varsity athletics includes teams in the following sports: baseball, basketball, cross country, football, golf, gymnastics, tennis, track and field, and wrestling. Women's varsity teams include: basketball, beach volleyball, bowling, cross country, golf, gymnastics, rifle, soccer, softball, swimming and diving, tennis, track and

field, and volleyball. MU athletic teams have won a combined 29 national titles and lead the nation with 330 recognized Academic All-American student athletes.

Staff Participants

Three MU administrators were interviewed to present an academic affairs and student affairs perspective. Although not a requirement for selection, all staff participants were White.

Jordan. Jordan held the title of Senior Vice President and Dean of Undergraduate Education. Jordan was also an English Professor at MU. Jordan described the role as being in charge of “looking at ways to support student success as measured by engagement, retention, time to degree, and graduation rates.” Jordan oversaw several units that supported academic departments and colleges. In addition, Jordan oversaw the Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management, which focused on the areas of admissions, financial aid, and the University Registrar.

Chris. Chris was the Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs. Chris directed the Civic Engagement Office, provided leadership for a comprehensive response to high-risk behaviors, collaborated with the campus and community to help keep students safe from alcohol and drug use, directed the Student Affairs Office assessment initiative, and provided co-leadership for a student employment learning program.

Pat. Pat was the Director of the Office of Student Retention. Pat oversaw a team of academic coaches and was involved with several different initiatives to support students’ academic success.

The following section provides a detailed account of these administrators' responses to interview questions that pertain to MU's environment, student resources, and their knowledge of rural student issues.

MU Environment

According to the administrators, MU provided a traditional college environment where students came to live, compared to an online campus. It was a large public land grant institution contiguous with the town it was located in, a larger city compared to others in the state. Administrators mentioned that the institution focused on meeting students' needs holistically, meeting basic, recreational, and intellectual needs. MU's was an environment that supported partnerships and collaboration between students, faculty, and staff in order to keep students engaged in a college experience that allowed them to develop into worldly citizens and lifelong learners. According to Chris, "I think we really do try to set a good tone and people are willing to commit time and energy to communicate to students that I care about you and I think the overwhelming majority of us do that."

Student reactions to the environment. According to the administrators, students reacted to MU's environment in different ways, depending on their experiences coming into MU. Administrators felt students' reactions were dependent on their values, preparation, and whether they came from marginalized populations. The majority of students experienced a sense of community within a sub-community where they felt welcome and accepted. However, according to Chris,

I think that we probably have some students that don't feel that culture that most students feel. You know and I'm thinking about some of our marginalized

students where it may not feel so safe. From time to time if you'd been on campus for any length of time you know we have occasionally those things that appear in the environment or things are said that feel for some populations of students, unsafe. Something reported that's written on a bulletin board or some sticker that appears on a lamppost or something that's written on the sidewalk that communicates that this might not be the welcoming environment that we hope it will be for all students.

Chris recognized that campus culture and social norms could be alienating for students, particularly those from marginalized populations. Chris was alluding to several past incidents where racial and anti-LGBTQ slurs have been written on houses and fences near campus, displayed in text-messages made public, and written in chalk outside of campus buildings (MU campus newspaper).

Pat felt that some students had a difficult time transitioning to college life at MU. Pat mentioned a personal experience of being a student at MU who came from a high school where the majority of the population was non-White and being surprised at the predominance of White students and comparative lack of racial minorities. Pat noted,

I didn't know that I would have that experience but felt a little like 'off' for a second. It just wasn't what I was used to. But I remember talking with other friends, and one from...a small town in [state] and it was overwhelming for her for the opposite reason. And how interesting that is that we were both having a pause, or a moment and then adjusting to the culture or transitioning to college but for very different reasons. And so I think it just depends on the student, of how they react to what we provide at [MU].

Potential barriers. Potential environmental barriers to student success and belonging came from a variety of areas. According to Pat, high academic expectations at MU “can be really difficult for our students who arrive here who are unprepared or who have a lot of work to do in order to become ready for college-level work.” These students needed to work harder and engage with campus supports in order to overcome their lack of prior academic preparation paired with high academic expectations at MU. Fortunately, there were many support options open to students. However according to administrators, there were so many resources that oftentimes students did not know where to start. Jordan indicated that there was a lot of duplication of resources which could cause students to be overwhelmed. According to Jordan, it was also difficult to communicate when and how students could get involved with the opportunities available. It was difficult to communicate beyond emails, which students often did not even open. Administrators felt MU provided many opportunities but students often did not know about them in order to take advantage of them.

Bringing students together. Many efforts were dedicated to bringing incoming first year students together. According to administrators, it was important to break down the large university into smaller communities. The Student Affairs Office provided six weeks of intentional programming to acclimate students. The Office of Student Housing facilitated first year activities, as did the Greek system. Jordan and Chris mentioned that MU symbolically brought students together at the New Student Convocation the Friday before starting classes as first year freshmen. MU also had a program that created a venue for first year students to dialogue and interface with faculty members, staff members, and other students about issues of diversity. The Admissions staff of New

Student Orientation surveyed students to identify particular interests and based on their responses, students would receive a communique with more information about activities they might be interested in. Scholarship programs and learning communities also provided opportunities for students to come together. Pat highlighted that the Office of Student Retention created a program that focused on first-generation students and helping them create a support system right away.

Administrators pointed out that there were other efforts that encouraged all students to get involved, not just first year freshman. Many students attended football games and other athletic events. The Office of Student Involvement, the Civic Engagement Office, and the Recreation Center were units that provided opportunities for students to engage with each other. According to Chris, 90% of students utilized the Recreation Center at some point. In addition, separate colleges and academic units each had their own activities and opportunities for students to get involved.

Organization. In general, MU's organizational structure was highly decentralized, and according to Jordan, this could "be a challenge sometimes in terms of providing a unified mission and ensuring that all students receive equal access to information and support." Jordan noted how every unit handled things differently and university-wide initiatives were difficult. In addition, some units had more resources than others so some students were not getting equal programming or scholarship opportunities depending on their college. Jordan felt that decentralization also led to duplication of resources where some students would be enrolled in 3 different success seminars and some would not have access to any of them. Duplication also created confusion for students. This was an inherent challenge for a large institution, managing

equitable student resources on such a large scale (Birnbaum, 1988). In light of some of the organizational issues, Chris mentioned that there had been a recent restructure of MU's organization and consolidation of several units in an effort to reduce unit "silos" and match student experience more holistically. Previously, offices like the Student Affairs Office and the Division of Research reported directly to the MU President. Recently, these units and others were consolidated under the Executive Vice President in an attempt to produce more collaboration across campus. Administrators noted that as a traditional campus, MU was not set up to cater to first year commuter students or students aged 25 years or older like it did for on-campus students aged 18 to 24.

Campus culture. Campus culture at MU varied across students based on personal characteristics and how they got involved. Jordan said, "Nationally we've been described as a very engaged campus where students have a lot of opportunities to get involved and where student involvement is prized." There did seem to be a unifying identity where, according to Chris, the way students behaved was in general, "full of character, full of integrity, the people went out of their way to be nice and friendly, that the campus was welcoming, that it helped make students feel at home." Pat described faculty and staff culture as "serious" in work and responsibility for the MU mission and goals of supporting student success.

Student Resources

The university administrators discussed the various elements of MU's environment that supported students. MU used a scanning system to collect data on student participation in order to allow campus leaders to better understand who had access to resources and who did not.

Resources supporting marginalized populations. It was a priority for leaders to promote initiatives and resources specifically designed to support students from marginalized populations at MU. The administrators mentioned some by name and noted there were many more. Some examples included the Multicultural Center, the Intercultural Office, the College Preparatory Academy, several scholarship programs, Emerging Leaders, National Hispanic Scholars Awards, LGBTQ Resource Center, International Student Office, Office of Student Involvement, and several college-specific resources.

Resources for first-generation students. There were several resources that administrators pointed out that specifically targeted first-generation students at MU. The Office of Student Retention provided a program that enrolled 177 first-generation students with a 4-day orientation followed up by an academic success seminar. Jordan also mentioned a First-Generation Faculty initiative, which helped first-generation faculty members become more accessible and encouraged interactions with first-generation students. There was a Veteran Success Center, which served many first-generation students as well. Several learning communities and scholarship programs provided opportunities for students to take courses together and live together on the same floor of a residence hall. According to the administrators, these were particularly beneficial to the first-generation students developing a sense of belonging. MU also provided the Student Support Services programs, a set of federally funded programs that targeted first-generation students and low-income students.

Student/faculty interaction. Increasing faculty member interaction was a key priority for MU leaders, which was reflected in the multiple initiatives that had been

started to encourage faculty-student interactions. Jordan pointed out that the university had implemented an online system that operated in concert with the student information system and populated student information for instructors, advisors, administrators, and other staff to access. Here, instructors could flag students or send them kudos and referrals based on academic performance. This system also encouraged advisors to write visible notes about student interactions. Students had access to view what was written about them, search campus resources, and make appointments with their advisors and instructors. Other units such as the Financial Aid Office and the Intercultural Office, a unit dedicated to meeting the needs of ethnic minority students, had been encouraged to use the system as well. The purpose of the system was in part to facilitate interactions between students, faculty members, and staff members. According to Jordan, “The more units who use that system and the more notetaking we have on particular students, the more cohesive our support structure is for understanding what are the needs of the particular student.”

According to Pat, data from the New Student Orientation survey was also being used to identify student need and follow up with information for students. MU had 26 learning communities, which created co-curricular opportunities for engagement. Chris mentioned a scholarship program that promoted student and faculty member collaboration on undergraduate research where students would get paid a stipend to conduct research supervised by faculty members. Chris also noted that faculty-led study abroad trips provided more interaction between faculty members and students as well. Faculty members also commonly served as advisors for student-run organizations through the Office of Student Involvement.

Resources promoting a sense of belonging. Administrators mentioned many outlets at MU that promoted student belonging. Chris's team in the Student Affairs Office administered a mattering scale and found that students who were actively involved felt they mattered more to the institution. Therefore Chris felt it was important to get students connected and engaged on campus. In addition to over 500 student organizations, the Greek system provided students a built-in set of friends and housing. Scholarship programs and peer-mentoring programs also promoted belonging. Jordan noted that the peer mentors themselves found that the opportunity to give back to other students was important for their sense of belonging. The Recreation Center fostered student belonging through intramural teams. Various musical ensembles also promoted student belonging. According to Jordan, religious organizations and cultural organizations on campus, "are critical for creating a sense of belonging, a sense of community particularly when they don't feel like they are represented in the large community. Having a home for them is critical through those groups."

Engaging students. According to Pat, there were efforts to engage students academically through referrals to the Office for Student Retention for coaching and workshops. Jordan mentioned that MU was developing a learning community for sophomore, junior, and senior students in the 2.7-3.0 GPA range who were at risk for leaving MU. Jordan also pointed out that the advising system at MU had become more "professionalized" with advising being delivered by a professional staff person more attuned to helping students get connected. According to the administrators, peer mentoring programs were reaching out to more students to make sure they were "finding a home and a place." The Office of Student Housing was giving Resident Assistants the

skills they needed to build relationships with students. Pat noted that the Office for Student Retention would reach out to students after New Student Orientation based on their responses on their initial surveys in order to help engage them proactively.

Campus Climate

Throughout the interview process, administrators were very helpful in their cooperation and participation in answering questions about MU. However, upon further analysis, it appeared that although they highlighted many positive attributes to MU's environment, the administrators seemed to shy away from describing the negative aspects of the campus environment in much detail. In order to produce a balanced description of MU's environment, I utilized content from the student newspaper to provide supplemental information about the campus climate.

According to the campus newspaper, there had been several incidents within the prior several years that characterize a more hostile environment for marginalized students than what was mentioned by the administrators. Here are just a few examples of the contentious campus climate at MU. In 2011, MU students published a blog which collected and presented racist and hateful tweets. In 2013, a student in a leadership role used racial slurs to make a point at a leadership event prompting a response from MU administrators including the University President condemning the student's behavior. There had also been more recent evidence of racial, sexual, and gender discrimination among students, fraternity members, and at various campus events. The national Black Lives Matter movement prompted MU students from racially minoritized populations to speak out about their experiences and to raise awareness about racism and inequity issues across campus.

These are important factors to include when discussing campus culture and attempting to portray a balanced view of the institutional environment at MU. Staff members were eager to promote the positive aspects of campus. However as Chris indicated, this environment could also feel unsafe for students.

Individual Context

This section provides a summary description of each rural student participant, each representing a sub-unit for analysis embedded within the larger case (Yin, 2017). Table 3.2 found in Chapter 3: Methodology, indicates demographic information for each participant including pseudonyms, gender, racial/ethnic identity, age, population of hometown, number in high school graduating class, semesters enrolled at MU, college, major, first-generation status, Greek affiliation, artifact(s) they brought for discussion, and reported level of belonging at MU. Following the table, a summary description of each participant will provide contextual information about the participant's background and experiences at MU. Each summary includes a brief demographic description of the participant and an overview of the individual's responses that pertain to experience of rural life, transition to MU, and experience of MU's environment. Within each summary is also a description of how contextual elements from the participant's rural background related to subsequent experiences at MU. The corresponding figures (4.1 through 4.8) separate pertinent elements and experiences of rural and college life into blocks and illustrate the relationships between connecting and alienating experiences across the contexts for each participant. For some students there was a linear relationship between alienating experiences in rural life and positive experiences at MU, such as Aaron's

experience (Figure 4.1). For other students, rural experiences both positively and negatively affected their experiences at MU, as was the case with Tessa (Figure 4.6).

Aaron

Aaron was a 20-year old White male attending MU as a Physics/Computer Science double-major in the College of Arts and Sciences. He currently lived off-campus and was not associated with a Greek house. Aaron was originally from the state where MU is located and grew up near a rural community with a population of approximately 560. Based on his responses on the demographic questionnaire, his graduating class ranged from 20-50 people and he was ranked 1st among them with a high school GPA of 4.0. Aaron was not a first-generation student and indicated that he had several highly educated family members. He was currently in his 5th semester at MU with junior status and a GPA of 3.69. Aaron indicated his level of belonging was 4 out of 5 where 1 designated the lowest level of belonging and 5 indicated the highest. He had always planned to attend college and had long been interested in physics. He attended campus visits and considered other schools in the Midwest but chose MU due to its economic benefits with in-state tuition, an “acceptable” physics program, a “memorable” library, “impressive” resources, “good vibes,” and good spaces.

Figure 4.1 illustrates several elements from rural life that Aaron was alienated by, or connected to, and how these elements were related to his positive and negative experiences at MU. Aaron’s responses indicated that he felt both connected to his rural life and alienated by elements of his rural background. Overall, he appeared to have a very strong sense of belonging at MU. In the past, at times Aaron had a hard time relating to his peers in his rural community because his interests and intellectual abilities

did not match those of his classmates. At MU, Aaron appreciated the large population, which provided a larger pool of people to select friends from. He could make friends with people that he actually shared common interests with. In his rural high school, Aaron was not challenged and developed some bad academic habits. He had quite a low regard for the education he received there. Aaron felt that at MU, academic expectations were high and many students shared his intellectual abilities. This was an environment that Aaron thrived in and appreciated because he had been lacking the academic competition and challenge in his rural life.

In his rural community, Aaron's friends lived far away from each other so to get together took a "30 minute car ride." Therefore, Aaron appreciated that MU's spaces were self-contained and most of his friends lived on campus, which meant "a text and a five minute wait." This made it easier for Aaron to maintain contact with his new support system and have frequent interactions with them.

Aaron complained of his rural community's lack of privacy due to everyone knowing each other. Of all of the participants, he seemed the most annoyed at that aspect of rural life. Therefore, he reveled in the new anonymity that MU's campus gave him with so many other students studying there. Living in a big city on a big campus meant that he had he could experience a new sense of autonomy and anonymity. He could be independent with few others knowing his business.

Aaron found it difficult to access information with the incredibly slow speed of his internet connection in his rural home. He felt this made it difficult to be a student and learn in a rural setting because it was so much less efficient to access information. So

when Aaron got to campus and experienced the high speed internet connections at MU, he felt he could learn much in that environment.

Aaron was connected to his rural life in a few ways that affected how he experienced MU's environment. Although privacy was at a premium, Aaron experienced built-in supports with the close relationships he had developed throughout his life in a rural community. This made a transition to a new place with few familiar faces daunting. However, Aaron quickly formed a new support system with his fellow Physics/Computer Science majors and formed a very tight "home community" to replace the one he missed from back home. His rural experiences had made him appreciate the need for close social supports and the importance of finding new ones in college. Growing up in a rural area, Aaron developed a closeness to and appreciation of nature. He said that was just something he took with him to college. While campus was located in the center of a large city, Aaron took comfort in the many green spaces and general "openness" of the university environment. The low population density of his rural area meant that Aaron could often find solitude when he wanted to be alone. This was the one element that Aaron mentioned that he really did not appreciate about MU's environment, it was crowded. He had a hard time finding solitude when the library was full of people and most of the study areas were packed with study groups. This made it particularly important to Aaron to go out of his way to find study spaces that would allow him to be alone when he needed it.

Overall, Aaron's general lack of connection to some aspects of rural life led to his appreciation of many elements of MU's environment because it was so different from what he grew up with. He now had anonymity, a close group of friends that shared his

interests, access to information when he wanted it, and a culture that supported academic challenge. The rural elements that he liked were there in the open spaces, and he had fully embraced the new environment at MU.

Aaron	
Alienated by Rural Life	Positive Experiences at MU
-Can't relate to peers	→ -Wide selection for friends -Others to share common interests -Good roommate
-No challenge in academics	→ -Academic competition
-Distant friends	→ -Close proximity to friends
-Lack of privacy	→ -Autonomy/anonymity
-Lack of accessibility to information	→ -Accessible information
Connected to in Rural Life	
-Built-in support system	→ -Supportive study groups -Social support -Very tight "home community"
-Nature and openness	→ -Openness of campus
Negative Experiences at MU	
-Solitude	→ -Crowds

Figure 4.1. Rural life effect on belonging at MU: Aaron.

Alyssa

Alyssa was a 20-year old White female attending MU as a Family Science major in the College of Education. She currently lived on-campus in the sorority house where she was a member. Alyssa was originally from the state where MU is located and grew up in a rural community with a population of roughly 1,400 people. Her graduating class had approximately 26 students and she was ranked 4th among them with a high school GPA of 3.8. Alyssa was a first-generation student currently in her 5th semester at MU with junior status and a GPA of 3.2. Alyssa indicated her level of belonging was 4 out of

5 where 1 designated the lowest level of belonging and 5 indicated the highest. She had always assumed she would go to college and started formulating plans when she was in 8th grade. She was motivated by her family and by her mother's struggles. Alyssa was also a part of the Upward Bound program that provided college preparation for low-income and first-generation students. She initially wanted to attend New York University (NYU) and also looked at other in-state options. Alyssa resisted MU at first because she felt, "everybody goes to [MU]; I want to go somewhere different." In her senior year of high school she received a full-ride scholarship to MU and began to reconsider. Her goal was to graduate debt free so financial aid was a large factor in Alyssa's decision to come to MU.

Figure 4.2 illustrates several elements from rural life that Alyssa was alienated by, or connected to, and how these elements were related to her positive and negative experiences at MU. Alyssa's responses indicated that many of the elements that alienated her in her rural community helped her appreciate how MU's environment was different.

Alyssa felt contained and isolated in her rural hometown and appreciated the freedoms and opportunities at MU. She noted that she felt like the only one in her class that wanted to get out of that town and do "bigger and better things." The environment at MU provided her many opportunities to get involved and engaged on campus and she embraced that chance to change and grow with her experiences at MU. She indicated her hometown was also relatively geographically isolated. If her family needed supplies they had to travel 100 miles round-trip once a month. This helped Alyssa appreciate MU's campus where she felt like she had everything she needed "at her fingertips." There was very little diversity in Alyssa's hometown with a limited population. According to

Alyssa, people there were closed-minded and conservative. Alyssa rebelled against that mindset and embraced the diversity she found at MU and the campus culture of inclusiveness. The culture and supports for diverse populations not only helped Alyssa feel like she belonged, but also inspired her to pursue a career in the Peace Corps, where she could travel and help others in other countries.

Alyssa also felt judged and ostracized in her rural high school. Her family was not “farm rich” like some others in her town and she was not always able to keep up with the newest fashions the other rural students were wearing. Having a limited income hindered her socially there, however Alyssa perceived that at MU people were not judged by their appearance, clothing, or resources. Instead students judged each other based on their level of intelligence and who they generally were as a person. At MU, Alyssa fit in because she felt valued for her intelligence and perceived that who she was as a person was consistent with others around her. Having survived cancer as a child, Alyssa had a prosthetic eye, which also caused her to be ostracized by her peers. She indicated that although they had known her for her entire life, her schoolmates constantly ridiculed Alyssa about her eye. She had assumed that since the people that knew her well had continued to ostracize her because of her prosthetic that when she came to college and met new people that it would be even worse. She was pleasantly surprised when most people at MU hardly noticed her eye and those that did still accepted her for who she was and not what she looked like.

Alyssa was connected to a few elements of her rural life, which also affected how she experienced MU’s environment. In high school, she was encouraged to participate in many activities so she enjoyed getting close with her teammates on athletic teams and her

frequent engagement outside of class. She was able to experience these same things through MU's opportunities for involvement, specifically through her sorority, student organizations, and other philanthropic organizations on campus. She was highly invested in cancer philanthropy because of her own experience with cancer and her desire to give back. Fortunately, her sorority sponsored a cancer-related philanthropy that Alyssa could get involved in. She also appreciated growing close with her sorority sisters, similar to her close bonds with her fellow classmates and teammates in her rural high school activities. Alyssa also experienced success as a vocalist in high school. She felt while talented, with so few to compete with, Alyssa stood out as the best singer in her class. Coming to MU with so many other talented singers, she no longer stood out among her peers and felt undervalued in her music major. With the close proximity and long-term relationships prevalent in her rural community, Alyssa thought her peers there knew her very well. She suffered from depression at times and her rural peers would support her in ways that worked for her since they knew her so well. She missed that closeness at MU and even though she had many friends there, few knew her well enough to help her through bouts of depression without asking questions about what she needed.

