#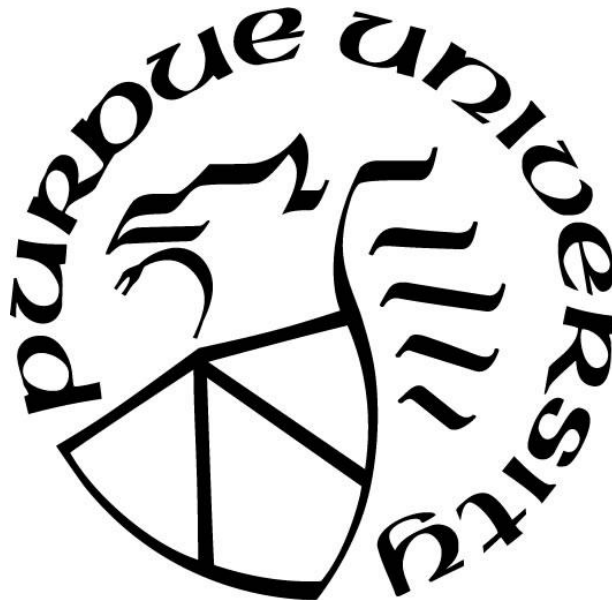 EXPLORING HOW THE RURAL SCHOOLING EXPERIENCE OF INDIANA HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS INFORMS PERCEPTIONS, BELIEFS, AND ATTITUDES ABOUT POSTSECONDARY ASPIRATIONS

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to all the rural students living in the U.S. and around the world who've been overlooked, underestimated, and disregarded. You deserve to follow your dreams and reach for the moon and stars just like everyone else. Staying true to your rural roots while fostering the desire for more and different is where hope and fear collide. Take a leap of faith and follow your intuition and heart as they will guide you to who and where you are meant to be. My passion for this dissertation is fostered by my leap of faith and rural lived experience. I am grateful for Boone Grove High School, the small school that built me in Porter County, Indiana, which cultivated my grit and perseverance that propelled me to seek a college degree and pursue educational aspirations and attain achievements beyond what I could envision. To all the first-generation students there's something special about being first, and being among the first in your family to attend and graduate from college is a very special first! My educational journey has been made possible by all the people who have supported and cheered me on. But also the many students that I've been able to serve in my 27 years in academia in Indiana and Florida. I want to thank all the students because I've learned so much from you and you've made me a better human, mother, college access and success advocate, coach, mentor, and servant leader.

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In many ways, my doctoral journey has been my