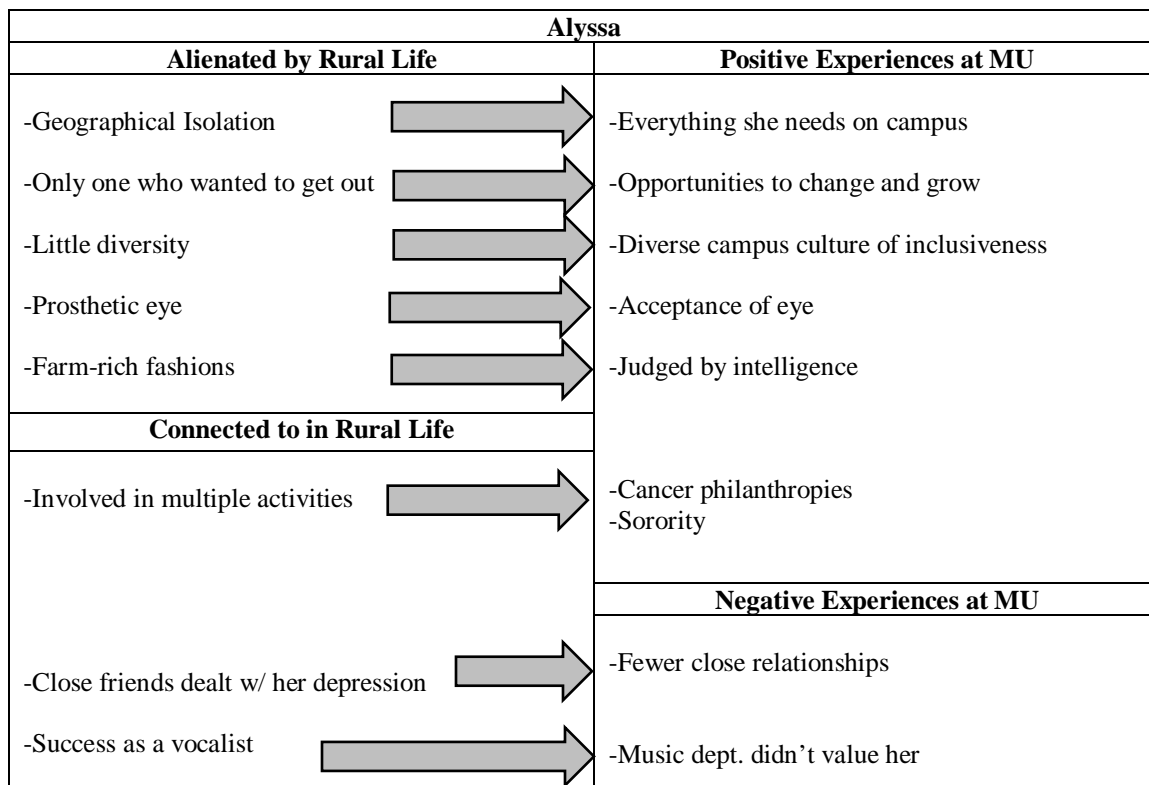


Figure 4.2. Rural life effect on belonging at MU: Alyssa.

Ian

Ian was a 20-year old Hispanic/White male attending MU as a Political Science major in the College of Arts and Sciences. He currently lived off-campus and was not a member of a Greek organization. Ian was originally from the state where MU is located and grew up in a rural community with a population of roughly 400 people. His graduating class had fewer than 20 students and he was ranked 6th among them with a high school GPA of 3.5. Ian was a first-generation student currently in his 5th semester at MU with junior status and a GPA of 3.4. Ian indicated his level of belonging was 5 out of 5 where 1 designated the lowest level of belonging and 5 indicated the highest. Ian valued education and had been planning on attending college his entire life. He was good at academics and wanted to go to law school. MU was always his first choice even

though he did not attend any campus visits before he enrolled. Overall, Ian identified with the city and college lifestyle much more so than the rural life, and many elements of his rural background alienated him growing up. This rural context informed how he experienced his MU environment and can be seen in Figure 4.3 below.

Ian had mixed experiences growing up in a rural community. He was ostracized for social reasons in high school, which among other things, contributed to his suffering from depression and even being suicidal at one point. Therefore, when he came to MU, he appreciated the numerous opportunities to form new relationships. He bonded with the other students on his dormitory floor and met his future best friend at that time. Through that friend he also got connected with the Sci-Fi club where he was introduced to Dungeons and Dragons, a game that became one of his favorite pastimes. He felt a sense of belonging with that group. Ian noted that back in his home town, there was nothing for him there but his family. He did not identify with the rural lifestyle and felt much more comfortable living in the city. He identified with city life at the university. There was more to do in the city and at the university there was much more course selection so he could get an education that interested him. His hometown was isolated with few options to grow and develop outside of the common norms and careers valued by his small community. Ian felt restricted with his options and therefore was ready to utilize the many opportunities to grow offered at MU. He quickly became involved on campus and engaged academically.

In addition to being geographically isolated, Ian thought people in his rural community also expressed a homogenized and conformist mentality. There was little diversity where he grew up, and although he indicated that he was not discriminated

against because of his race, Ian much preferred the diversity available at MU. According to him, this also facilitated Ian's academic and personal development and allowed him to feel more like he belonged. There were few people where he came from so seeing the crowds on campus was striking for Ian at first. He began to appreciate and anticipate the peak times on campus when the most students were walking to class. He enjoyed walking through the crowds and learning about new perspectives from people all the time.

Ian also felt connected to some elements of rural life. Although he was ostracized by his classmates, he felt the adults in his hometown were very nice and taught him lessons of acceptance and kindness. Ian indicated that these were "Midwestern values" and the people in his hometown made an impression on him. He felt these values informed his approach to life at MU and helped him have an open attitude to learning about new people and new perspectives. He also felt that MU's campus culture was one of "niceness" and his Midwestern values helped him fit in.

Ian also appreciated the personalized attention he got in high school classrooms. One of his senior teachers knew Ian's family well through a family connection. This familiarity coupled with the small class sizes helped Ian succeed in classes even when he was depressed and unmotivated. He noted he would not have been successful in another high school environment. Ian noted that the limited but personal education he received in a rural high school made his experiences with large class sizes unpleasant. Compared to high school, Ian was getting very little attention in his big classrooms, which he felt made it difficult to focus. He also noted the overwhelming selection of resources and supports at MU, so many he did not know where to start. These were difficult to adjust to since he

was already primed to work more one-on-one with instructors and staff. Finally, Ian felt connected to the closeness to people that was inherent with living for so long in close proximity to each other. Ian noted that people in his rural community could be counted on for support, whether it was neighbors, teachers, or other professionals in the town. Ian missed that at the university. He was not close with his neighbors in the city and it took much effort to connect to people at a deeper level, similar to what he was familiar with in his home community.

Ian		
Alienated by Rural Life	Positive Experiences at MU	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ostracized in high school -Depression/suicidal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Sci-Fi club -Best friend -Bonding in dormitory 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Nothing for him there but family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -More to do in city -Courses he wants to take -Identified with city life 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Few options to grow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Opportunities to grow 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Homogenized and conformist mentality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Crowds/diversity 	
Connected to in Rural Life		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Adult lessons of kindness -Midwestern values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Culture of niceness 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -More one-on-one attention 	<th style="text-align: center;">Negative Experiences at MU</th> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Large class size -Overwhelming selection of resources 	Negative Experiences at MU
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Closeness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Lack of closeness to people 	

Figure 4.3. Rural life effect on belonging at MU: Ian.

Kylie

Kylie was a 20-year old White female attending MU as a Management major in the College of Business. She currently lived off-campus and was not associated with a Greek house. Kylie was originally from the state where MU is located and grew up on a

farm outside of a rural community with a population of approximately 300. Her graduating class had 13 students and she ranked 2nd among them with a high school GPA of 3.916. Kylie's mother and older brother both attended MU. She was currently in her 5th semester at MU with junior status and a GPA of 3.21. Kylie indicated her level of belonging was 4 out of 5 where 1 designated the lowest level of belonging and 5 indicated the highest.

Kylie grew up on a family farm co-owned by her grandmother and father. Faith was "a huge part" of Kylie's upbringing and she felt that was common for most people in that rural area. Kylie had been planning on attending college since junior high. MU was the only school she applied to and she did not go on a campus visit before she applied. She chose MU because it was as big as she could get without leaving the state. She admitted that she did not think too much about her decision but was happy with MU.

Kylie had many positive connections to her rural background, which had positive and negative implications for her experiences at MU (see Figure 4.4). For instance, Kylie was very close to her family in her rural life, which bled into her experiences at MU. Her mother attended MU in the past and her brother was an upperclassman attending MU when Kylie was a freshman. There was a connection to her family that allowed Kylie to ease her transition to college and also have some prior familiarity with how college worked. However, this close reliance on her family actually negatively impacted other experiences for Kylie at MU. Her deep commitment to family meant that Kylie was expending less energy recreating a new support system in college and leaning more on her existing familial supports. She noted that her reliance on family might have actually been inhibiting some of her close friendships. She was also drawn to come home as often

as she could for family obligations. However according to Kylie, it was more than a 3 hour drive from MU so she was more likely to stay at MU, which may have prompted more homesickness.

Kylie also appreciated her other built-in support systems from her rural upbringing such as her faith and the community at large. At MU, after her family, she also reached out to her roommate and a Christian group on campus to help supplement her social support needs. She found several Christian group members that she became friends with in part due to their shared rural backgrounds. She had little interaction with other rural students outside of the Christian group. Kylie wished there was more specific support for rural students at MU. She missed having her rural community looking out for her and felt more unsupported and on her own in that environment. Kylie knew everyone in her rural community and felt connected to them. It had been a goal for her to stay connected to others on campus in a similar manner, which she did. When asked about her belonging at MU, Kylie said she was connected to the people, not the campus. Unfortunately, she felt there were few rural students on Main Campus for her to connect with. In addition, coming from an area with conservative views and little diversity, Kylie had to adjust to the new diverse environment where not everyone shared the same views with similar perspectives.

One connection to rural life that led to a negative experience of MU's environment was Kylie's personalized education in high school. Her classes were small, she had known everyone in her classes for almost her entire life and she likely had a personal connection to her teacher. This made her educational experiences at MU, with a large campus and large impersonal classes, difficult to adjust to. As a result, Kylie

experienced some academic issues her first semester and intermittently throughout her college career in part because of the radical difference in educational environment.

The one thing that Kylie mentioned as being a downside to coming from a rural community was the lack of opportunities she had there. She felt a bit inhibited and Kylie was excited to come to MU to get the “big city experience” she was looking for. Kylie wanted to get out of her rural town, at least temporarily, and live life on a larger scale, which she did at MU. Although Kylie still felt very connected to her rural hometown, she did enjoy living in the big city and felt like she somewhat belonged at MU.

Kylie		
Connected to in Rural Life	Positive Experiences at MU	Negative Experiences at MU
-Family	-Older brother attended -Mother attended	-Long drive home -Commitment to family inhibits close friendships
-Built-in support system	-Roommate -Rural friends from group -Christian group	-No resources for rural -Community not looking out
-Faith		
-Know everyone	Connected to people	-Adjusting to diversity -Few rural on Main Campus
-Personal education		-Large classes -Academic issues -Large campus
Alienated by in Rural Life		
-Fewer opportunities	-Big city experience	

Figure 4.4. Rural life effect on belonging at MU: Kylie.

Wes

Wes was a 21-year old White male attending MU as a Mechanical Engineering major in the College of Engineering. Although this was his first semester at MU after transferring from a smaller out-of-state institution, he had accrued enough credits for junior status. He currently lived in a dormitory on Main Campus and recently joined a

newly formed fraternity. Wes was originally from the state where MU is located and grew up on a farm outside of a rural community with a population of roughly 500 people. According to his responses on the demographic questionnaire, his graduating class had between 20-50 students and he ranked 5th among them with a high school GPA of 3.85. Wes' father attended MU and he had 3 older siblings who had attended college. He had a current MU GPA of 3.02 and indicated his level of belonging was 1 out of 5 where 1 designated the lowest level of belonging and 5 indicated the highest.

Wes planned to go to college his entire life. With his parents' encouragement, he considered many schools across several states, although he limited his search to the Midwest. His original intent was to reach outside of his home state to provide him with a bigger, different experience than what he had at home. After several semesters out of state, Wes came back to his home region and chose MU because it was in-state and had his major. He attended a transfer visit day and confirmed that this was the school for him.

Wes had strong connections to the rural environment in general and found that he felt good about what he described as a generally rural feel to campus, and to the city beyond (see Figure 4.5). Wes noted that he thought the city was actually populated with quite a few people from rural areas who had moved to the city. Wes thought this also resulted in more rural students at MU, which helped him feel more at home. However, since he was so accustomed to a smaller, rural environment, navigating the large spaces on campus and the large city was intimidating and could be overwhelming for Wes at times. Wes also came to rely on the close-knit community he had back in his rural hometown. He tried to find a replacement support system that was as close and felt, at

least initially, that his new fraternity could help fill the void left from leaving his hometown.

There were several elements of MU's environment that subverted his efforts to belong. Wes noted that at MU there was a lack of built-in support for rural students. He thought his dormitory was not really tied in to the community on campus and Wes had to work hard to find his place. Although there were some rural students at MU, Wes felt they were still too few to help him build a support system of rural students. Being from a rural area and having life-long companions already, Wes was not used to reaching out to new people to make connections, which he felt he needed to do at MU.

Wes found other elements from his rural life that related to his experience of MU's environment in a positive way. He was used to participating in many activities in high school with 4-H and other extra-curricular opportunities. Wes felt more at home then, signing up and participating in several student organizations and attending MU athletic events. Growing up in a rural area, Wes indicated he had a close connection to nature. He felt that although not quite the same at MU, some of his needs for nature were realized with the several open spaces and green spaces on campus. Wes also indicated that he developed a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility living on a farm in a rural area. He felt that the Midwestern values that other students at MU generally exhibited matched some of the values that he grew up with as well. This made the environment at MU seem more cohesive with his rural environment.

Wes was also alienated by a few elements of his rural background and grew to appreciate the environment at MU when it countered those experiences. For instance, Wes had limited options for friends growing up in a low-population-density area.

Therefore, when he came to MU, although the number of people on campus could be intimidating, overall the diversity was something Wes embraced and used to find friends that shared his interests. He also perceived a lack of privacy and judgmental people in his rural community where close proximity and lifetime relationships meant everyone knew everything about each other. Now that Wes was at MU, he appreciated the resulting anonymity and independence he had in the environment where almost everyone was a stranger.

Wes		
Connected to in Rural Life	Positive Experiences at MU	Negative Experiences at MU
-Rural environment	→	-Rural feel to campus -Other rural students -Rural feel to the city
		←
		-Navigating large spaces -Navigating large city
-Close-knit community	→	-New fraternity
		←
		-Dorm not tied to community -Work harder to find a place -Lack of built-in support -Few rural students -Not used to reaching out
-Participate in many activities	→	-Football games -Student organizations
-Work ethic/responsibility	→	-Midwestern values
-Nature	→	-Open spaces
Alienated by in Rural Life		
-Lack of privacy -Judgmental people	→	-New autonomy/anonymity
-Limited options for friends	→	-Diversity

Figure 4.5. Rural life effect on belonging at MU: Wes.

Tessa

Tessa was a 20-year old White female attending MU as a Psychology major in the College of Arts and Sciences. She currently lived off-campus and was not associated with a Greek house. Tessa was originally from the state where MU is located and grew

up in a rural community with a population of approximately 190. Her graduating class had 14 students and she was ranked 4th among them with a high school GPA of 3.34. Tessa was a first-generation student currently in her 5th semester at MU with junior status and a GPA of 3.1. Tessa indicated her level of belonging was 4 out of 5 where 1 designated the lowest level of belonging and 5 indicated the highest.

Tessa had been planning on attending college since 7th grade and her family had always expected her to go. She never felt like it was an option not to go. She considered a few in-state colleges but did not attend any campus visits. She chose MU in part because she thought no one else in her graduating class was going there and she wanted to get away from her classmates and have a chance to “find” herself.

Tessa had many positive experiences at MU that mirrored aspects of her background (see Figure 4.6). Tessa experienced a very personal education in her rural high school, having a personal connection to most of her teachers. She subsequently connected to experiences at MU that helped her feel more invested in her academics. She purposely took small classes every semester because she quickly learned that she related best to professors and other students in those classes. She felt she belonged in her math classes, not only because she understood the course material, but because she made lasting friendships with other students in those classes. Her new Psychology major had classes that interested Tessa and she felt connected to the subject matter. She developed close working relationships with her academic advisors and some of her instructors, contacting them frequently during times of academic uncertainty.

For Tessa, there were some elements of MU’s environment that made making these personal relationships more difficult. The large lecture classes that she took were

overwhelming for her and the opposite of a personal educational experience. With so many people, it was difficult to get much one-on-one interaction with faculty members. She also was quite taken back by the academic rigor expected at MU. Tessa felt without the personalized touch of educators, she initially floundered in some of her classes where she expected she would do better. In addition, her first major, Chemistry, proved to not be a good fit for her academically and she needed to reach out and find somewhere else that she belonged.

During her youth, Tessa spent many hours walking around her small hometown with her family and friends. She became very familiar with the layout and landmarks that identified her community. Coming to MU was difficult at first because the campus felt large and it was difficult to navigate. She also had a difficult time navigating the city and said she used a GPS every time she left campus her freshman year. After a while though, she began to realize that the Main Campus was actually about the same geographical size as her hometown, which made her feel a little less homesick. She found some spaces that felt “homey” to her and began to appreciate being on campus even more.

As with most of the other participants, Tessa experienced close-knit relationships with many people from her hometown. After her initial homesickness, she began to recognize that some environmental structures were in place to help recreate some of that closeness with others. Her learning community was very beneficial for her to live with other students with similar interests experiencing some of the same things as her. Also her freshman roommate was someone she developed a close bond with and even continued to interact with in subsequent semesters. Tessa also noted that many of her current close friends were also from small rural areas and suggested that perhaps like her,

they found that developing close relationships was particularly important to them. Tessa also developed a close “work family” at the small store she chose to work at in the city. Although not directly related to MU’s environment, many of her co-workers are also MU students and Tessa frequently saw them on campus. According to Tessa, in her rural hometown, everyone worked either on the farm or in town. Tessa herself worked 30 plus hours a week at a small local store in high school. It was important for her to work at MU and when she did not have a job her freshman year, she said it felt weird. She purposely chose to work in a smaller store that reminded her of home.

One thing that Tessa appreciated about her hometown was that she knew everyone. Like many of the other participants, she had developed life-long relationships and was not used to reaching out to new people. Tessa also indicated she was an introvert and especially had difficulty in awkward social situations. Therefore, the necessity she felt to reach out to others her freshman year at MU in order to know more people, was a challenge for her that was difficult to overcome at first.

Tessa		
Connected to in Rural Life	Positive Experiences at MU	Negative Experiences at MU
-Personal education	-Small classes -Advisor -Math classes -Psychology major -Caring professors	-Large class size -Chemistry major -Academic rigor
-Hometown size	-Main Campus size like hometown -"Homey" spaces	-Navigating large campus
-Close-knit relationships	-Learning community -Close friends from rural areas -Roommate	
-Working	-Work "family" -Working at a smaller store	
-Knew everyone		-Reaching out to new people

Figure 4.6. Rural life effect on belonging at MU: Tessa.

Kevin

Kevin was a 21-year old White male attending MU as a Water Science major in the College of Agriculture. He currently lived off-campus and was not associated with a Greek house. Kevin was originally from the state where MU is located and grew up on a farm outside of a rural community with a population of roughly 1,200. His graduating class had 30 students and he was ranked 2nd among them with a high school GPA of 4.0. Kevin was not a first-generation student and his older sister also attended MU. He was currently in his 5th semester at MU with junior status and a GPA of 3.35. Kevin indicated his level of belonging was 4 out of 5 where 1 designated the lowest level of belonging and 5 indicated the highest.

As a child, Kevin had wanted to be a zoologist and had been planning to attend college for as long as he could remember. He received financial aid, which was a main contributor for his choosing to attend MU. He also appreciated that it was only an hour

away from his family home. He appreciated the academic programs and had been a long-time fan of MU athletics. Kevin also thought it was also beneficial that his sister attended as she could help him with the transition.

Kevin seemed to have a very close connection to his rural life. He noted several specific instances where he felt like a fish out of water at MU and most experiences that Kevin related from his rural life resulted in some negative experience at MU (see Figure 4.7). For instance, he was used to going to bed and getting up early for morning farm work and continued that lifestyle in college. He was surprised and annoyed that so many other students would stay out until past three or four o'clock in the morning and was woken up many times living in the dormitories. Kevin was also unfamiliar with some of the urban fashions and customs such as jogging for recreation that he often saw on Main Campus. This was not what he was used to and made Kevin feel out of place.

Kevin had a built-in support system with close relationships and support from his community. He admitted it was a bit difficult for him to reach out and make friends at MU. Fortunately, Kevin connected to his MU roommate his freshman year, who he developed a close friendship with. Kevin noted that he really did not find other close relationships like he experienced back home until he got involved in a Christian group on campus. In that group, Kevin had deep conversations and became so invested he felt like he belonged there. Kevin also found it easier to relate to students when he changed his major to Water Science and started taking classes with more students from rural areas.

Kevin was also used to being close to nature growing up in a rural area. He found similar experiences on Ag Campus where the physical environment was more representative of a small community with more quiet green spaces than Main Campus.

Kevin noted that Ag Campus generally had more of a “country” feel to it. On the other hand, the physical environment of Main Campus was more unfamiliar and uncomfortable for Kevin. Main Campus was mostly concrete, with few trees and green spaces compared to Ag Campus. Kevin’s freshman dorm room was on the ninth floor of a high-rise and Kevin was a bit intimidated being up that high.

Kevin also noted how Main Campus culture was very different from his experiences growing up in a rural hometown. Back where he was from, Kevin was used to people looking each other in the eye and being generally direct with each other. He noted that people averted their gaze on Main Campus when he looked them in the eye. He was also not used to seeing people jogging for recreation. He also felt a bit alienated at MU regarding some of the fashions popular on campus and in the city. Kevin was used to wearing boots and work clothes and noted how city fashions were unfamiliar to him. Kevin was used to putting in long hours on the farm and had developed a strong work ethic that he appreciated was common in his hometown. He noted that while Ag Campus had more rural-seeming, hardworking students, Main Campus culture was “less work-driven” than he was used to. People partied more often and later into the night than he was used to as well. Kevin did not appreciate being awakened at 3:00 am while his floor mates reveled their freshman year.

Kevin also noted the difference between rural and city cultures in his interactions with his neighbors. According to Kevin, back home, his family leaned on neighbors for support and vice versa, even though they did not live in close proximity to each other. In the city, Kevin lived in an apartment complex and although his new neighbors lived very close, he did not feel comfortable with them and knew very little about them.

One thing that seemed consistent for Kevin across his rural life and college life was a commitment to athletics. Kevin played multiple sports in his small hometown high school and was a standout athlete in football in particular. Kevin found that football was a common language that he could speak with just about anyone on campus at MU. Student identity and campus culture was so closely entrenched in athletics that Kevin used his experiences with sports as a bridge to reach out and connect to other students at MU.

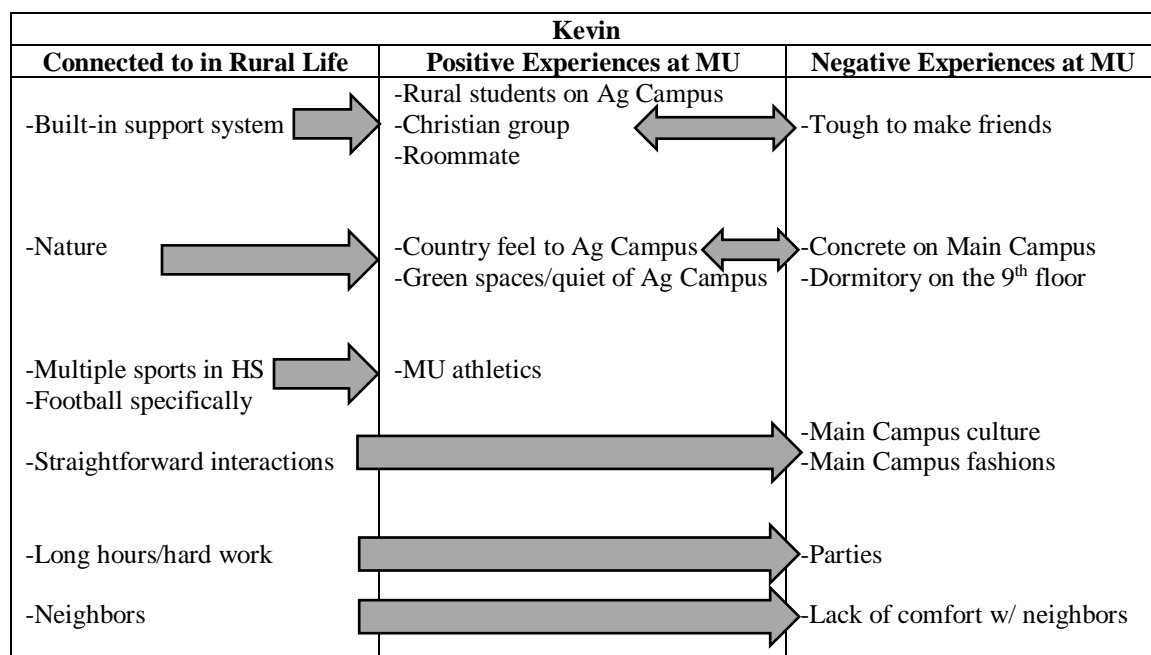


Figure 4.7. Rural life effect on belonging at MU: Kevin.

Erin

Erin was a 21-year old White female attending MU as an Animal Science major in the College of Agriculture. She currently lived off-campus and was a member of a Greek sorority. Erin was originally from the state where MU is located and grew up on a farm outside of a rural community with a population of roughly 200. Her graduating class had 21 students and she was ranked 9th among them with a high school GPA of 3.5.

Erin was not a first-generation student. Her older sister attended MU and her mother worked for the institution. She was currently in her 7th semester at MU with junior status and a GPA of 2.3. Erin indicated her level of belonging was 2.95 out of 5 where 1 designated the lowest level of belonging and 5 indicated the highest.

Erin had planned on attending college since her freshman year of high school. She wanted to get a degree so she could get a “decent job” in the future. Her older sister had transferred to MU and Erin thought since she was similar to her sister, that she would like it at MU as well. Erin considered only MU and applied to no other colleges. Erin felt a strong connection to her rural roots and had a particularly difficult time adjusting to her new environment at MU. Figure 4.8 illustrates how her strong connection to rural life affected her positive and negative experiences at MU.

Erin felt very close to the ag-related issues that affected her family and other community-members in her rural hometown. She strongly identified with being from a rural area and had a pretty rough transition to MU. She started out her freshman year living and studying on Main Campus and felt like she did not belong there. She said there were very few other rural students on Main Campus for her to connect with. According to her, the other Main Campus students were ignorant of ag-related issues and expressed negative judgments about Erin’s rural experiences. She felt alienated for being a rural student and was so intimidated by the environment that she hardly ever left her dorm room her freshman year.

After a while, Erin began to interface with the Ag Campus at MU. She joined an Ag Campus sorority, changed her major to Animal Science where she studied on Ag Campus. She participated in Ag Campus student organizations, took classes on Ag

Campus, and appreciated that there were more rural students living and learning on that campus. Erin also appreciated the quiet, less crowded, green spaces on Ag Campus. It felt more like her rural environment that she had growing up and preferred. She felt like she belonged on the Ag Campus.

Growing up on a farm, Erin got very involved in 4-H and was very invested in training and showing farm animals. Coming to MU, she had few interactions with animals and Erin felt very homesick in part because she missed her animals. She was able to replace some of that animal interaction when she declared her Animals Science major and took classes that gave her access to the animal holding areas on Ag Campus where she could do more animal-related activities. She also found herself mentoring younger students in her sorority who were still showing animals for 4-H. These outlets helped Erin develop a sense of belonging and recognize her connection to animals.

Having no animal interactions at first also made Erin miss her built-in support system from her rural community. Fortunately, Erin was able to make friends with another student her freshman year that had rural ties. This individual was also experiencing some of the same homesickness that Erin had living on Main Campus freshman year. They built a close bond and continued to live together on and off-campus. According to her, this relationship helped Erin develop a stronger sense of belonging at MU.

Erin was also connected to rural fashions. Growing up, she wore muck boots and work clothes in her daily work on the farm. Erin felt alienated by city culture and the city fashions that resulted in her feeling judged when she wore her work clothes and muck

boots to the store or some other city locale. Overall, MU environments that were more aligned with city life were more difficult for Erin to adjust to.

Erin		
Connected to in Rural Life	Positive Experiences at MU	Negative Experiences at MU
-Rural identity -Ag-related issues	-Ag Campus sorority -Ag Campus spaces -Rural students on Ag Campus -Ag Campus classes -Ag Campus club	-Few rural students on Main Campus -Main Campus people and vibe -Main Campus judgment of her ruralness
-Farm animals -4-H showing animals	-Animal Science major -Mentoring 4-H students	-No animal interactions
-Built-in support system	-Best friend w/ rural ties	
-Muck boots and work clothes		-City environment -City fashions

Figure 4.8. Rural life effect on belonging at MU: Erin.

Chapter 5: Findings

The purpose of this case study was to explore how rural students experience higher education contexts and develop a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern university. The following questions guided this research:

- To what extent and in what ways do rural students feel a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern university?
 - How does students' identification with their rural background influence how they experience their college environment?
 - What do rural students see as key environmental factors affecting their sense of belonging?
 - Is the institution providing supportive environments for rural students and if so, how?

This chapter reports the combined and triangulated full case findings and the subsequent themes that arose throughout the process of analysis. This report is a result of multiple stages of coding and analysis and represents a synthesis of contextual institutional and individual data. These findings were interpreted through the lens of a theoretical framework made up of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological development theory, Strange and Banning's (2015) four models of educational environments, and Strayhorn's (2012) definition of sense of belonging. This framework is key to examining the environmental contexts of higher education for rural students because it focuses on rural individuals and the various levels and interactions of the educational environment that they experience. It is important to note that each of these components are represented throughout the findings and not separated into their own section. The

proximal processes/interactions, personal characteristics of students, and environmental contexts are interspersed among the emergent themes.

Overall, the central tension to the research questions involves the relationship between rural life and college life. There are various patterns that arise among these interactions. In order to describe these patterns and their implications for rural students, this chapter is organized into four sections. The first section describes rural life identity and how it influences rural students' experience of MU's environment. The second section outlines the three emerging patterns of intersection between rural life and college life. While students generally fit mostly into one of the three patterns, there were aspects of all three patterns evident in different students' experiences. Section three focuses on the importance of MU's environment replicating rural environments for students that highly identify with their rural background. Section four highlights how rural students expand their horizons at MU and describes rural student belonging outside of their rural environment.

Section 1: Rural Life Identity

Analysis comparing student experiences with rural life and MU administrators' responses revealed overriding elements of rural life that influenced rural individuals' worldview and how rural students experienced the environment at MU. In order to recognize the patterns of rural life and college life intersection, it is important to understand rural life identity as reported by participants. Common elements of rural environment, culture, interpersonal interactions, and education combined to create a rural identity that some rural students identified with more than others.

Isolation and Agriculture

According to the rural student participants, rural communities in this state tended to feel geographically isolated. Students living in these areas felt isolated from other communities and larger populations; those living on acreages such as Kylie and Erin were even isolated from their neighbors. Instead of being surrounded by humanity, individuals living in rural areas were surrounded by nature. Students indicated that fields of corn, soybeans, and other crops surrounded many homes. Groves of trees and open grassy fields were common. Farm animals such as cows, sheep, pigs, goats, horses, chickens, dogs, and cats were plentiful, and in some cases more populous than people. Erin pointed out,

Growing up in a rural area, my closest neighbor was two miles away and it was a missile silo, not even humans. So living on a farm, you know on the weekends when you know parents are like killing tumbleweeds and fixing fence and doing farm work...I would go out and my friends were my animals. [I wasn't] able to hop on a bike and ride a block down to my best friend's house.

Students felt there were opportunities here for individuals who wanted a life close to nature, working in agriculture away from civilization. Not everyone from a small town lived on a farm or ranch, but the press of agriculture and the issues associated with it were never far away.

Culture

Rural students felt that the nature of rural areas bred a certain kind of culture in the inhabitants that lived there. Since homesteads were more isolated and people within close proximity were limited, family became an important factor. Individuals like Erin

and Kylie relied on family members to help with physical and emotional support because there were generally fewer people around to lend support. According to Erin,

I feel like a lot of people in rural towns, you're really close with your family...you're stuck with your family a lot and then living six hours away from family and not having that, or having someone to go cry on their shoulder or lean on is really hard so when I found it, I clung to it because it was really helpful.

In an area where the local fortunes are often determined in part by weather and other elements out of individuals' hands, Kylie reported that faith was another important part of rural culture. Most rural communities had at least one church, and many had multiple churches. In this state, Christian faith was the dominant religion, with the majority of congregations of the Protestant variety. According to Kylie,

I feel like because I grew up in a rural community, church was always a huge part of our life. My life. In a small town of 300 we probably have 5 churches.

Compared to [this city] or a bigger place maybe, faith isn't something that's....It's usually a huge deal in a lot of people's lives so I don't know if it's necessarily rural or just my family, but it's always been a huge part of my life...I don't know if you come to the city and there's more going on and so that's not really something you think about as much? Yeah I do feel like it is a rural thing. That it's more prevalent is maybe the right word.

The isolation of rural areas also facilitated an environment of homogeneity. According to administrators and students alike, most rural people in this state were White, Christian, and had conservative political views. Conformity was the norm and

having this insulated worldview meant that many rural individuals were naïve to issues of diversity. In Kylie's experience,

in a small town, everybody's pretty set on their ways and I was pretty set on those ways too. And then coming here sharing different perspectives, or seeing different perspectives I guess has definitely changed my view on some things. And I would say I haven't completely changed my view but I've realized, 'oh, you know maybe this isn't so bad', and maybe I still don't agree with that but I can accept it or tolerate it I guess.

This was also the case for Tessa and Alyssa who indicated that they either came to MU with conservative political views, or were negatively affected by those views expressed by others from their small towns.

In addition to conservative views, a collection of values that Ian attributed to the Midwestern region of the United States were common in rural areas in this state. He said, "There's a joke that Midwest people are very kind and unassuming and very welcoming and I think that definitely is a stereotype that might be true." These values included sincerity, friendliness, integrity, and a straight-forward approach to interactions with others. According to Kevin, Erin, and Wes, a highly developed work ethic was common as well, since many rural individuals had to work long hours in the agricultural industry. Many rural people were reliant on the agriculture industry, which influenced the culture of the small towns as well.

Rural fashions also commonly revolved around agriculture. Kevin, Wes, and Erin noted that people were commonly seen in work boots and work clothes in many settings. Wes noted,

Growing up with horses, it was a big part of 4-H. That was a part of the attire you had to wear with everything. They helped when you were working with horses so your feet don't get stepped on as badly. You just had to wear them with a lot of different 4-H projects working with different animals.

Alyssa stated that other fashions were determined by the "farm-rich" families who were financially successful and had more money to spend on trendy clothes.

Several students indicated that since rural high schools were generally less populated than non-rural schools, in order for students to be able to compete in athletics and other activities, it meant that most or all of the students had to take a role on the team or ensemble. This resulted in rural students being involved in multiple extra-curricular activities. Alyssa described her experience,

in a smaller school like you had more chances to be in a leadership position or just be a part of everything versus like a big school you don't really get that...I feel like there were more opportunities to be a part of as many things as I wanted to.

Erin and Wes pointed out that another common extra-curricular activity related to rural agriculture was 4-H. According to the 4-H website,

4-H is delivered by Cooperative Extension—a community of more than 100 public universities across the nation that provides experiences where young people learn by doing. Kids complete hands-on projects in areas like health, science, agriculture and citizenship, in a positive environment where they receive guidance from adult mentors and are encouraged to take on proactive leadership roles ("What is 4-H?," n.d.).

Through 4-H, rural youth would do a variety of things including but not limited to raising and showing animals, crops, or other agriculture-related activities. In some communities, according to Erin, 4-H was such a prominent fixture that even youth that did not live on a farm or ranch would participate.

Interpersonal Interactions

For Aaron, it was easy to find solitude in an area with such a low population density. According to him, “[I’ve] grown up being so isolated. Not a fan of crowds. Never have been, never will be.” So many students mentioned this that it became almost a distinguishing feature of rural areas in this state. However, Wes and Alyssa pointed out that it was also difficult to avoid interacting with the rest of one’s rural community. The rural culture and general isolation influenced how rural individuals interacted with each other. For instance, Erin felt that the families that lived in these areas commonly had been there quite a long time with a family member inheriting land or a farm, or had some other tie to that area. Some families had been in their rural communities for generations. For Erin, this often meant that growing up in a rural community, she was going to be around the same people for her entire youth, with few new students or teachers to interact with. According to Kylie,

Everybody knows everybody and so if I see someone, I know them, I know their name and I have somewhat of a connection to them. Whether I like them or not. I can think of some way that I am connected to them. Either they were my teacher or they were a classmate’s parent or they work with my mom, or you know just stuff like that. There’s always a connection between us regardless if it’s good or bad I guess.

This provided rural individuals with a built-in support system with that community and lifelong relationships with almost everyone within close proximity. Students mentioned that these lifelong relationships were close and people relied on their neighbors to help them in times of need. Kevin pointed out in his experience, “If we were going on a trip, we would give them a call and say ‘hey could you feed our animals?’ And you’d trust them to come over and feed your animals for a week.” Reciprocity was common and necessary for many.

Education

Students indicated that rural education often meant that there were few students in the classrooms and there was more one-on-one attention from the instructors.

Educational supports were often limited but easy to access and navigate. Most participants indicated they had personal connections to the teachers, which gave their education a more personal touch. Perhaps teachers were more invested in the students because of that connection.

According to the rural participants, rural teachers were often supervising multiple extra-curricular activities and their teaching suffered. Tessa experienced that firsthand and noted,

My math teacher...he was the girls basketball head coach and so he was gone a lot and he also did football and track so he just did everything. And so I feel like math with him was maybe a lot easier than it should have been. We got through a chapter every semester, it was kind of sad.

Aaron mentioned that in rural communities internet access could be slow and students generally had less access to information, which made a well-rounded modern education

more difficult. Students felt there were often few extra resources in rural schools and students had limited access to a variety of foreign language and advanced science instruction. With the exception of federally funded programs like Upward Bound and a handful of courses that Alyssa and Ian experienced, there were few advanced placement courses and college preparation opportunities.

Section 2: Patterns of Rural/College Life Intersection

One goal of this study was to examine how students' rural background influenced how they experience their college environment. According to the administrator Jordan, the term "rural" could mean many different things for students based on background, personal characteristics, and what they identified with. After speaking with the eight rural student participants, it appeared that Jordan's assertion was correct. Each student experienced rural life and its influence on how the individual experienced MU's environment in different ways. In fact, each student needed a unique model to represent those relationships (see Figures 4.1-4.8). What became clear however, is that there definitely was some interaction between a student's rural life and sense of belonging at MU.

Figures 4.1-4.8 depict key components of rural life and college life and how they intersected for each student. These intersections corresponded with connecting and alienating experiences across the contexts resulting in positive and negative influences on a rural individual's experiences at MU. Looking at alienation and belonging in another way, data analysis and triangulation indicated that there were many elements of MU's environment that influenced rural students' development of a sense of belonging. Most students had experiences and perceptions unique to themselves, however comparing all of

the students' experiences and the administrators' responses resulted in a few broad findings. See the Venn diagrams in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 for elements of rural student belonging and alienation from administrator and rural student perspectives.

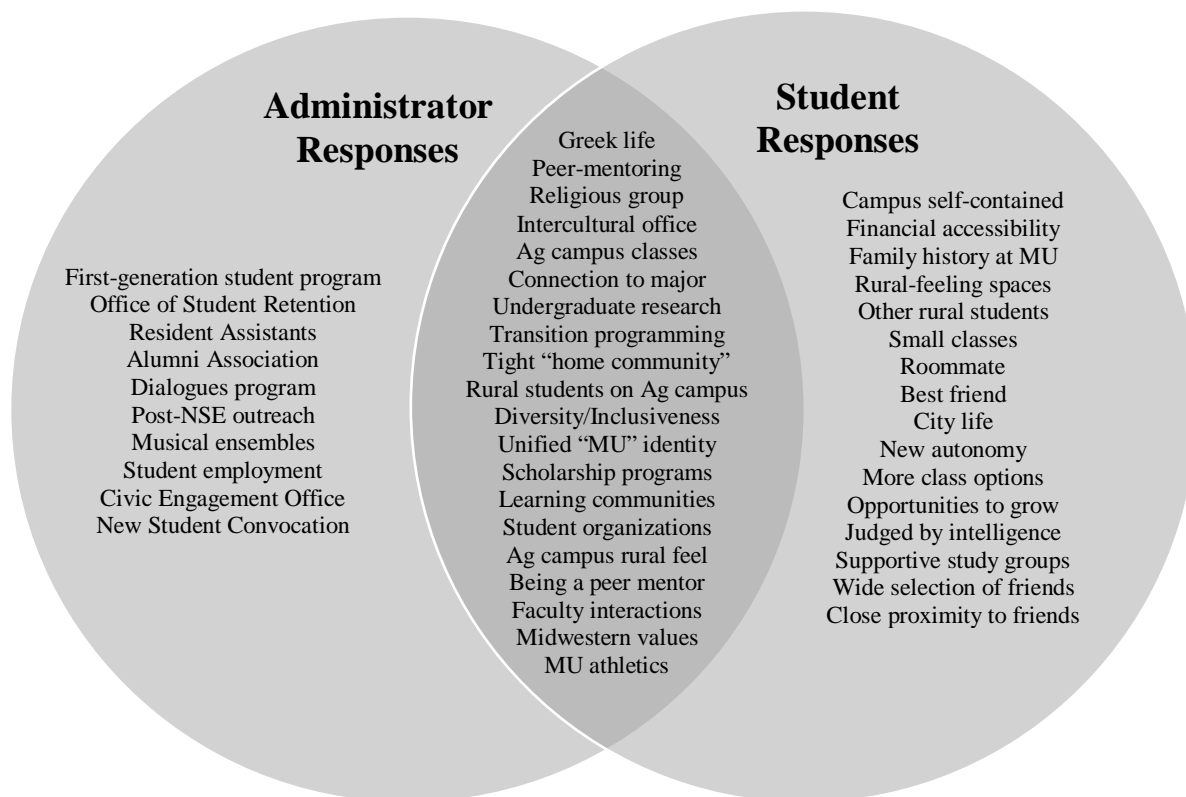


Figure 5.1. Belonging at MU.

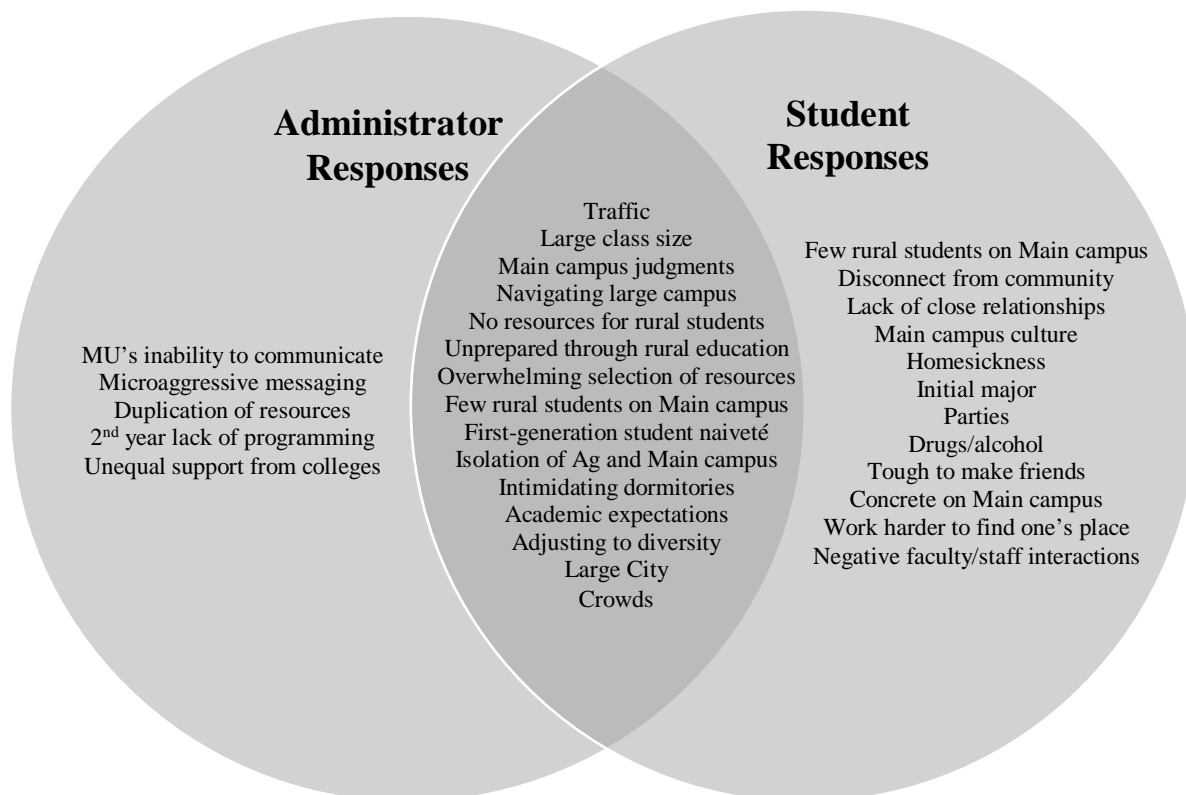


Figure 5.2. Alienation at MU.

From these rural and college experiences pertaining to belonging and alienation emerged three patterns of college life and rural life intersection. Pattern 1 represented components of rural alienation that led to students appreciating elements of MU's environment. Pattern 2 characterized students identifying with aspects of their rural environment, which in turn presented challenges for them in MU's college environment. Pattern 3 occurred when students identified with aspects of their rural life, which had both positive and negative implications for their experiences at MU. While students generally fit mostly into one of the three patterns, there were aspects of all three patterns that appeared across multiple students' experiences. This section focuses on case-wide findings that illustrate these three patterns and describes each in detail.

Pattern 1: Rural Alienation and MU Appreciation

Several students including Aaron, Alyssa, and Ian indicated that many elements that alienated them in their rural community helped them appreciate how MU's environment was different. For Aaron, Alyssa, and Ian there seemed to be a direct relationship between their negative experiences in rural life and their subsequent development of a sense of belonging within MU's environment. Various aspects of life such as size of the environment, relating to peers, academics, and opportunities are discussed as they relate to students' alienation in rural life and connection to MU's environment.

Size of environment. Some rural students liked MU and the surrounding area because other than traffic and some isolated experiences, they actually enjoyed city life. Ian noted, "I feel like I belong here more than I did back home...there are things here in the city and the university that interest me and that I want to be a part of." Most rural students mentioned that their rural hometown was geographically isolated with a relatively small area where individuals congregated. Kevin and Alyssa mentioned that there were very few stores or restaurants in their towns and if they wanted something, they needed to travel significant distances to get it. One benefit of MU's environment that many students embraced was the convenience of close proximity. Campus seemed more self-contained and had everything students wanted close-by. According to Alyssa,

In high school if I wanted a prom dress or homecoming dress, I had to travel to [a bigger city] to get that because there is nothing down there in [my hometown] where I could get it and, yeah, we had to come to [a bigger city] for a lot of things. I would say we definitely came at least once a month because this is where you know, we could come to [a large convenience store] and buy bulk or

groceries because it was cheaper, even though we had to travel 50 miles, 100 miles round-trip. And if my step-dad needed stuff like car parts for his car, like he had to come to [a bigger city] to get those. So yeah, having everything at my fingertips is definitely a lot different. Like I can buy just if I really want a smoothie I can go buy one, it's right there just three blocks away...so I think that was the biggest difference, was just having so many options for food and clothes and, oh my gosh, don't even get me started on the clothes.

Relating to peers. While it was beneficial in many ways to have such close relationships as those often developed in a rural setting, several students pointed out some downsides to the closeness. For instance, Aaron and Wes pointed out that the closeness also meant that everyone knew everything about everyone and there was little to no privacy. Wes noted,

where I grew up, it was obviously a very small town. Very close-knit community. I felt that...everyone knew everything about everyone and like you couldn't really do anything without like, you know, making someone mad or being under someone's judgement about something.

At MU, while solitude was difficult to come by, privacy and autonomy were in great supply. With so many other people on campus, it was easy to go unnoticed and unknown on campus where students did not have to answer to everyone else for their actions. According to Alyssa, students were judged more based on their intelligence than what they wore or how much money they had.

According to most participants, in rural schools, it was easy to find others to ostracize. Anyone who was different in any way was often a social target, which could

have damaging effects on an individual's comfort and even mental health like it was for Ian. Ian's unpopularity in high school no longer mattered in his new college environment where he had the opportunity to reinvent himself. Alyssa also felt ostracized in her rural hometown by her prosthetic eye and was relieved when she encountered very little judgement or teasing from her new classmates on MU's campus.

Ian, Aaron, Alyssa, and Erin indicated that there were also limited options for friends in rural communities. These individuals were simply stuck with the people that were also living there too. This could be good if there were many shared interests, but Aaron, Wes, and Ian had a hard time relating to the few others, and there was no one else to choose from. Aaron said,

I mean high school probably half of my class wanted to go into either welding or auto mechanics. I know nothing about either of these things. So it's just you know, if you're personally researching something and want another human's input on it, you're out of luck.

At MU, students lived with a multitude of people many of whom shared their common interests. Aaron in particular appreciated the large population and wide selection for finding friends and other students with common interests that lived within close proximity. He felt this improved his chances of forming quality friendships.

Academics. The way rural students perceived academics in their rural environment and college environment had several implications on their experiences at MU. For instance, students said their rural educators had comparatively low academic expectations and for some the schoolwork was not challenging. According to Aaron,

Coming from the rural setting there was no challenge...That ties into going to university with the intention of finding something more challenging than what you've had at home...I was genuinely just better at academics than my peers in high school so I would work on these assignments that were geared towards people that just didn't have as good of a background from home or from their own personal interests to do this academic work. And I would just knock those out like bam, bam, bam. And you get tired of doing those so junior, senior year rolls around and you're just not doing things.

Aaron was relieved when he came to MU and found his academic major much more challenging. He felt the academic expectations, at least in some disciplines, were appropriate to help him grow as an individual and positively benefitted his sense of belonging at MU.

According to the rural participants, there were limited academic outlets in their hometown high schools and many students were funneled into classes that they did not care about. At MU, many choices for academic interests abound with a wide variety of academic options for students to choose from. Ian noted,

In high school, there's so many like topics that we're just forced to learn about that I don't care about. Like I took Trigonometry and stuff and I just hate math. Now, I'm a political science major so I don't need math...There's a lot more options in terms of academics and so you can really find something that you can enjoy and not have to take classes that you hate...you can really try to design your academic experience in a way that you enjoy and find engaging.

Being engaged academically had a positive influence on rural students developing a sense of belonging at MU and for some students, many academic options and high expectations were what they needed to thrive in their new environment.

Opportunities and diversity. According to Ian, the mentality of people in his rural environment was very “homogenized” and he felt he did not have many options to develop. For students like Ian, Aaron, Kylie, and Alyssa, who did not want to live in an insulated, isolated world of agriculture, this environment felt a bit claustrophobic, where there seemed to be fewer opportunities for growth outside of what could be done in a small rural community. With multiple student organizations, spaces for sharing of ideas, and general diversity on campus, students like Alyssa and Ian could thrive in the MU environment.

In addition, several of the first-generation students and those from lower-income families felt that the financial accessibility of MU contributed to their sense of belonging. Either through scholarship programs or grants, students who felt normally they would not have gotten a chance at higher education appreciated that MU made it possible for them to attend college. Alyssa and Ian particularly appreciated the opportunities that MU provided and noted how they felt they belonged financially. Ian explained,

I've never felt like the fact that I come from a low income background has you know, made me feel like I don't belong maybe because this is a very affordable place and it feels like they want to help people who are like that succeed.

Opportunities at MU that exposed students to new perspectives and enabled them to experience things they otherwise would not be able to experience proved to be another

example of how students that were alienated by aspects of their rural life could appreciate the differences in MU's environment.

Pattern 2: Rural Identification and MU Challenges

Counter to the pattern described above, rural students also identified with several aspects of their rural life, which led some students to experience challenges at MU. For Tessa, Kevin, and Erin in particular, there seemed to be a direct relationship between their strong connection to rural identity and their subsequent barriers to develop a sense of belonging at MU. Various aspects of life such as size of the environment, support systems, academics, and cultural lifestyle influenced how this pattern emerged for some rural students.

Size of environment. The rural environment was often described as insulated, isolated, and small. While some rural students reacted positively to the larger size of MU's environment in contrast to their rural environment, some students were more negatively affected by the large campus, city traffic, and large classes. For instance, many rural students found that they had a difficult time navigating and belonging on the large Main Campus. Wes recognized that it was easy to fall through the cracks at such a large institution. When he first got there he did not know who to talk to and he felt "overwhelmed" and "anxious." The "faster pace" of campus made him feel like he did not belong. Kylie felt it was hard to be connected to such a big place and did not feel connected to campus itself.

The size of the city also brought negative experiences for rural students. In addition to having to learn to navigate the large campus, students also had to learn to navigate the city, especially with the increased traffic. Tessa stated, "I think my

freshman year I might have been a little intimidated by the size of the city. I couldn't go anywhere without a GPS." Kevin also responded by saying,

The traffic obviously is a lot worse than...back where I'm from. That was definitely something that I had to adjust to last year when I started driving was just 'oh I've got to leave earlier than I would have planned because oh there's probably going to be traffic.' You kind of have to set up times around rush hour...If you're driving downtown on a Friday or Saturday night, it's just a whole other world for me. Seeing all, seeing so many people just walking around, jaywalking, whatever.

Another barrier to rural students' belonging at MU that appeared unanimous across all participants was the large lecture classes at MU. Students used words like "shocking," "overwhelming," "crazy," and "a little scary" to describe their courses with 200+ students in them. Erin explained,

And just you know, being in a class with 400 people is a lot different than 10, so that was a big shock. And getting used to the fast-paced-ness of class and not having as much one-on-one like, with a teacher, was a lot to get used to.

For every participant, these classes represented a huge departure from the small classes they were used to (fewer than 15 per-class in most cases). Rural students felt intimidated by the large number of people in their classes and were less likely to build up connections with them there. Erin and Tessa were afraid to engage and ask questions in these large classes because it would be embarrassing to ask a question everyone else knew the answer to. Rural students also reported having a more difficult time interacting with the professors teaching these large classes because there were so many other students that

they felt the professor did not have time for them. These environments were more one-sided with professors reading or lecturing using PowerPoint slides, and utilizing fewer interactive conversations.

Support systems. In a rural environment, support systems were built in for individuals. Family was important, and friendships were limited but close and often longstanding. While some students had no problem moving on without their rural supports, others became homesick and found it difficult to adjust, which delayed their sense of belonging at MU. Kylie and Wes's belonging were inhibited not only by the size and scope of the university, but they were also both missing their families. Tessa also missed her family and this homesickness made her "hate [MU] at first." According to Tessa,

I didn't realize how hard it would be to not be home and it wasn't so easy to turn around and just go home. The classes didn't necessarily seem that hard that first week, we didn't do very much but I just didn't realize how much I was going to miss everybody.

In addition to missing their families, rural students also missed their friends and other community supports. Back home, Alyssa's community knew about her depression issues and how to best ameliorate her situation. At MU, nobody knew what was going on with her and so she was unable to get the same level of support. It was a goal for many rural students to replace these supports in college but having grown up in a rural area and rarely meeting new friends meant that individuals who left the community may have lacked skills related to reaching out and developing deep meaningful relationships. This added another potential barrier for rural students trying to replace their support systems at

MU. Participants Tessa, Kevin, and Erin all had a built-in support system with close relationships and support from their hometown community. For these students it was a bit difficult to reach out and make friends at MU.

Academics. Other evidence of the pattern where students identified with their rural life and were challenged by MU's environment emerged in the area of academics. Students that missed their rural academic systems often had a difficult transition to MU's various academic options and high expectations. One difference between rural education and MU was that students had to know how to reach out to their professors. In rural high schools, teachers were highly accessible, but at MU, students reported that depending on the class, it was much more intimidating to reach out to faculty members. It was difficult for students to connect with their professors in their large lecture classes. Erin said,

you can't always talk to the professor one-on-one or even a TA, or even find time to meet because they have 400 other kids too. It's just really hard to get questions asked and then, sometimes you're tutor doesn't even know.

There were so many students competing for the professor's attention that it was difficult to interact or even ask questions. Kevin indicated that unless the professor's office hours fit with his schedule, he had difficulty working with professors outside of class. Students coming from rural backgrounds may not have had the skills or knowledge of how to appropriately reach out to a professor for help. That was not a common issue in a small school and Erin and Tessa indicated that they were intimidated and preferred to just struggle in the class before they reached out to a professor.

Another contributing factor to this pattern seemed to be a student's initial connection to and performance in their academic major. It appeared that students' first

year academic performance was an important contributor to whether students felt like MU and their chosen major was a “good fit” or a “bad fit.” Students that were surprised at the academic rigor of college and lacked identification with their initial major were negatively influenced. Some students took longer to develop a sense of belonging as a result. Kevin noted,

My initial major here was in the Engineering school and after my first semester I kind of got into feeling that that wasn't a good fit...I just didn't feel like that was the right place for me. And yeah, I can't put my foot on it now, but that's why I left the Engineering school and I'm in [the College of Agriculture] now.

Half of the participants including Kevin, Alyssa, Tessa, and Erin changed their majors at least once and five of the eight participants explicitly indicated that their sense of belonging was directly affected by their poor performance in a class or classes directly related to their initial major.

Faculty members also had power to influence students' sense of belonging. Erin and Alyssa changed their initial majors in part because they were discouraged by faculty members. One professor told Erin she was probably not cut out for that major.

According to her,

The professor was not nice at all. I went in to talk to him about, you know, grades and how like I was struggling in his class and he was like ‘well you're probably going to fail. There's no way I can help you. You probably shouldn't be taking this course, you probably shouldn't be in this major' kind of thing. Kind of made me feel like I didn't belong at all. Yeah. Really wanted to quit and go somewhere else after that.

Erin changed her major to Animal Science and she was much happier with the professors she encountered on the Ag Campus. Alyssa had a vocal instructor in her Music major that made her feel uncomfortable. They would have voice lessons together and she was uncomfortable with him. She requested a different instructor from the department chair and her request was not granted. Alyssa felt very discouraged and eventually changed her major as well.

Cultural adjustments. Students that strongly identified with the culture of rural life seemed to have difficulty, or at least a resistance to, adjusting to the city and campus culture at MU. For instance, Erin, Wes, and Kevin felt connected to rural culture and rural fashions and noted examples of how they felt out of place at MU. Erin noted,

Sometimes I feel like I do really stupid stuff like, that wouldn't be considered stupid at home. Or like, for instance like, wearing, what I'm wearing now, with muck boots. Being completely covered in mud and going to the grocery store. That's totally normal from where I am, everybody's like that. Here, you've got that 5:30, everybody's getting off work and their in their nice suits and stuff and I'm over here in my muck boots covered in mud, getting all these weird looks. It's just like country mouse in a big city.

Like Erin, Wes was also connected to rural fashion. Wes continued to wear his cowboy boots in college even when they were not necessary for his college lifestyle. In fact, Wes found it helpful to identify potential friends at MU by recognizing those who dressed like him, with work shirts and work boots.

Kevin also felt like a fish out of water at times in the big city and mentioned several cultural aspects of MU's environment that he was not used to. For instance Kevin noted,

you go onto Main Campus and you see so many people who are a lot different, it's...kind of a culture shock. You see stuff that you're not as used to. Like joggers for one thing. That was kind of weird to me the first time I saw so many joggers.

These cultural adjustments, academic issues, support systems, and size differences between rural life and college life were representative of a specific pattern of rural life and college life intersection where a stronger identification with elements of rural life made it more difficult for students to develop a sense of belonging in their new college environment.

Pattern 3: Rural Identification with Both Positive and Negative Implications

Although the two patterns discussed above depict a very linear relationship between rural and college life, not every aspect of this contextual intersection was as straight-forward. In fact, many components of rural student experiences at MU were complex and layered. For instance, Tessa and others had many positive experiences at MU that mirrored aspects of their rural background. However, these same experiences could also have negative influences on a student's development of a sense of belonging at MU. Some areas where this pattern began to emerge include family, diversity, class size, and specific campus cultures.

Family issues. Many rural students mentioned having close relationships with their family, which became a characteristic of the rural life according to participants in

this study. This connection to rural life had positive and negative implications for students at MU. For the students who already had family members attending MU or as alumni of MU, this familiarity with the institution gave them an extra incentive to choose MU and some advance information about how to navigate the environment. On the other hand, a strong commitment to family meant that students often had an acute sense of homesickness when they were too far away to frequently drive home and visit their family. Kylie indicated,

if I want to go home for the weekend it's a lot harder because I want to try and plan to be there as long as I can. Since it's such a long drive back and forth. So I would say that's probably the most difficult thing or the thing that maybe stops me from just running home to see this and that. My sister is a freshman this year so I like to try and you know, go watch her volleyball games and things like that if I can. And so I would say yeah, it's really hard to be able to just run right home and do that and then run right back.

Both Tessa and Kylie mentioned how their commitment to family might have also been inhibiting their ability to make close connections to others on campus. Kylie said,

So maybe if they weren't and I wasn't so close to them, maybe I'd have stronger...I have strong connections with friends but I feel like maybe I wouldn't be as tied closely to my family if they weren't always a huge part of my life. Some people don't have great family backgrounds so they kind of start a new family when they come to college. I would say for me that it stayed pretty strong on both sides that I have my family and then I have my friends too. I'm really

close to my friends but I would say my family is probably who I would consult first if something huge came up maybe.

Kylie kept her family so close that she would often consult them before taking classes or making other choices while at college. Like several other student participants, Kylie wanted to keep her original support system in place, even with them several hours away.

Diversity. One common theme of rural students was that regardless of whether they strongly identified with rural life or not, most of them wanted to expand their horizons. However, because of their rural experiences, the size and scope of an institution like MU that provided opportunities for new horizons could be challenging. Aaron enjoyed having more opportunities academically and finding others with common interests. However, he was also not a fan of crowds and found it more difficult to have solitude at MU. Erin liked the new experiences she was having through her sorority such as philanthropy and leadership, however she had a difficult time living on Main Campus with few other rural students.

Although they claimed an interest in expanding their horizons, Erin and others also looked for others with a similar background to them. Wes noted, “that’s really nice. Finding those people in a large crowd that are similar to you.” Being at an institution the size of MU, there were other rural students, however there were fewer students similar to them than what they were used to growing up in a rural community.

Class size. Rural students who preferred the small classes and one-on-one attention in their rural schools had a difficult time in their large lecture classrooms. However, these same students felt they performed really well in their small classes. According to Tessa,

My English class my freshman year...ended up being my absolute favorite class. It was a super small class, there were only 21 of us, 22 of us I want to say. Super tiny...and the same with my math classes my freshman year. They're just, they were a lot smaller...With my math classes, I love recitations and I'm still like, best friends, texting people daily from students that I had in those classes two years ago. And it just seems crazy that we'd still be friends after all of that but I like the smaller classes I guess. They have been some of my favorite things academic-wise.

Like the other rural students in the study, Tessa had been used to a smaller classroom with more one-on-one attention from instructors. Therefore, Tessa purposefully chose to enroll in a small class every semester to offset her experiences in her large classes.

Ag Campus vs. Main Campus. With complex patterns of rural life and college life intersection, campus culture and context emerged as being particularly important for rural students. Student experience of the campuses was dependent on a particular individual's identification with rural life. Students who did not strongly associate with rural life preferred Main Campus, and those that did strongly identify with rural life benefitted from their experience on Ag Campus.

Unique cultures. Many agreed that each campus had its own culture. Jordan noted,

If you are living on the Main Campus versus the [Ag] campus, I think just the campuses themselves have different cultures and the different affiliations to which students are involved really shapes their sense of what being on campus means.

Erin and Kevin in particular had majors that were housed on the Ag Campus. These students took classes on both campuses and commuted between the two frequently. Their perspectives corroborated Jordan's opinion and told the story of two campuses with very different environments and cultures. Erin said,

I feel like it's very triggered towards, well at least [Ag] campus is of course triggered toward agriculture so there's tons of ag focus, ag kids. I feel like everybody has very similar mindsets because they all predominantly grew up in rural areas like me and so we all kind of have similar interests and mind-sets. You get over on Main Campus and I feel like it's a lot different. It's a little bit more diverse, a lot more different areas being studied over there. I feel like it's a little less welcoming as well. And a lot busier and crowded.

Kevin also shared his description of the two campuses. He indicated,

You can kind of tell, [Ag] campus people look more like where I'm from. People walking around in jeans, boots, they got their seed company hats on. It feels more like home for me. Versus Main Campus, it's more similar to what I'm used to. But I've spent a lot of time on Main Campus as well with classes I've had to take. With that whole Ag Campus more of a country, more of a rural feel, I guess I feel more like people are more hardworking here just in general. Just from what I'm used to. I'm thinking about farm kids. We work hard, we work out in the fields with our dads. We are all on the football team because it's not that big of a school. But you go onto Main Campus and you see so many people who are a lot different, it's....kind of a culture shock. You see stuff that you're not as used to.

It seemed that Ag Campus was viewed more as the “rural” campus for farm kids and small-town students who were interested in agriculture. Main Campus was deemed more cosmopolitan, with more options, more students, and a more diverse and urbane atmosphere. The unique nature of each campus meant that students either felt like they fit with that culture, or they did not fit on that specific campus. Students identified themselves with either the rural-focused Ag Campus culture or the cosmopolitan Main Campus and felt less comfortable on the campus they did not identify with.

More integration needed. One interesting finding was how both administrators and rural students mentioned how there needed to be more integration between the two campuses. Chris made the comment that,

Every time I’ve been out on [Ag] campus in general, it seems to be a nice gathering space for many of our rural students. Now I think that is both a strength and a weakness because I think that [Ag] campus is a great supportive environment but I think we have these stereotypes about what happens on Main and what happens on [Ag Campus] and oftentimes we don’t do a great job of trying to integrate the two.

Chris felt it was important that the two campuses have more cross-pollination and integration that would ease the stereotypes a bit and allow Main Campus students to be comfortable on Ag Campus and vice versa. Kevin also commented on his experience with Ag and Main Campus integration. He said,

It’s kind of interesting with the whole split campuses thing. You don’t get as much of the mix and mingle between people from [Ag] and Main. People go back and forth but this is more of the Ag Campus and you’re going to have more

of the rural students going here as opposed to the Main Campus so they might not interact as much with people on Main.

When asked, Kevin thought that the university had fostered a supportive environment for rural students on Ag Campus. He also felt that, while on Main Campus, nothing “really smacks you in the face that, ‘Oh they don’t like people from rural communities,’” university leaders have not really addressed rural students on Main Campus. On Main Campus, there were fewer rural students and so they “kind of just get mixed into the crowd.”

Rural students on Main Campus are not utilizing Ag Campus resources. Erin spent a lot of time on the Ag Campus and pointed out that the College of Agriculture was actually addressing rural issues through ag-related student groups. Most students who were unaware of rural-related resources spent most, if not all, of their time on Main Campus and had little familiarity with the Ag Campus. Those that spent more time on Ag Campus (Erin and Kevin primarily), thought that all elements of its organization and the environment in general were more attuned to the needs of rural students than Main Campus was. Half of the rural student participants did not even mention Ag Campus at all in their interviews. These students all had majors housed on Main Campus and most of them highly identified with city life versus rural life (Aaron, Ian, Alyssa), with the exception of Wes. Kylie, although a Main Campus student, did mention Ag Campus, but really only as an afterthought. Kylie said,

I know [Ag] campus is a lot different. [Ag] campus is a lot more of the rural students I would say. So it’s kind of a whole different world over there so maybe

it's just weird for me because I'm on Main Campus a lot. Maybe that's some of it.

Main Campus students did not seem to know as much about the resources on Ag Campus as those students with Ag Campus majors. In fact, many of these rural students were not interested in Ag Campus because they were more happy living and learning on the bigger Main Campus. According to Kylie,

It's almost like a different little community over there so if you love a rural area and you still want to come here for awesome opportunities but you want to be continue to have that rural atmosphere, I mean you can think [Ag] campus has a lot to do with that. I think just because [Ag] campus has more of the agricultural majors so that's some of why. I mean it's just like that over there. Whereas for me, I'm not interested in that so that's obviously why I am over here. I mean I still could have lived on [Ag] campus but I didn't really want to. I still wanted the bigger city aspect I guess.

Campus preference. The students that did spend more time on Ag Campus, did so because they preferred the community and lifestyle that was afforded them on that campus. Erin lived on Main Campus her freshman year and chose not to engage much in that campus. She stated,

I don't spend as much time on Main anymore but I did live over there for a year and my room was my favorite place because that was the quietest, non-crazy place I could find on Main Campus. I didn't really like going out unless it was to go running. And I didn't even run on campus because it was too congested, too many people.

A pattern seemed to emerge in the analysis that the students who generally embraced the urbane and diverse lifestyle at MU and the city beyond, were students who studied and spent much of their time on Main Campus such as Aaron, Ian, and Alyssa. These participants did not mention Ag Campus at all and seemed to really enjoy the Main Campus environment. Two of the participants who indicated that they were having a harder time making friends initially, both lived on Main Campus their freshman year and changed their major to those housed on Ag Campus and felt much more comfortable with that environment.

Section 3: Replicating Aspects of Rural Life at MU

The first section of this chapter outlined rural life identity according to the rural student participants. The second section highlighted the three emergent patterns of rural and college life intersection as they pertained to sense of belonging. This section addresses pattern two specifically and describes aspects of MU's environment that acted to replicate rural life for students who were strongly connected to their rural identity and were more likely to develop a sense of belonging at MU when the college environment reflected aspects of their rural upbringing. This section relates to how rural students wanted more of a rural environment at MU. In examining MU's environment, I first assess the rural footprint at MU, then describe how MU is broken down into smaller components for students to experience. I then discuss the importance of faculty and staff for rural students and conclude the section with a look at how MU athletics pertains to rural students' sense of belonging.

Assessing the Rural Footprint at MU

One theme that emerged after triangulation analysis was the fact that according to the student participants, rural students seemed to make up a large percentage of the enrolled students at MU. Especially with the land-grant mission at MU, according to administrator Jordan, it was a priority to focus on the needs of rural students because, “Rural students comprise such a large percentage of our population...” Several students agreed. According to Wes,

A lot of people around here are from the rural areas. Well there’s a lot of people from a lot of different areas, but there’s a lot of people also from rural areas and so [MU leaders] know what it’s like just to have to try and make that transition as well.

The list of sections below highlight several components of MU’s environment that either directly or indirectly cater to the needs of rural students.

Rural feeling spaces. Many students appreciated the rural-feeling spaces, particularly on Ag Campus. Kevin described,

The green spaces obviously growing up on a farm, you know, with a grove of trees and all the crops and a big lawn, you’re used to green. And I will say Ag Campus is superior to Main Campus in that respect. There’s a lot more green out here. Where you’re at, your main cluster of buildings like on Main, that, you know, there’s just mostly concrete there and that doesn’t, I don’t know, it just doesn’t feel the same.

According to Wes, since many rural students attended MU, the campus had more of a rural feel overall. He indicated,

I've been around the university a lot of my life and I know a lot of people who go here and so that just kind of contributes to the fact that it's very rural and has a very rural feel to it and just coming here, knowing a lot of people who come here more since they're similar in age to me kind of has just backed that up as well. Some students felt that as a by-product of so many rural students coming to MU, there was even a rural feel to the city beyond campus. Especially once participants became more familiar with the city, they recognized some of its similarities to their home towns. Kevin thought some neighborhoods of the city were almost interchangeable with parts of some smaller towns he had been in. He noted the way that people in the community acted, the fact that people held doors for each other and were polite to each other contributed to a rural feel to the community.

Shared social norms. Wes agreed with Kevin and felt that there were many people in that city from rural areas for whatever reason. Wes stated, [The city MU is located in is] a city but it's still a rural community I'd say so yes, like there's a lot of people from rural communities and I'd say that's just the biggest thing is that it's a lot of small town people come together in like a bigger city but it still has that rural feel to it as well.

Therefore, a lot of the same values and the sense of community that were important in a rural town, were also present in that particular city, which made it feel more like an extension of his small town.

Students and administrators alike had their opinions on the general values that rural students brought to MU. Both administrators and Erin noted that there was a particular loyalty to the institution for in-state students. Erin shared,

I feel like most of the people are from [this state]. I feel like a lot of [this state's] kids, we grow up in [this state] and go to school in [this state] and we go back.

We don't really leave [this state] as much. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. What do kids share? Our roots, our [state] roots.

In addition, administrator Chris added that the geographical location of MU and its surrounding rural areas contributed to the types of values and norms that pervaded the campus. Chris noted,

I know a little bit about the lifestyle and the expectations about some of our rural students because they are coming from farms and ranches and oftentimes in small schools where the demands on them were great because they had to be in everything to help make it go, is they're very hard workers. Sincere, authentic, genuine. Those are the good Midwest values, those are some of the words I hear and I think I've experienced when I think about our rural students, especially the hard-working, kind of a hard work ethic that they bring with them.

Ian used similar words including "Midwestern" to describe his values. Ian also described these values as being common across the student body at MU in general. So the general theme was that since there were many rural students on campus, their values pervaded the aggregate environment and their social norms were consistent with the overall campus culture.

Rural students fitting multiple demographics. These commonalities with the general student population was possibly one reason why MU did not have any resources or supports specific to rural students. Jordan indicated, "I don't know that we specifically target rural students. I think there's a difference there. And I think it's because some of

the other demographics that we rely on to target our students, rural students often fall into those.” The idea was that rural student status in itself was not a targetable demographic because the term “rural” could mean a lot of things to different people. However, rural students did fit into many of the demographics supported by MU’s resources, such as first-generation status and low-income status. This did not feel quite right to Kylie who noted,

I would say maybe it’s kind of overlooked, the leaders just assume that ‘Yeah, you’re from [this state] so this should be like home to you, it should be [more] the same or similar than [for] someone from out of state or out of the country, which obviously it would be a much bigger transition for them.’ I would say maybe rural students get generalized with everyone else for things.

While rural students shared many social norms with the larger campus community and could fit into different demographics already being served, at least some rural students could still benefit from rural-specific resources.

Breaking MU into “Smaller Pieces”

One of the most prominent themes pertaining to rural students experiencing the environment at MU was their perception of its size and scale. When students first got to campus, most of them were overwhelmed by the size and number of people there. Based on administrator reports and rural student comments, the key for students to cope with the environment and develop a sense of belonging was to make their MU environment more like their rural hometown and break down the large environment into smaller, more comprehensible pieces. Administrators claimed that breaking MU down into sub-communities was a major goal for the institution. MU leaders provided information

about multiple layers of resources dedicated to that goal. Students also commented about how they made connections and what they needed from campus to develop a sub-culture for themselves.

“Double perception.” Most students noted that once they had experienced it, MU did not seem as big as it did initially. Aaron had a theory for this, which he called “double perception.” He noted,

If I just walked across campus right now, I wouldn't think ‘oh, there are tens of thousands of students here.’ You don't get that impression I don't think. I mean really I can't even imagine how there are that many students actively participating on this campus. So it's kind of like double perception there I guess. Like comparing it to the old [rural] environment, it seems huge. But comparing it to what it actually is, it seems surprisingly small, surprisingly communal.

Tessa added that it seemed “homier” than she had expected. This supported the idea that actual size was not as important to rural students feeling comfortable, as was their perception of the size. Therefore, by becoming more familiar with the environment and building a close-knit support system, rural students were perceiving the large university as smaller and more comfortable for them.

Creating a culture of community. According to students and staff alike, the major goal for rural students experiencing MU's environment was to find their own sense of community. Administrators even touched on that when describing the campus culture at MU, saying that students in general organize and coalesce themselves into sub-communities. It was important for Aaron, Alyssa, Wes, Tessa, Ian, Kevin, Kylie, and Erin to feel a sense of belonging through acceptance into a smaller group. Aaron shared

about his own experience of finding a close bond with other students in his major. He explained,

Well it's a good example of how making yourself a part of smaller communities on campus can just help you be more comfortable with people you are around I suppose. That's really something I identify as being important especially to rural students but also to everyone, is just identifying sub-communities that you can involve yourself with...So if sense of community comes from anywhere in particular, it comes from that. The strongest contributions are from the smallest groups I would say in terms of building a sense of belonging.

So for students in general, it was important to find a sub-community, a small group to belong to and create a culture of community.

Replacing rural supports. While the idea of finding a community of one's own was relatively universal to the general population of students, rural students in particular needed to build these communities. It seemed like the key to belonging for most of the rural students was creating close interpersonal connections. Most of the student participants were either consciously or sub-consciously attempting to rebuild and replace the close connections that they experienced in their rural hometowns.

All participants found something to connect to and use to build deep relationships at MU. Aaron connected with his Physics/Computer Science major cohort and explained,

I think it's really the people. I mean it's kind of the fact that you're with these people to work, but they're also your best friends from college and they're you know, you can just the fact that you can be around each other for a three hour binge and not be murderous is you know, then that's a place where you belong.

The other rural student participants had their own unique connections to MU that replaced their rural supports. Wes had his new fraternity, Kevin and Kylie had their respective Christian groups, Ian had the Intercultural Office peer mentor and Sci-Fi club, Erin found a community through her Ag Campus sorority, Alyssa had both her scholarship program and Main Campus sorority, and Tessa had a learning community.

Figure 5.3 below does not represent every piece of MU's environment. It depicts components of MU that rural student participants particularly connected to and utilized in order to replace their rural supports. The center of the pie represents MU as a whole and the eleven sections each signify a specific piece of MU's environment that contributed to rural students' sense of belonging. Participant names are suspended above the pie and linked to the sections that each student indicated was beneficial to that individual's development of a sense of belonging. Some students are linked to multiple sections (i.e. Kevin, Ian, and Tessa) and some developed a particularly strong connection with a single element of MU's environment (i.e. Aaron and Wes). Figure 5.3 illustrates the idea that MU could be broken down into pieces and when this was the case, students found one or more of those pieces to connect to, which enabled them to replace their rural supports to some degree.

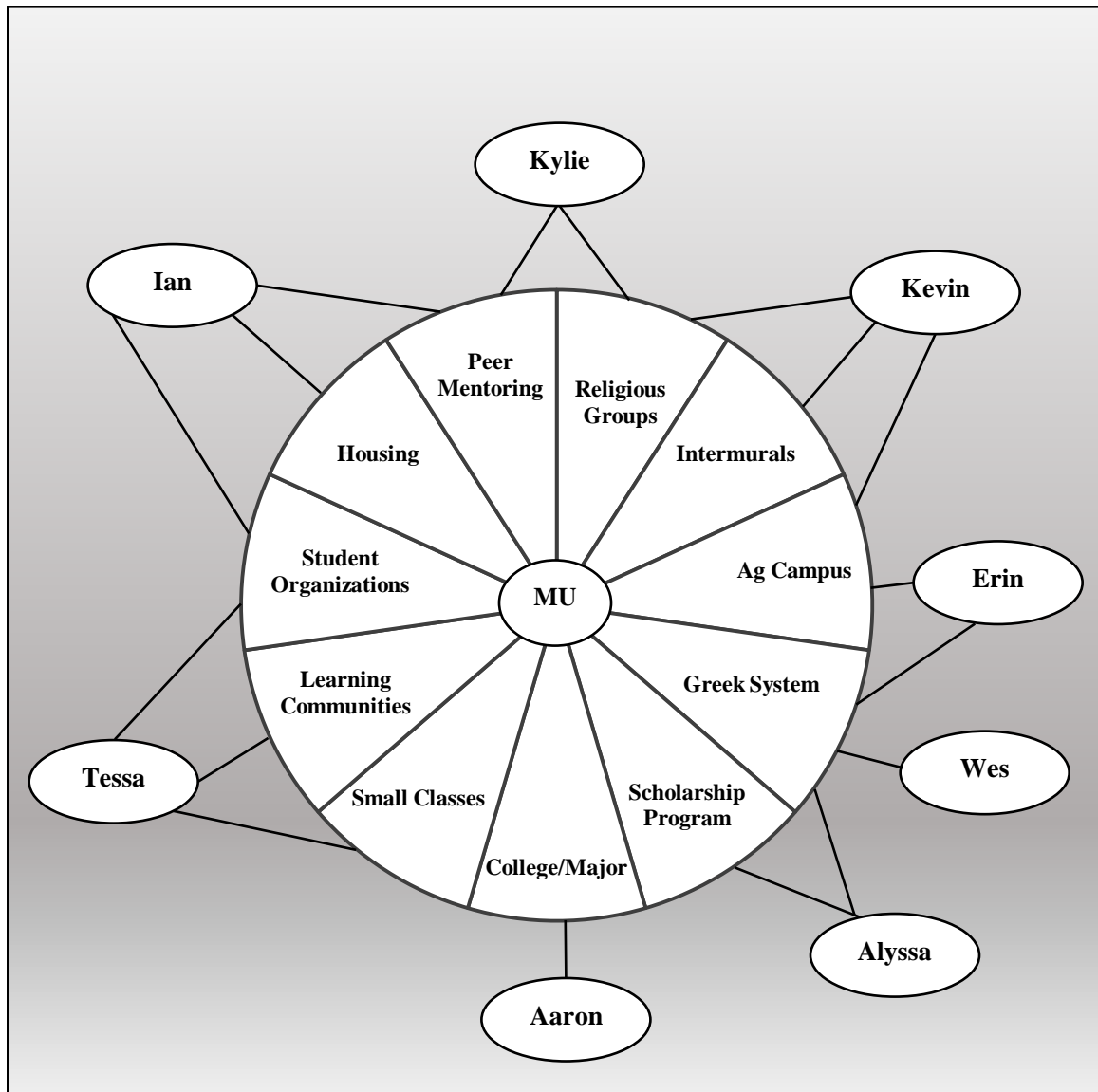


Figure 5.3. Breaking MU into smaller pieces.

Retention efforts. Retention efforts through scholarship programs, learning communities, the Intercultural Office, and other diversity initiatives helped students feel connected to others at MU. Specific retention efforts such as peer-mentoring had positive effects on students' sense of belonging. The Intercultural Office reached out to Ian and provided him with a peer mentor that he continued to meet with even after the timeframe of the program was over. Ian described his experience,

I continued those meetings all the way through until she graduated last year. Not because I was obligated to in any way but simply because she was a person that really helped me quite a bit and also, I identified, I felt you know, I just kind of felt you know that we were very similar and kind of had similar backgrounds and she was a person who I could, you know talk to about things that affected me in terms of [MU].

He connected to the peer mentor in part because their backgrounds were similar and this helped normalize his experiences at MU. Kylie also had a peer mentor in her college-sponsored freshman orientation class. Their small-group met and discussed their strengths and Kylie was so taken with the process that she applied and became a strengths coach herself in a subsequent semester. As a strengths coach, Kylie felt very connected to her college, which corroborated with the MU administrators' report that peer mentors themselves benefitted most from the process. Kylie said, "I feel like being a strengths coach connected me closer maybe to the college...When I was a strengths coach it was a lot more like working closely with the university." The act of mentoring and serving the institution built a level of investment and connection to the college or department that helped the mentor develop a sense of belonging as well.

Decentralization, duplication, and communication of resources. While rural students benefitted from retention efforts and opportunities at MU, participants indicated that they were often overwhelmed by the number and organization of resources. There were some barriers to breaking down MU for students in an effective manner.

"Highly decentralized." The administrator Jordan mentioned that MU was a "highly decentralized" institution and as a large university made up of numerous

colleges, departments, and other units, it became difficult to monitor all of the resources offered and student participation. There seemed to be three issues that stemmed from decentralization. One, retention efforts were being duplicated by multiple units across various colleges and entities. Two, there was disparity in resources across colleges so some students had access to many duplicated resources while students in another college may not have access to any. Three, there were so many resources that as a university, it was difficult to communicate to students exactly which ones to use when and where they were located. According to Jordan,

I think we have lots of opportunities for students to get involved but it's difficult to communicate to students at a point and time. When and how to get involved. Even the fact that students don't have a common email address for instance, or that we don't have mechanisms for communities to communicate beyond emails which they don't ever open. Is an issue. So I think what we do have is we have lots of opportunities, the barrier is that students often don't know how to find those opportunities to take advantage. And I think that's because we're a highly decentralized campus. We still have a lot of autonomy in the colleges and so each college wants to sort of make its own stamp, which means that developing university-wide initiatives is very difficult.

Rural students concurred with Jordan and from Wes's perspective as a new transfer to MU, it was hard to find the resources he needed. Wes stated one of his difficulties was, "Just finding the different people that you need to get in contact with to make everything work...Again with the resources, just knowing when and where to get those, who to ask for help basically, is the main thing."

Difficulty communicating to students. Regarding the communication barrier, Wes concurred that often students did not read their emails, at least those from the university. He said,

I'm probably one of the few students who actually does check their email a lot. I feel like most people don't really do that. Students anyways. Plus it's just another thing that you have to keep up on...it's harder to remember, 'Oh I have to check my email for all this other stuff and just have to go on the internet for all this other stuff.' That's not something that people my age anyway, really want to do. They want to do that for more fun things.

MU had been attempting to mitigate some of the duplication issues, however without the ability to communicate to students, it was difficult for them to successfully inform students on how to best approach using resources.

The importance of family. For many rural students, family was a crucial aspect of their support system. Three of the eight students (Kylie, Kevin, and Erin) had older siblings that attended MU when they arrived on campus. All three of them were introduced to their primary outlet for socialization through their older sibling. Erin's older sister was a member of the sorority that Erin eventually joined with her sister's encouragement. Kevin's older sister encouraged him to join the Christian group where he eventually became president, and Kylie's older brother introduced her to the Christian group that she subsequently joined. Kylie also continued to lean heavily on her family for support. She indicated,

Just my family's a huge part of my life. They support me in all of my decisions and before I go through with any big decisions, I would say I always consult them and I talk to at least one of them every day.

Tessa's comments about finding a new "family" at college were especially salient and seemed to capture the need that many rural students had to replace their rural supports. Tessa indicated that she was "socially awkward" and an introvert. Fortunately for her, she put herself in positions to be able to overcome her social fears and make some deep connections. Tessa described what her learning community did for her,

So it did make me feel like I belonged a lot more because our floor did start to feel like more of a family and it just made me feel a lot more comfortable because it didn't feel like I was just living with strangers that I didn't know and it might have made the experience of transitioning a little bit easier not having to worry about social stress and awkwardness on top of academics...I got to kind of continue to have that close-knit community and relationship with people because I got to know 50 plus people on a personal level, if not more. Because we were paired with one of the other floors of guys and so I got to get to know all of these people on the same somewhat family level that I was used to back home.

Tessa's experience with her learning community was especially beneficial for her because many of the other students in that group were also from small towns, which she was not expecting. As her college life evolved, Tessa met some new friends through commuting to campus and currently lived with several of them. She described their relationship as follows, "These people are like my family, like a second family. Like my home away from home honestly." It was important for Tessa to mention how close they

were. The closeness and support helped her feel like she had replaced her rural support system. She indicated,

I think it relates in the sense that I grew up in a really close knit, everybody knows everybody community with there not being that many people. And a lot of these people did too. I mean the majority of us met here but all of those girls were from teeny tiny areas...I appreciate the fact that I came from a small area and I can carry those values through college still and I had a super close knit group of friends and family and I still have that.

Tessa also found a replacement “family” through work, and was particularly interested in choosing an environment where she could maximize the depth of her relationships there. She did not want to be “a stranger at work.”

Other students looked for deep relationships at MU as well, which in some cases actually inhibited the amount of friendships or connections these students had. Erin found a best friend with a rural background and “clung” to that person as a support she could relate to her freshman year. Aaron found his academic group and decided to keep his connections close and focus most of his attention on connecting to others in his major. Kevin connected deeply with his freshman roommate but found himself the “odd man out” on his floor otherwise. He explained,

I roomed with a guy that I knew growing up in high school. He was from a different town but we went to the same youth group, went to the same church so I had him as a really good friend and that was about it in terms of really good friends. But I got to meet a few other people and I’m still friends with those guys but I kind of thought I’d get more friendships like that one.

Kevin finally found more deep relationships when he got more involved in the Christian group, but for a while he had a hard time replacing his rural support system.

Reaching out at MU. It was clear that for rural students, finding deep connections to people and building sub-communities to replace the close connections they had in their rural background was an important factor to their development of a sense of belonging. At MU, there were so many things to connect to that if rural students knew how to reach out, they would likely find something they could feel they belonged to. Some rural students had different approaches to reaching out and making these connections. As noted earlier, Tessa found herself in positions where she was surrounded by others with similar interests in a learning community. Alyssa indicated that she was outgoing and had no problem making initial contact with people and developing friendships. Kevin used football to break the ice with others, Wes looked for other rural students with work boots, and Ian felt that his attitude had everything to do with his ability to reach out and make connections. He explained,

The people. That was the one thing that was pretty easy to transition to I think. I've always loved talking to people. I've always loved crowds and things like that so, while I wasn't used to being around tons of people all the time and being in such close proximity to hundreds of people, I definitely got used to it pretty quickly and I would say that I enjoy it quite a bit. And while I know a lot of people who come from more rural areas don't like that, that's something that I kind of thrived in was all the people. It was something that I had never really got to experience and I guess it was something that I didn't know that I would enjoy until it happened. Being around so many people.

For Ian, being in the crowds came easily for him and appeared to be something he had desired even before he knew what being in crowds felt like.

Reaching out and making connections was not as easy for everyone as it was for Ian. Several of the students growing up in rural areas reported being in the same group of people their entire lives with no practice meeting new people. Wes described his situation as,

Growing up in a smaller town, I guess I wasn't as used to having to reach out to different people. I was just kind of just used to 'these are your classmates, these are the people you are going to hang out with for the next however many years.' But here you have that option to seek out different people and you kind of just figure out where you fit best there. Just try to relate as best as possible.

So for some rural students like Erin, Kevin, and Tessa, reaching out and making connections did not come as naturally. This is an important idea to consider because rural students may need those close connections to feel like they belong, even more than non-rural students. The fact that rural students particularly need to replace their support systems and may have fewer tools to do so is an important implication to discuss in the next chapter.

Importance of Faculty/Staff

One important aspect of rural students' finding ways to relate their rural life identity and their belonging at MU had to do with their interactions with faculty members and staff members. Coming from a rural place where education was generally more laid back and personalized, students generally connected to their teachers. Ian reported that there were fewer supports in rural high schools but the supports were more accessible to

students in the form of one-on-one attention from a teacher or a single guidance counselor with few students to assist. This educational context could be very different at MU, with many resources and opportunities to navigate and less communication from the institution about which supports to utilize and when. Therefore students realized that it was important for them to connect with their professors and advisors and rebuild some of the continuity they had with their rural educators.

Academic supports. In order to bridge the academic gap between rural high school and expectations at a large university, new academic supports for rural students needed to be developed and relatively quickly. The rural student participants generally thought of faculty members as caring and motivated to help students, although they felt that in some cases the efforts of faculty members felt forced or insincere. Erin reflected that faculty members seemed to have too many students to effectively care about them all,

I don't know if people necessarily care that I'm here. Everybody seems like it, like professors and stuff, but they see so many students every day and I feel like they can't always care that much about everybody...I feel like most of the time they're just kind of faking it. They don't really know me, so how do they want me to achieve?

Either the faculty member had too many students to credibly get to know an individual, or this person was more interested in research and seemed distracted teaching. Both Aaron and Kevin mentioned having professors that would rather be doing research than teaching undergraduate students.

Academic advising. Academic advisors were also a key element to rural student success and students reported that advisors were generally more accessible than some of their professors. Aaron found advisors less helpful because they did not know much about his major, however most students appreciated the assistance that advisors provided in helping them navigate their academics. Kevin reported that once he switched his major, he recognized the importance of working with his advisor. He indicated,

I went in to my advisor, we had a meeting for about a half hour and set everything out pretty quickly. We were able to get things set for this semester and then after the first week of classes I went back in there to talk with her about how classes were going. Since I'm a junior I kind of wanted to talk about grad school, minors and stuff like that. So I've gotten more on top of that. And I feel that advisor kind of feeds off that. In terms of you know, she's able to instead of plugging away trying to figure out something for me, she's able to more assist me in decisions...it's a better advising situation.

Perhaps this relationship was something akin to what students experienced with rural guidance counselors. This was not addressed in the interviews and may need to be addressed in a follow-up study.

Unified by Athletics

One theme that emerged almost unanimously as an important environmental factor for rural students replicating their rural environment and developing a sense of belonging at MU was their identity through MU athletics. Almost every participant including the administrators mentioned a unifying element to MU's environment that centered around athletics, and in most cases, football specifically. According to Jordan,

We have football games, which I think are certainly one of the ways that our students' identities are different from some of the other institutions...Sports and athletics are something that our students bond with and identify with. Not all students, but many of them do. And it's one of the reasons that many of them say that they come here.

It seemed that MU's leaders consciously drew upon student interest to help build the football team and other athletic teams into something that students could identify with. Chris noted,

Football I think is a big piece of the campus culture and another opportunity to bring large groups of students together regardless of age. I wanted to mention that as one other aspect of bringing the student population together...I think athletics is one of those things that does help bring, unites students. I think the athletic department does a nice job of trying to give them an identity within those events...I think they do a nice job of bringing in, coalescing those students who are really interested in those activities.

For some rural students, MU athletics were highly congruent with their rural experiences. Tessa indicated that in her town, everyone participated in sports and so everyone was invested and would attend games to cheer on the home team. She attributed her town's culture to being rural-specific because youth had fewer options for Friday night in her small town. Tessa stated,

In a larger community, not everybody's going to go to a football game. And so I feel like that has definitely carried over from a rural area. It's not even a question to go to a football game, you just go. And maybe kids in [big cities] are like 'who

cares about football?’ but I know we’re all raised in a super small area and sports were such a big part of our lives because smaller schools, everybody had to compete or you wouldn’t have a team...So I feel like the sports games weren’t even a question and that’s how a lot of us spend a lot of our time and hang out. I didn’t even question it when I bought my tickets and I don’t think they did either. I know a lot of kids that don’t have tickets and I guess thinking about it now, a lot of my friends that don’t have tickets aren’t from rural areas. I would say just because sports might not have been as big a part of their life as a rural area kid would experience.

Kevin also had a personal experience with football in a rural high school and loved attending MU athletic events in general. He felt it helped him relate to other students. In fact, he even had some classes at MU with people he played football against in high school and admitted that was “kind of neat.”

Ian did not really care for football, but he could not ignore the power of the identity that MU athletics had over most students at the university. He recognized the overall impact that athletics had on students, whether or not they went to games.

According to Ian,

The campus culture here is pretty diverse I think but the most defining feature of campus culture is definitely centered around that stadium over there I think. Not football. I don’t mean that. I mean, that idea identity of that. A lot of people here don’t like the football team that much. They don’t care. I love keeping up with [MU] football, but I don’t go to too many games, I don’t really watch too many games either. But the identity of being a [part of this university] whether

that means you follow sports, or that means that you are a person who participates in other organizations here, it's just the culture really stems around that identity of 'You are a [part of this]. You are a member of Midwestern University.'

So whether MU leaders made a conscious effort to tap into student identity or it was just a coincidence, there was no denying that students in general and rural students specifically were including MU athletics as a unifying element contributing to their identity formation and development of a sense of belonging.

Section 4: Rural Students Expanding Horizons at MU

Section three reflected pattern two of the rural life/college life intersection and outlined aspects of MU's environment that helped rural students who wanted more of their rural environment at MU develop a sense of belonging. This section will focus on patterns one and three and highlight aspects of MU's environment that were congruent for students who wanted more opportunities at MU than what their rural environment offered them. One major theme that emerged was the idea that rural students came to MU to expand their horizons after their isolated and insulated rural lives in small communities. Rural student belonging was tied to an individual's ability to adapt and adjust to the new environment and grow as individuals. Rural students wanted to belong in an environment that allowed them to do more and know more than they did in their rural environment. Although this seems like a straightforward idea, it was actually layered and complex because different participants had different expectations for how their horizons were actually expanded. I will discuss how students perceived their expectations of college, describe how diversity facilitated and challenged rural students in

their sense of belonging, look at how rural students participated in new opportunities at MU, and reflect on the fluidity of belonging.

“Bigger and Better”

Some rural students seemed to minimize their accomplishments and the accomplishments of others in rural areas. There was a pervasive perception that coming to MU would allow them to do more. Alyssa said, “I feel like [there was] this small community and not a lot of people would go find bigger and better things in a way. They’re usually there forever.” Wes, although he identified with the rural life said, “I’d just grown up in that small town area and so I kind of wanted a bigger experience, different experience than what I’d grown up with being around all the same people.” Erin, who possibly identified with rural life the most and had one of the most difficult times transitioning to MU even said, “I really like all the different things that I’ve done with [my sorority] professional development-wise here on campus and trying to do more bigger and better things.” This idea that growing up in a small town limited one’s options was pretty consistent across participants and students were either hopeful or apprehensive about what to expect at a large university in a bigger city.

Diversity as Facilitator

Many students and administrators noted that rural students were stereotypically naïve to issues of diversity. The closed-off rural environment meant these students lived in a homogenous and conservative world and coming to MU would expose them to an environment with a diversity of perspectives that were unfamiliar to rural students, for better or worse. The administrators tended to believe that the diversity at MU was a facilitator for student growth. According to Pat,

the environment of diversity and engagement provides us such a cool chance not only for rural students, but they're definitely in that category of growth and understanding the human experience. And understanding all the different cool beautiful ways that people are different and how we can use that to shape who we are and how we impact the world. So I think it's a great chance for learning. And that's not only the rural students, but I think they have an opportunity to benefit from that for certain.

MU leaders supported diversity initiatives not only to provide marginalized minority students a safe, equitable, and accessible environment for learning, but also to provide the general student population with a rich experience, exposing them to multiple perspectives and worldviews.

Several rural students indicated their connection to the diverse population at MU. Alyssa, Ian, Kylie, and Aaron were excited to come to MU and get out of her hometown and experience the diversity. According to Ian,

Because of my being in the hometown and the way it was, lots of the same thing all the time, people were very same, wasn't a lot of diversity of cultures of opinions of races to be honest either, I was very eager to experience new things.

It was exciting for Ian to get out of his hometown and come experience the crowds at MU. Tessa started out relatively conservative coming from her rural background, but the environment at MU helped open her eyes and she began to change her views. She said,

I have met a lot more people that I wouldn't have thought in high school that I would be friends with now just because I was raised republican. My roommate is gay and I love him to death, but in high school that wasn't accepted whatsoever.

And now my eyes are just a lot more open than they used to be I think, in perspective to a lot of things.

Tessa believed that the environment at MU presented her with new ideas, new perspectives, and new people that challenged her previously held beliefs. These challenges helped Tessa realize the world was bigger than what she had experienced back home in her rural hometown. Tessa's transformation was not the only one after coming to MU. Alyssa and Kylie both noted how they had changed their views after being exposed to the diverse environment.

In addition to appreciating how the diverse population helped him grow, Ian also appreciated the inclusive nature of campus culture at MU. As a Hispanic first-generation student from a low-income family, Ian was impressed with the lack of discrimination he felt as a minority student. He noted,

I've never felt alienated in terms of my race. I've never felt alienated in terms of my economic status because it is a pretty diverse campus. Obviously it's pretty much the majority White but for a state that has a huge majority of White people, there is a pretty diverse number of races here especially with a very high foreign exchange student population. So I've never felt like I don't belong in that way.

Ian's experience was that MU's diversity was a facilitator both for his growth and his development of sense of belonging.

Diversity as Challenge

Not all students wanted to experience diverse student perspectives in the same way. Some students were more comfortable finding supports in other rural students because they highly identified with their rural identity and had a harder time adjusting to

non-rural individuals. Kylie appreciated her relationships with other rural students in her Christian group. Kevin preferred being on Ag Campus where people were more like him. Erin also preferred Ag Campus and indicated, "I feel like everybody has very similar mindsets because they all predominantly grew up in rural areas like me and so we all kind of have similar interests and mind-sets." She also felt ostracized on Main Campus her first semester because non-rural students did not understand her. She explained why she appreciated her best friend with a rural-background. She said,

It relates because we're both from rural backgrounds. It just reminds me that even though when I thought I was the only rural kid there on city, she was there too and she helped me realize that my rural roots weren't something to be ashamed of.

Because a lot of the city kids were like 'oh you touched a chicken before? That's weird, why would you do that?' and stuff like that. She was like 'oh yeah, I do that stuff too.' So she made me feel not as ashamed of being from a rural area.

Therefore for Erin, connecting to someone familiar who could normalize her rural experiences was more important than embracing the diverse perspectives that some of the non-rural students had. So while most agreed that the diverse population and environment at MU had long-term benefits for students, it was also important for rural students to be able to connect to others with similar backgrounds. This goal was evidenced in the retention programming for scholarship programs, learning communities, and the experiences of students like Erin and Kevin.

Multiple Activities at MU

Overall, many rural students and administrators agreed that rural student experience included the opportunity to be involved in many extra-curricular activities in

high school because participation was required in order to have a team. However, what this meant for students tended to vary. Some students appreciated that experience but did not seem to have any long-lasting affects from it in college, and some tended to over-involve themselves as a byproduct of their previous rural experience. According to Aaron, students were limited in rural high schools so they went overboard with involvement in college. He noted,

A definite potential issue that I've seen in other students from my high school, is that they take on way too many extra-curricular responsibilities. I don't know to what extent that's a problem in the general population, but it strikes me as something that maybe stems from the fact that you really just get to choose between two sports and band every season like in a small high school. So you know you're in all these clubs and stuff and then they just end up dropping out of everything or getting burnt out.

On the other hand, students appreciated the multiple activities and wanted to continue that practice in college. Alyssa liked being social and involved and compared herself to the other students in her scholarship program and felt like she always needed to step it up. She explained,

Especially because a lot of the other students in [my scholarship program] are also from rural backgrounds or they come from [different] ethnicities and stuff like that. I just felt like they were doing so many bigger things than I was so I was feeling like I was constantly behind...I felt like I needed to catch up and be a part of other things. And then I would be a part of too many things and I wouldn't be

able to put as much time to every single one of them. And I would just like, not fail, but I would have to get rid of a couple of those.

While Alyssa's situation seemed consistent with the theory of over-involvement, hers was actually the most extreme example of students becoming overinvolved to the point where they had to rein it in. Ian was involved with several things at once and decided to prioritize, Tessa did as well. However, most of the students seemed pretty well-adjusted with the amount of activities that they were involved in. On average, students were highly involved and engaged in around two activities.

Belonging via Expanded Horizons

Different students reacted in different ways to the diverse array of clubs, people, and perspectives on display at MU. Some embraced it all, others were more selective of what they chose to embrace, and others chose to select what was more familiar. Alyssa felt she really expanded her horizons and opened her eyes as a result of her time at MU. She began to recognize how each student's individual experience represented an evolution and so her perceptions and sense of belonging was always in flux. She summed up her growth as follows,

We're all constantly growing and developing so it's like you're going to at some point feel like you [are] growing out of certain areas and then maybe you haven't developed up to par in other areas. Where you belong in one stage, but you belong in another.

Alyssa seemed to understand that as a student at MU, her horizons were always expanding and changing her. She may feel like she belonged in one place at one time,

but then changed and felt a sense of belonging somewhere else. For her, belonging was a moving target depending on her experiences and growth.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented findings in four sections as they pertained to rural student belonging and the patterns of intersection between rural life identity and college life.

Section 1: Rural Identity and College Experience

Section 1 described a rural life identity that emerged through analysis of rural student responses. Rural life was isolated and focused on agriculture. There was a certain homogenous rural culture that permeated these areas that included conservative views, Christian religion, Midwestern values, specific fashions, and an emphasis on nature. Interpersonal interactions were close and personal, as was the educational environment. While the rural environment seemed consistent across the case, students reacted to it uniquely and it influenced their experience at MU in a variety of ways.

Section 2: Patterns of Rural Life/College Life Intersection

Section 2 presented the three emergent patterns of intersection between college experience and rural life. Pattern 1 indicated that some rural students felt alienated by their rural upbringing and these students embraced the novel and expansive elements of MU's environment. Pattern 2 described students that strongly identified with aspects of their rural life and subsequently were challenged by the novel and expansive element of MU's environment. Pattern 3 embodied students who identified with rural life and experienced both positive and negative implications for their development of sense of belonging at MU.

Section 3: Replicating Aspects of Rural Life at MU

Section 3 presented findings that pertained to the second pattern of rural life/college life intersection and highlighted elements of MU that helped students who strongly identified with their rural background become acclimated to and develop a sense of belonging at MU. Students indicated that aspects of MU felt rural due to the location, campus design, and number of rural students attending. Breaking down the large institution and replacing rural supports was challenging for some, however there were many opportunities to do so at MU. Faculty and staff member interactions were crucial to student belonging, and MU athletics was an aspect that strongly unified the entire student body, including rural students.

Section 4: Rural Students Expanding Horizons at MU

The chapter concluded with a discussion of rural students expanding their horizons at MU because they were looking for more than what their rural life could offer them. This section related to patterns 1 and 3 and focused on challenges and benefits to a novel and expansive environment at MU. Students perceived their accomplishments at MU as “bigger and better” and expanded their perspectives as a result of the diverse population and opportunities that MU provided. Some students were challenged by some elements of the diverse campus population and preferred to surround themselves with similarly rural individuals. Rural students navigated the multitude of extracurricular activities and reflected on the evolving nature of belonging and described how expanding their horizons influenced belonging.

Chapter 6: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore how rural students are experiencing the cultural dissonance between rural life and college life and how it contributes to their sense of belonging at their chosen institution. Previous research on rural students has produced findings that relate to students' transition to higher education (Heinisch, 2016; Schultz, 2004) and many of those findings are replicated here. Moreover, the current study found specific patterns of intersection between rural life and college life, which pushes the body of knowledge on rural students beyond transition issues. These patterns characterized rural students' experience of MU's environment. Although there was an individualized element to these patterns, there was enough overlap to represent a new way to conceptualize rural student sense of belonging at a large urban university. This chapter will explain the findings in the context of past research on belonging in higher education, rural student experiences, and Strange and Banning's (2015) four models of college environments. Implications for theory, practice, and future research will also be discussed.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging Through Athletics

Several elements of the findings were consistent with past research on belonging. For instance, the phenomenon of rural students feeling a unified identity through MU athletics could be explained using Bollen and Hoyle's (1990) idea that perceived cohesion in college students contributes to their sense of belonging. According to Bollen and Hoyle's definition, "Perceived cohesion encompasses an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with

membership in the group” (p. 482). The rural students felt like they belonged to the larger MU cohort that supported and celebrated MU athletics, particularly football. Although consistent with sense of belonging and perceived cohesion research, this finding specific to rural students was unique in that several students indicated the particular overlaps between their required involvement in high school and their sense of obligation to support the home team in college. This was a new finding that had not been previously reported about rural students.

Belonging Through Social Supports

Sense of belonging was also linked to perception through students’ discernment of their positive social supports. Most of the participants noted how their sense of belonging was connected to their social relationships. Either through friends, a “work family,” roommates/floor mates, or other social outlets. This corroborates the findings of Hagerty et al. (1996) and Johnson et al. (2007) who also found belonging was positively influenced by perceived social supports. For instance, Kylie explicitly indicated that her sense of belonging was to her friends and Christian group, not the campus itself. Aaron also perceived his social supports as being an incredibly strong component to his sense of belonging at MU. Hausmann et al. (2007) reported that students’ early social experiences in college were better determinants of sense of belonging than background characteristics or academic experiences. This is an interesting juxtaposition because this study found patterns in background characteristics influencing students’ perception of social supports. Early social experiences were important to participants in the current study, however complex interactions between their individual background and personal experiences

indicated that academic experiences, individual characteristics, and social supports all intersected at varying degrees to influence rural student sense of belonging.

Belonging Through Engagement

There was also much evidence of rural student engagement positively influencing their sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter's (1997) work showed when students were involved in student organizations, they were influenced to belong. This result compares favorably to the current study where almost every participant belonged as a result of their participation in various organizations. According to both Strayhorn (2012) and Tinto (1987, 1993) feeling a sense of belonging helps students increase engagement in the higher education environment. This linear relationship where belonging leads to engagement was not as clearly indicated in the current study. Instead, it appeared as more of a self-perpetuating cycle where engagement breeds belonging which then leads to increased engagement. Examples of this in the current study were seen in the experiences of Kevin and Erin who at first were disengaged and did not feel a strong sense of belonging but when siblings introduced them to an activity they became involved and then developed a stronger sense of belonging.

Tinto (1993) noted that it was crucial for institutions to provide supportive learning environments for students to actively participate. As the findings reflected, MU did indirectly provide supportive environments for rural students. While MU did not provide university-wide supports for rural students to participate in as a specific demographic, many activities and organizations were appropriate for rural students to benefit from. However, the large scale and decentralization of MU's organization made it more difficult to monitor participation and communicate with students at a university-

wide level. So at this large institution there were many opportunities for engagement, but fewer chances for university leaders to universally curate students' sense of belonging.

Rural Student Experience at MU

The previous chapter's description of rural life and its subsequent interactions with college life represents a composite of several common student experiences, some of which are consistent with past research on rural students, and others that provide new insights into rural student experiences.

Rural Life Identity and MU Belonging

The administrator Jordan made a salient point by noting that identifying as "rural" can mean many different things to many different people and it was important not to stereotype people's experiences. The rural life findings described each individual's experience of rural life and illustrated how each student experienced rural life in a unique way. Some individuals identified with rural life more than others, which may have affected how they experienced the environment at MU. In fact, there appeared to be a connection between how a student identified with rural life and their subsequent sense of belonging at MU. This connection emerged into three patterns: being alienated by rural life and embracing the differences in college life, strongly identifying with rural life and being challenged by college life, and experiencing elements of both. For instance, the students who identified less with rural life, seemed to embrace the diversity and novelty of city life at a large institution (Pattern 1). On the other hand, the students who strongly identified with their rural background seemed to struggle on the Main Campus of MU (Pattern 2). For some students, they appreciated some elements of their rural life that had both positive and negative implications for their experience at MU (Pattern 3). This

three-pattern representation of the intersection between past experiences and sense of belonging in college is central to this study's findings and a new way to conceptualize rural student experience. This focus on individual characteristics can help explain how students experiencing similar things in a similar environment reacted in different ways.

The size of MU's environment seemed to affect all participants to a certain degree, but it really affected Erin, Kevin, Wes, and Tessa. Kylie also experienced some cultural and academic adjustments in coming to MU. All of these students identified with several aspects of rural life and had some difficulties with the size, scale, and scope of MU's environment. On the other hand, Aaron, Ian, and Alyssa all were strongly motivated to get out of their rural communities. None of these students particularly identified with rural life and seemed to have a smoother transition into the opportunity-filled world at MU. The rural students that did not identify as much with Main Campus such as Kevin and Erin found a sense of belonging on Ag campus with social norms and other environmental factors more closely aligned with the rural life they were more comfortable with.

Consistent with findings from Heinisch (2016) and Schultz (2004), city life was initially oppressive for some and enjoyable for others. Many of the same students who had trouble adjusting to Main Campus also noted difficulties with the city beyond. However, one difference between this study compared to earlier rural student research is that by focusing on students in their junior year, I was able to capture a more evolved stage of rural student experience. In this case, the initial transition was over and student participants had had time to acclimate to their environment. By their third year most participants, regardless of their connection to rural life, liked several aspects of city life.

Ames et al. (2014) found rural students who chose smaller institutions did better than urban students. This was likely due in part because of the similarity of the educational environment to their rural background environment. In this study, a few participants mentioned smaller schools and how they were different than what they were experiencing at MU. Wes in particular had first-hand experience with a smaller school before he transferred to MU. My findings concur with Ames et al. that it does matter what kind of institution students attend and that in this case there were unique components to the large university such as large scale, decentralization, lack of communication, an overabundance of resources, etc., that proved to be particularly problematic for rural students, especially those that strongly identified with rural life culture.

Opportunities at MU

Consistent with earlier research by Hadre (2007), Heinisch (2016), and Provasnik et al. (2007), rural students appreciated the increased resources and opportunities that the higher education environment at MU provided them. Internships, networking venues, and increased access to information were highly prized by rural students. Those kinds of opportunities also allowed students to expand their horizons and gain new perspectives. Many participants' comments reflected the spirit of Battle et al.'s (1995) findings noting how rural students needed an expanded perspective and an educational environment that would support their strengths and identity development. Alyssa and Erin both appreciated their opportunities to do "bigger and better" things in college than they would have back in their rural community.

While some students seemed to relate more to their rural life identity than others, in this case almost every student recognized the benefits of the opportunities available at a large institution. The challenge for some participants was effectively finding, reaching out, and utilizing these opportunities in a manner that would meet their needs. The findings of this study particularly highlighted the challenges that rural students have reaching out in an overwhelming environment when they had previously experienced simple and accessible supports and resources.

Seeking Community

Handke (2012) indicated that during interviews with rural students, they portrayed their rural hometowns as highly communal environments. They felt a strong obligation to their parents and family unit and spoke of being nervous and unsure when interacting with strangers. Rural students also exhibited a strong orientation to others, which manifested itself in student interest in others and in feelings of accountability to serve others. According to Handke, rural students desired communal connections in college similar to those found in their hometown. Many participant responses in this study corroborated Handke's findings. Tessa, Kylie, and others were often trying to replace their "family" and other support systems. Aaron mentioned explicitly how important it was to replace those supports with sub-communities. Again some students had more success than others initially in reaching out and replacing these communal social supports. This seemed to relate to each individual's willingness to reach out and ability to relate to others in the new environment. Those that more strongly identified with their rural life were more hesitant and resistant to embracing communities that did not closely resemble their rural community.

Culture Shock and Reactions to Diversity

Culture shock. The idea of rural students experiencing culture shock at MU is complex and multifaceted. On one hand, administrators pointed out how many social norms at MU were consistent with those of rural areas around the state. Kuh and Whitt (1988) noted how cultures and subcultures on campus can influence the overall culture of the organization. Some environmental components like MU athletics were dominant influences on student experiences. The “Midwestern values” mentioned by both administrators and students were also a consistent element of MU culture, possibly influenced by the geographical location of the institution or even the rural footprint on campus. Many rural students in general enjoyed being a part of the religious and racial/ethnic majority and having many others on campus share their conservative views. However, similar to findings by Heinisch (2016), Schultz (2004), and Tieken (2016), there were several elements of MU’s environment that were more difficult for rural students to adjust to. Similar to the findings of Heinisch, for many rural students the anonymity found at a large institution could be intimidating and the large classes were especially difficult. In both Heinisch and the current study, students mentioned how there were more people in their large classes than in their hometowns, which was overwhelming for them to consider and resulted in a lack of individualized attention among other things. These environments led to jarring academic transitions with increased academic competition. Some students like Aaron thrived, but most others had a difficult time with the academic adjustment. Therefore, although rural students shared many social norms with the larger campus community, they would still benefit from rural-specific resources that addressed size and scale-related issues.

Reactions to diversity. While administrators felt like the social norms were consistent with rural experiences, the rural students unanimously noted how diverse campus was. The cultural shock of increased diversity was real according to Tessa, Alyssa, Kylie, and others. Rural students in this study had various reactions to the diverse student population they encountered at MU. Some students like Ian and Alyssa, embraced the diversity for its novelty and difference from their rural upbringing. Others like Tessa appreciated the transformative effect that exposure to diversity had on their previously-conservative perspectives. Yet other rural students such as Kevin and Erin felt uncomfortable with the new diverse population and missed interacting with other rural, or like-minded, individuals. Reactions like these can be explained through past research on rural students (Heinisch, 2016; Provasnik et al., 2007) and diversity in higher education (Bowman & Denson, 2012; Gurin et al., 2002; Locks et al., 2008; and Park & Chang, 2015). Similar to findings in Heinisch, and Provasnik et al., high schools according to the rural students in this study were insulated and homogenous and rural students that felt more alienated by these aspects of their rural upbringing were willing to embrace anything that was different, which was embodied in part by the racially and ethnically diverse student population at MU. Students that appreciated the growth and benefits from an expanded perspective were experiencing diversity through informal and classroom interactions as predicted by Gurin et al. Gurin et al.'s theory was that interactions with diversity would increase learning and democracy outcomes for students and allow students educated in a diverse environment to be better suited to function in an increasingly heterogeneous society. According to Gurin et al., institutions like MU with

a diverse student body utilized this as a resource for students to interact with a diverse range of peers and gain the ability to perceive differences within and between groups.

Rural students who were less comfortable with the diverse population were potentially experiencing the discomfort due to identifying more closely with their homogenous precollege experiences. It seemed that for those students, they were benefitting less from their interactions with diversity than students who had previously been exposed to more diversity in their precollege experiences (Bowman & Denson, 2011). Bowman and Denson (2011) found that although interracial interactions in college had educational benefits for all students, those that were more familiar with diverse populations were more comfortable with the diversity interactions in college and therefore benefitted more than individuals from more homogenized precollege environments. According to Park and Chang (2015), students from homogenous high schools were oblivious to issues of race, which could contribute to a larger learning curve and more difficult transition to an environment with a highly diverse population. Locks et al. (2008) related engagement with diversity to a student's sense of belonging, finding that in addition to frequent interactions with peers in general, substantially engaging with a diverse range of peers improved an individual's sense of belonging. This was certainly the case with Alyssa, where her sense of belonging was tied to her level of engagement and connection to multiple individuals in a diverse array of contexts. On the other hand, Erin and Kevin both felt less belonging on the more racially and ethnically diverse Main Campus. Erin in particular reported few interactions with others on Main Campus and both she and Kevin complained of cultural discrepancies. Perhaps if they had come from

non-rural high schools or more diverse environments, they would have been more open to engaging with the diverse population at MU.

Rural Student Experience with the Four Models of Campus Environment

Throughout the entire process of developing and implementing this study, the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's (1977; 2005) ecological theory of development, Strayhorn's (2012) definition of sense of belonging, and Strange and Banning's (2015) four models of campus environment were critical to my approach conceptualizing and interpreting rural student experiences. Most of the pertinent interactions that rural students had at MU occurred at the microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner's theory. Strange and Banning's models seemed to pair well with the direct experiences that students had with the microsystems of MU. Therefore, during analysis their models helped me conceptualize and categorize the various themes that emerged and their place within the overall context of MU's environment. In this section I will touch on the physical, aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed environments at MU and how these elements influenced rural student experiences of those environments.

A Sense of Place in the Physical Environment

According to Strange and Banning (2015) an institution's physical environment contributes to a student's sense of place. They indicated that "The concept of place is foundational to the human experience and can serve as a heuristic device for understanding the dynamics of the college campus" (p. 12). The authors believed that allowing students to connect through a sense of place means the physical environment of an institution is accessible and welcoming, functional yet aesthetically pleasing,

connected to the greater community, constantly re-evaluated, and encourages communication. This environment is a function and symbol of the institution's culture and provides a setting for behavior.

The participants in this study described the environments of three specific places at MU: Ag campus, Main Campus, and the city beyond campus. Ag campus provided rural students a sense of place more similar to their rural upbringing with open green spaces, fewer buildings and more trees, and a variety of landscapes including an arboretum and fields of crops. There were also animal pens, beehives, and other physical elements that more closely represented a rural atmosphere. Main Campus in contrast was described as large, diverse, crowded, intimidating, and difficult to navigate with a disorienting layout. There were many substantial buildings, much development, with constant expansion and construction. This place was very different from the rural educational settings students were used to and for some students inhibited a sense of belonging and for others fostered an excitement about new possibilities and opportunities. Students also described Main Campus as having everything in convenient proximity and well-designed for study with an emphasis on innovation. These qualities promoted collaboration and forward-thinking growth and development, which were goals of the institution. The city beyond campus was also exciting and positive for students in many ways as it provided more things to do, more sounds, and a close proximity to shopping, employment, leisure, and other activities for rural students to engage in than they had back home. This place also had its drawbacks as the large size was difficult to navigate and traffic was a major adjustment for most students.

With these three components within the physical environment of MU, students were able to develop a sense of place and connect to at least one of them if not all. Each individual's needs were different and various elements that they connected to were disparate. However, the diverse array of environments meant that there were physical elements and behavioral traces that symbolized institutional culture that each student could relate to. Some environments were more rural-focused and others more urban. One important consideration is how the initial impression of this large, diverse environment affects rural students and at what point they discover the sense of place that they feel most connected to.

Congruence with the Aggregate Environment

According to Strange and Banning (2015) the aggregate environment of an institution has many variables both institutional and individual that influence an individual's sense of belonging. While this study was primarily investigating environmental components of the institution that affected rural student individuals' experiences, it was interesting to see each student's individual reaction to their level of congruence with MU's aggregate environment. Strange and Banning indicated that "The degree of person-environment congruence is thought to be predictive of an individual's attraction to and satisfaction or stability within an environment" (p. 74). When individuals are more congruent, they are likely to stay within that environment and when they are less congruent they either adapt to it, leave, or try to change the environment itself. Strange and Banning theorized that both the environment's and the individual's consistency influenced the outcome for incongruent students. For instance, an institutional environment that was highly differentiated and consistent was more likely to

reinforce itself. The same idea applied to students individually. Therefore a consistent and focused student that was incongruent in a differentiated and consistent environment was more likely to leave because it would be more difficult to adapt oneself or the environment. A student with inconsistent personality patterns was more likely to adapt to incongruence by changing themselves.

Due to its diverse human aggregate, MU's environment had several immovable consistencies that rural students had to either cohere with or adapt to. There were many different types of people on campus competing for resources and faculty members' attention. Diverse perspectives were the norm and although some rural social norms prevailed, many non-rural norms were also prevalent and accepted. The campus was located in the center of a highly populated city, which reflected a more urban lifestyle. There were high standards for academics and fewer individualized academic supports. Some students were congruent right away, some had to adjust. Students who more highly identified with a rural background were less congruent with the distinctly non-rural elements of the aggregate environment and one may consider those individuals who took longer to adjust as having more consistent patterns of personality and identity. Fortunately, all students were able to find some congruence to some element of the aggregate environment, some just took longer than others. Ag campus featured many aggregate characteristics that matched those of rural students. There, students with a consistent rural identity were able to find other students like themselves and therefore feel a stronger sense of belonging and congruence with that aspect of MU's environment. Students who did not feel a strong sense of belonging to their rural identity felt more congruent with the urban environment of the Main Campus. In addition, students who

may not have had such consistent or focused personality or identity traits were able to adapt to Main Campus and became congruent in time.

Finding Meaning in an “Anarchical” Environment

Robert Birnbaum (1988) recognized several different types of institutions and their organizations including collegial, bureaucratic, political, and anarchical. Every institution can contain some elements of each, however defining features are most likely determined by size and scope of the institution. As a flagship university, MU’s organization is plagued with challenges common to anarchic institutions: fluid participation, multiple often-conflicting missions, decentralization, and inequitable or overlapping distribution of resources. MU leaders recognize this and have in many cases taken steps to address these issues in ways similar to those recommended by Birnbaum. Leaders have collected data, created feedback loops through a hierarchy designed to effectively manage large-scale decision-making, monitored student behaviors, and implemented limited but purposeful university-wide culture change. Strange and Banning (2015) synthesized organizational models of institutions and the anarchic nature of MU is defined by a highly organic, dynamic, and flexible environment more susceptible to change than stability. All of these qualities influence how the organizational environment at MU affects rural student experience.

Rural students in this study came from academic environments that were small, stable, and with a clearly-defined hierarchy of supports. It became clear that the anarchic organization at MU was very different from what these students were used to and many students had a difficult time adjusting to this new environment. While there were many supports available, the complex layers and duplication of efforts made it difficult for rural

students to navigate and manage the resources offered to them. Large classes were overwhelming and individualized attention was harder to come by. However, once students adjusted to the new environment, they were able to take advantage of more of the compartmentalized elements within their majors or colleges and build sub-communities that helped break down the large infrastructure into smaller pieces. This allowed students to experience stable environments more similar to the organization of those that they were used to in their rural high schools. Their academic advisors became their tether to other resources and a hub for learning about more supports, similar to the role of their guidance counselor in high school. These smaller organizational structures made it easier for rural students to find focus and meaning in the otherwise anarchical environment at MU.

Social Climate “Inspiring Cooperation”

Strange and Banning (2015) indicated that “examining collective personal perspectives of an environment...is critical to understanding how people are likely to react to those environments” (p. 116). They went on to say that students’ perception and construction of their educational environment influences their connection to or belonging within it. The characteristic features of environmental press, social climate, and campus culture are elements of an institution’s socially-constructed environment that affect student experience.

At MU, campus culture was described first-and-foremost as being diverse. MU was inclusive, accepting, and open to supporting the needs and ideas of a wide variety of students. Rural students perceived fellow students as exhibiting different perspectives from them, which could be a mix of threatening and enlightening for students originating

from more homogenous environments. In addition to supporting diversity, the campus culture was perceived as being unified by MU athletics, Midwestern values of politeness and conscientiousness, high academic expectations, and where student involvement was encouraged. The combined emphasis on inclusiveness, conscientiousness, and engagement produced an environment where students perceived that they were being encouraged to collaborate and work together to further their education. Administrators and students alike mentioned how the environment at MU “inspires cooperation” and faculty, staff, and students were motivated to work together.

Whether or not rural students are more attuned to seeing their environment as communal is an interesting possibility and this topic would benefit from further research. How students were being defined by their environment was one important distinction between rural students’ rural and college educational environment. Although each student had unique experiences in high school, a theme emerged where they were often judged by their peers based on their appearance or family situation. At MU students were under less scrutiny but when they were judged it was more based on their intelligence or who they were as person. This represents a shift in social climate, which seemed positive for the students that mentioned it.

Implications for Theory

Benefits of Multiple, Overlapping Frameworks

This multi-layered theoretical framework was beneficial to this study for several reasons. It was helpful to provide a lens in which to interpret data and also acted as a structure to support the research design. Most importantly, these interconnected theories allowed me to conceptualize from a larger perspective what was occurring at the

individual level with the rural students at MU. Using cross-pollinating theories provided important context for each other and helped explain one another. For instance, Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological levels theory was important to understanding how interactions between environments, even those that did not contain rural students, could affect their experience and development of a sense of belonging. Organizational dynamics at the exosystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem levels informed how rural students received resources and were communicated with. In addition, the majority of the interactions reported occurred at the microsystem level, which allowed me to apply another frame within this level of higher education environment. This frame was Strange and Banning's (2015) models of environment, which broke down these microsystems and helped me recognize and classify student reactions to their environment. The socially constructed and human aggregate environments proved to be particularly key elements that tied into the rural issues pertaining to how rural individuals view themselves and how they view their environment.

The Importance of Congruence

Congruence was another important idea as it related to sense of belonging. Strayhorn's (2012) definition included congruence and it was crucial to conceptualize rural student congruence within their varying educational environments in order to understand their positions of belonging. Congruence was crucial to student experience at all levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological system and Strange and Banning's (2015) models of the environment.

Understanding Intersection of Rural Life and College Life

One theoretical implication that was particularly salient to studying rural student sense of belonging was the patterns of reciprocal influences of rural life belonging and educational belonging. My analysis of rural life congruence and MU belonging incorporated the theory that these two contexts were interconnected and influences on an individual's sense of belonging were context-specific. Past context influences how students experience new contexts. So it was beneficial to study belonging by examining connections to past life environments, current environments, and then comparing those environments and the individual's congruence with them. For rural students in this case, it seemed that individual student's characteristics influenced how they perceived social supports, which in turn influenced sense of belonging. Based on my analysis and findings, applying the above mentioned frameworks to experiences of both the current and past environments and comparing the individual's congruence within them was an advantageous method for studying rural student experiences of environment and how it affects sense of belonging.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings from this study, leaders at MU are already making efforts to shape MU's environment as an inclusive and beneficial learning venue for a diverse population with diverse needs. However, good intentions only go so far and there are some organizational dynamics such as unequal distribution of resources and duplication of efforts that are undermining university-wide attempts to monitor and efficiently provide resources and opportunities equally across the student body. According to Strange and Banning (2015), an institution's organization can be highly influential on a campus' innovation, efficiency, production, and morale. With its large size, scale, and

highly decentralized organization, MU is duplicating resources at varying degrees across the student population. MU leaders were attempting to address the issue of decentralization and duplication of efforts through the implementation of a scanning system, outreach to incoming freshmen, and providing communication through emails about various resources. However, systemically there were limitations to this due to the different units' varying access to resources and attitudes about retention.

For their part, most student participants did not appear to be very aware of the organizational constructs that drive the university. They understood that there were multiple resources, but the organization and hierarchy was unclear. In addition, there was little agreement among students about how much MU's leaders knew about rural student issues. This could be because rural students were often not considered a separate demographic for study and concern at MU. In this section I will discuss several implications for practice based on the findings and recommend some additional efforts that may benefit rural students at MU.

One theme that emerged across all of the findings was the importance of rural students making connections. A sensation or feeling of connectedness was part of Strayhorn's (2012) definition of belonging as well. Retention programming such as learning communities, scholarship programs, and the experiences of students such as Erin and Kevin show us the importance of students connecting with others with a similar background. Therefore, the goal of many of these recommendations will be to increase rural students' connections across and to campus. Since it was predicted by administrators that rural students would be particularly challenged navigating the

complex layers of support at a large institution like MU, it is important for institutions to make their supports transparent and accessible.

Improve Communication with Students

Effectively communicating with students is a challenge that the MU leaders I interviewed were already aware of. Students and administrators agreed that there is a disconnect between the dissemination of information and its reception by students. MU leaders identified several aspects of MU's environment that they predicted would help rural students connect that student participants did not mention at all in their comments (see Figure 5.1). Some of these could be beneficial if rural students were made aware of them such as the Office of Student Retention, the Civic Engagement Office, and the Alumni Association. Currently emails are the primary mode of communication university-wide. Students get inundated with emails from their advisors, instructors, admissions, the registrar, and various other units. These are appropriate messages from appropriate sources, however the message was not getting across in some cases. According to Wes, many students did not read their emails because "that's not something that...people my age anyway, really want to do. They want to do that for more fun things." One suggestion was utilizing physical space to advertise resources and opportunities more effectively. Wes indicated that billboards and posters were something that students could passively look at and not have to log-in for. MU leaders may also need to consider building their presence on social media or other outlets students commonly traffic. It is difficult because social media is a moving target with many social media outlets being trendy or faddish by nature. This issue will not resolve itself

however, and institutions need to look outside of emails for communicating with rural students, and the general student population as well.

Recognize Rural Students' Inexperience Reaching Out

The findings from this study corroborate similar findings by Heinisch (2016) that indicate the importance for rural students to replace their support systems in their new environment. However, in contrast to Heinisch's previous study where rural students claimed that they were skilled at developing close relationships, in this case students had low self-efficacy in their ability to develop close relationships because theirs had previously been built-in to their rural environment. Some rural student participants admitted to having trouble reaching out to build their new supports. According to Hagerty et al. (1992) in order to feel a sense of belonging, one must have energy, desire, and potential to get involved, and share common qualities with others in one's environment. This became difficult for some when they tried to navigate the large scale and complex layers of support in order to develop their new social supports. This was easier in a rural educational setting with one guidance counselor and much individualized attention from teachers. However this is not the case in such a large environment as MU and rural students in particular may have less experience acting first to make their needs known.

For some rural students in this study, reaching out and making connections did not come naturally. This is an important idea to consider because rural students may need those close connections to feel like they belong, even more than non-rural students. The fact that rural students particularly need to replace their support systems and may have fewer tools to do so is an important idea for higher education leaders to recognize.

Outreach for new students is a good start but more efforts could be made to meet rural students halfway in their attempts to recreate their support system.

Provide Rural-Specific Groups

Administrators mentioned that rural students comprise several other demographics that are already being served such as first-generation students (Provasnik et al., 2007). According to administrators, rural students are also experiencing several of the same social norms on campus as they have back in their rural hometown. However, it is not enough to just assume that since rural students experience some similar social norms that they do not need specific outreach. There are already several unofficial student groups with rural-leaning themes and goals but the majority of these are found on Ag campus where many rural students have already acclimated and developed a sense of belonging. According to rural students studying primarily on Main Campus, there are no rural-specific resources for them. This type of rural student may have a major that is not agriculturally-based but still wants to feel connected to their rural roots. Therefore, MU students could benefit from a program specifically designed to provide outreach and identity for rural students on Main Campus who want to connect with other rural students.

Peer-mentoring has a long history of research-supported benefits for postsecondary education (Gershenfeld, 2014; Hastings et al., 2015; Jacobi, 1991). Several students in this study also mentioned the benefits of various peer-mentoring programs. Aaron liked the format of the Honors Program peer mentoring program and noted

I recall a whole week being dedicated to going over [student organizations] and like helping people identify which ones they'd actually be interested in long-term, helping people have strategies for like integrating those into academic life. And I think that that just like small group mentoring is probably the most effective approach to getting those ideas over to students.

Perhaps offering this peer mentoring opportunity on Main Campus could incentivize rural students on Ag campus spending more time on Main Campus and vice versa, bringing the rural student community together across campuses.

Integrate Ag Campus and Main Campus

Based on the findings with various patterns of rural life identity and individualized characteristics, there may be several types of rural students coming to MU. Some who identify less with their rural identity may positively react to the diverse atmosphere and embrace the new culture and some who more strongly identify with their rural upbringing may be more resistant to novel aspects of MU's environment. It is important for leaders to recognize those distinctions and provide an integrated environment that addresses the needs of all types of rural students. Several students and administrators indicated that each campus is stereotyped with its own culture and little interaction between students on the campuses. For instance, students that identify with rural life and choose a major that is on Ag campus may do well there with the student-first supports and rural-feeling community. However, they may have more trouble relating to Main Campus and would prefer to stay on Ag campus as much as possible. Rural students who perhaps identify with rural life but who are not in an ag-campus major get little initial incentive to go out of their way to go out to Ag campus so they

remain on Main Campus, feel a bit alienated and having to find their own supports, which they may or may not be ready to do considering their insulated, pre-built supports from their rural upbringing. This dynamic perpetuates the disparate stereotyped and somewhat isolated campuses and fosters exclusion more than inclusion. Therefore efforts to integrate the campuses and get more students out to Ag campus to experience that environment and vice versa are an important step in providing positive environments for rural students. One goal would be to build a university-wide community and identity that reaches beyond athletics and the borders of the campuses. One way to accomplish this would be to encourage cross-pollination of student groups and programs that previously would have been seen as 'Ag campus only' or 'Main Campus only.'

Increase Opportunities to Engage with Diversity

Similar to the findings of past research on precollege experience with diverse populations (Bowman & Denson, 2011; Locks et al., 2008; Park & Chang, 2015), this study found that rural students who had experienced a homogenous rural upbringing were often challenged by the diverse student population they encountered at MU. However, when rural students were able to engage with the diverse population, they were able to expand their horizons and develop as more well-rounded individuals.

The university had committed resources to provide an environment where students from diverse backgrounds could feel comfortable and belong, such as the Intercultural Office and the Multicultural Center. MU administrators also mentioned that the university provided a one-time opportunity for first year freshman to dialogue with each other and faculty and staff members about diversity. However, these efforts may not be enough to help students understand and interact across the range of diversity

represented on campus. As Park and Chang (2015) reported, this is not just an issue limited to rural schools, in fact there are many urban and suburban schools in the United States that are highly segregated, even in areas with diverse populations. Thus, many students come to college without much prior exposure to diversity. Therefore, a large public university such as MU must utilize its resources already dedicated to supporting diversity and extend their purpose to also focus on promoting increased student engagement with diversity.

Implications for Future Research

The scope of this study represents only a few participants at a single institution. While the findings are meaningful considering the case, many are specific to the limited scale of the study. With this in mind, there are many directions for future research with rural students and their experience in higher education. This section will highlight a few implications for future research that specifically relate to this study's findings.

Define "Rural"

It was brought up by administrators and became evident with participants that the term "rural" could have different meanings to different individuals. This study utilized the U.S. census definition focusing on population density and also asked participants to identify themselves as being from a rural area. However, although all student participants indicated that they identified as being from a rural area, their responses to interview questions indicated that their experiences and identification with rural life varied widely. In order to gain a more specific participant pool that identified with various distinct elements of rural life, a future study could ask the screening question "What is your definition of rural and to what degree do you identify with that?"

Participants would then have the opportunity to provide more information about their idea of rural life and depending on the goal of the study, the researcher could choose participants that all felt a similar way about their rural upbringing. This study benefitted from multiple perspectives and perceptions of rural life, however future studies may benefit from the ability to zero in on a specific type of rural student that may benefit from further study.

Chronosystem Influence

While Bronfenbrenner's (2005) process-person-context-time model (PPCT) was mentioned and considered for this study, proximal processes representing microsystems interactions within the context of MU's educational environment were primarily used for interpretation. The time element, and by extension macrosystem time also termed "Chronosystem" was not discussed or elaborated upon. Chronosystem's influence on student experiences was not fully realized and was not investigated to its full potential in this study. Future research is needed to investigate how a singular point in time while students were experiencing higher education influenced and affected rural students' experience of higher education. Chronosystem-sensitive contexts such as the presidential election and other political developments, popular cultural movements, and other wider influences on the macrosystem would be an important aspect to examine. Future studies could spend time documenting important aspects of the current Chronosystem and design interview protocols to inquire of participants about this aspect's influence on their experience.

Rural Students' Relationships with Advisors

Tieken (2016) studied messages that rural students received from high school guidance counselors about the value of higher education. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) looked at how rural individuals experienced student supports including those provided by guidance counselors in rural high schools. Both of these studies recognized the importance of educational supports outside of the direct influence of teachers or instructors. Administrators in this study predicted that rural students would have difficulty navigating the complex structures of supports at MU compared to the relatively simple support structures of the single guidance counselor in rural schools. In this case, the student responses corroborated that perception, however most rural students ended up developing positive working relationships with their academic advisors. Academic advisors proved an accessible resource for most rural students and a future study could examine this relationship in more depth. It seemed that the relationship students had with their academic advisors was somewhat akin to that which they had with their rural guidance counselors. It would be beneficial to compare and contrast these relationships in more detail. This could illustrate how commonalities might be emphasized to increase effectiveness of advising not only in student academic success but in their development of sense of belonging.

First-Generation Rural Students

The findings from this study indicate that more research on rural first-generation students is necessary. There were many overlaps between previous research on first-generation students and the first-generation rural students in this study, which reflected some issues and barriers that rural first-generation students experience. There were also

discrepancies in student experience, which necessitates future studies for the continued examination of these issues.

Provasnik et al. (2007) indicated that rural areas tended to be made up of mostly homogenous working-class, ethnic majority populations. This finding was also reflected in the current study where participants indicated their demographic backgrounds were similar to those described by Provasnik. The White working-class first-generation students in this study were motivated to attend higher education for similar reasons as those in past research on first-generation students. Alyssa was first-generation and wanted to do bigger and better things than her parents. Erin's father did not attend college and wanted more for his daughters. According to Thering (2011), White working-class first-generation students were motivated to attend college because doing so meant they could obtain employment that would allow them to live beyond the means of the working-class socioeconomic status. It was important for them to live more comfortably than their parents.

The rural students in this study were motivated to replace their support systems in college. Similar to Schultz (2004) and Heinisch (2016), the rural first-generation students were a bit more naïve about this process than the non-first-generation students and had a more difficult time building new relationships to offset the stress of their novel surroundings. While this matched previous research, some of the other findings did not necessarily reflect the same dynamics as previous studies on first-generation students. For instance, Jenkins et al. (2011) indicated that first-generation students reported less local social support from friends and family, which coincided with higher levels of stress and lower life satisfaction. York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) compared perceived

family support in attending college between first- and second-generation college students and found that second-generation students believed that they were being supported by their families, more so than first-generation students. In this case by contrast, most participants had tremendous support from their families and generally their entire rural communities as well. In fact, the support from their greater community was so strong that in some cases, students felt more pressure to succeed because they wanted to prove themselves to their community, which agrees with a similar finding from Heinisch (2016).

Similar to Collier and Morgan (2007), this study's first-generation participants exhibited a reduced knowledge of the college student role and academic supports. They were also more initially resistant to seeking out faculty member support, which coincides with the findings of Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2007). Similar to Schultz (2004), rural first-generation students' initial transition to higher education was rocky but by junior year the students were much more established. Like Heinisch (2016), rural first-generation students took a while to recognize the importance of professors and advisors and had a hard time getting individualized attention from their professors. However by their junior year, participants were less affected by this and were more likely to see how crucial these relationships were to their success and sense of belonging. This represents the contrast between the previous work of both Schultz and Heinisch and the current study. While their studies looked at initial, first-semester transitions, this study focused more at overarching themes related to environment once established. There needs to be more research on rural student experience after they have become established

in higher education in order to make more longitudinal comparisons between transition and long-term belonging.

Overall, it was interesting to compare the findings of this current study to those of Schultz (2004) and Heinisch (2016), which both looked at first-generation rural students specifically. There was definitely an overlap with Heinisch in which that study and the current study both found that many rural students had a strong bond at home and were highly motivated to return home frequently. However, while Heinisch (2016) indicated that rural first-generation students were less likely to participate and become engaged on campus, most students in this study did participate in extra-curricular activities and their trips back home did not inhibit their participation. Results like these demonstrate that one qualitative study alone cannot represent the experiences of all rural students and subsequent research is critical to elaborating upon and understanding the experiences of rural students in higher education environments.

Additional Methodological Considerations

As mentioned in the introduction, there were various delimitations and limitations that drove the design of this study. However, with more resources, longer timespan, and different perspective, this study could be replicated with a few alterations to the methodology. For instance, past research has indicated that most rural areas in the Midwest were racially and ethnically homogenous (Heinisch, 2016; Provasnik, 2007). Therefore I expected a mostly White racial/ethnic sample and did not choose to include racial diversity as an objective for sampling. However, in light of increasing diversity in both urban and rural areas (Lee et al., 2017), it would be beneficial for a future study to incorporate racial diversity as a component of the sample.

This study only focused on one case and therefore the generalizability is limited. It would be beneficial for a future study to emulate Garcia's (2017) approach and use a multi-site case study with a similar theoretical framework to this study. Garcia examined Latinx student experiences however the approach as a multi-site case study could also apply to rural students and garner a more in-depth and possibly generalizable description of rural student experiences in higher education. Finally, this study only represented a snapshot of its participants' college experiences. A future study would benefit from a longitudinal method revisiting the same participants throughout their college career starting first-semester and charting their progress and sense of belonging every year through graduation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how rural students experience higher education contexts and develop a sense of belonging at a large Midwestern university. Research questions pertained to how rural students' rural identity/background influenced their experience in college, what they saw as key environmental factors affecting their sense of belonging, and how institutions are providing supportive environments for rural students. The results of this study indicate that there is a connection between rural students' identity and their experience of higher education environments. It is beneficial to understand how individual characteristics such as a student's level of identity with their rural life interacts with the individual's experiences in college. This will allow us to predict a student's pattern of developing a sense of belonging in their non-rural postsecondary environment.

For the students in this case, by their junior year in college each of them had developed a sense of belonging to some aspect of MU or another. For these rural students, congruence with the campus and city culture became an integral part of their development of belonging. Each individual's ability to connect with and break down the large institution into a sub-community that replaced their rural supports was due in large part to individual characteristics as well as efforts on the part of the institution to provide accessible resources and supports. With enough motivation, time, and consideration, rural students were able to find a place to belong at a large urban Midwestern university.

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Appendix A
Staff Interview Protocol

- 1) What is your role here at the university?
- 2) What can you tell me about MU's environment and how it plays a role in the experiences of the general student population?
 - a. How would you describe the on-campus culture here at MU?
 - b. How do you see students reacting to their environment here at MU?
 - c. What are some common experiences of first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year students?
 - d. What are some potential barriers for students that result from the environment created here at MU?
 - e. What university-oriented elements do you see bringing students together?
- 3) What experience, if any, do you have working with rural students?
 - a. Do you know of rural students who are involved in programs you work with?
- 4) What can you tell me about the experiences of rural students coming to college at MU?
 - a. What are some common distinguishing features of rural students? (i.e. background characteristics, demographics, etc.)
 - b. What are some issues specific to rural students that they might encounter regarding their access to education, transition to MU, and academic outcomes?
 - c. What social norms (if any) do you think might make it difficult for rural students to transition to, and/or stay at MU?
 - d. How does the environment at MU play a role in rural students' experiences?
- 5) What university resources, student groups, or services are you familiar with that are targeted at rural students or could benefit rural students?
 - a. What are some on-campus resources or programs that specifically target first-generation students?
 - b. What are some resources, programs, or units that pertain to MU's diverse student body?
 - c. What efforts have your unit or other units made to address and facilitate increased student/faculty interaction?
 - d. How is the university or your unit addressing and/or facilitating equitable access to education?

- e. In your opinion, how does the university's organizational structure, mission, and hierarchy impact its ability to develop and implement supports for students?
 - f. To your knowledge, how is the university reaching out to recruit students from underrepresented student populations?
 - g. What are some resources, student groups, or services that could contribute to students feeling like they belong at the university?
 - h. To your knowledge, how is the university attempting to engage with students who are not engaged academically or on-campus?
- 6) Is there anything else pertaining to rural students, the university in general, students, university resources, or your role that you think I should know about?

Appendix B
Rural Student Demographic Questionnaire

Q1 Personal Information

Name:

Email:

Age:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Q2 Have either of your parents ever been enrolled in college at a baccalaureate/4-year level?

Yes

No

Q3 Do you identify as being from a rural area?

Yes

No

Q4 Approximate population of your hometown (or nearest town):

Less than 100

100-500

500-1,500

1,500-2,500

More than 2,500 _____

Q5 Number of students in your high school graduating class:

Less than 20

20-50

50-100

100-200

More than 200 _____

Q6 Approximate # of high school classmates...

_____ Attending college

_____ Attending this university

Q7 High school class rank (if known):

Q8 High school GPA:

Q9 Please list the activities/organizations you were involved in prior to coming to college:

Q10 Approximate # of college-level credit hours completed prior to coming to UNL:

Q11 Current major:

Q12 Number of credit hours you are currently enrolled in:

- less than 12
- 12-14
- 15-18
- More than 18 _____

Q13 Number of semesters enrolled at UNL including the current semester:

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- More than 7 _____

Q14 Approximate # of hours worked per-week at an on-campus job:

- 0
- 1-10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- More than 40 _____

Q15 Approximate # of hours worked per-week at an off-campus job:

- 0
- 1-10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- More than 40 _____

Q16 Current estimated cumulative GPA:

Q17 Is UNL the first college you've attended?

- Yes
- No

Q18 Please indicate the item(s) that best describe your current housing:

- On-campus dormitory
- Greek house
- Off-campus apartment/house
- Other _____
- I share space with 1 or more roommates
- I do not have roommates

Q19 Please list the activities/organizations you have been involved in since coming to college:

Q20 **Sense of belonging** refers to your perceived social support on campus, your feelings of connectedness, mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to your campus community and/or peers (Strayhorn, 2012).

On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate your sense of belonging at UNL:

1 2 3 4 5

Appendix C
Rural Student Semi-Structured Interview Protocol #1

Let's discuss your time here at this university from your point of view as a student from a rural area, and your experiences before and after you came to college.

- Describe your decision-making process for coming to college:
 - How long had you been planning to attend college?
 - What schools were you thinking about?
 - Did you attend campus visits? If so, what were they like?
 - What were the main contributors to your decision to attend college?
 - What brought you to this university specifically?
- Tell me about your transition from a rural high school to college:
 - Think back, and describe your first week on campus:
- Describe for me what you feel is the overall campus culture at MU.
 - What are students like in general? What are some common traits shared by many students?
 - What are the faculty/staff like? What are some common traits they share?
- Describe some differences between your life in your hometown and your life here at the university:
- How do you think your rural background influences how you experience college?
- How do you think MU's environment, like the physical spaces, campus culture, academic expectations, organization of colleges, social supports, etc., has influenced your experience?
 - How are you experiencing the size of the university? The size of the city?
 - Describe your favorite places on campus:
 - Tell me about some of your favorite experiences here:
 - Describe some difficult experiences you've had here:
- Tell me about the activities you listed on the questionnaire that you have participated in here at college:
 - What are these activities about and what do these activities entail?
 - How did you get involved in those activities?
 - How do these activities fit in with your academic and/or work responsibilities?
 - Are you still participating? Why/why not?
- Describe a time when you felt a sense of belonging (or socially supported, connected, cared about, accepted, or respected) here at the university:
 - How did it make you feel exactly?
 - What was it about MU that made you feel that way?
 - How did you respond to that?
 - How does that compare to your current situation?
 - What are some other experiences you had here that made you feel a sense of belonging?
 - Do you think these feelings had anything to do with your rural student status? If so, how?
- Describe a time when you felt as if you didn't belong at MU:
 - How did it make you feel?

- What was it about MU that made you feel that way?
- What could be done at MU to change that situation?
- How did you address the situation yourself?
- How does that compare to your current situation?
- What other experiences have you had here that made you feel like you did not belong?
- Do you think these feelings had anything to do with your rural student status? If so, how?
- Talk to me about your general sense of belonging on campus. Belonging includes your social support on campus, your feelings of connectedness, mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to your campus community and/or peers:
 - What is it about the campus that makes you feel that way?
 - Do you think your experience has anything to do with your rural student status? If so, how?
- To what extent do you think university leaders understand how the environment at MU affects rural students?
- In your opinion, how is the university addressing potential barriers and fostering supportive environments for rural students?

Appendix D
Rural Student Semi-Structured Interview Protocol #2

We may have run out of time during our last interview and did not have a chance to cover some of my initial questions. I would like to take a moment to address those now if you don't mind...

At the end of our last interview, I asked you to reflect and think about an item or items, including photographs, that you could bring to this interview that somehow relate to your sense of belonging. Today, we will use those items as a focal point to facilitate a more in-depth discussion about your sense of belonging and the environment at this university.

- Please tell me about the item(s) that you brought:
 - What made you think to bring this particular item?
 - What significance does this item have to you?
 - How does this item relate to your rural background?
 - What significance does this item have to your sense of belonging?
- How does the significance of this item relate to your current academic environment?
 - Does it relate to the university's physical environment?
 - If so, how?
 - Does it relate to the people you interact with at the university?
 - If so, how?
- Have you always felt this way about the university's environment or have your perceptions changed over time?
 - In what way have they changed (if applicable)?

Finally, I would also like to follow-up on a few topics that I wanted to clarify from our last conversation...

Appendix E
Artifact Elicitation Correspondence

Greetings, this is just a reminder that we have our second interview scheduled tomorrow. We will be following up our conversation from last time and also will be discussing the artifact(s)/photo(s) you chose to bring to our interview.

Remember prior to our meeting, please take a few moments to collect a photograph or item(s) to bring that either relate to your rural background or on-campus life and influence your belonging at the university. These artifacts/photographs will provide the focal point for this second interview.

Please plan for this interview to last approximately 60 minutes. I look forward to seeing what you decide to bring and hearing more about your experiences. See you tomorrow!

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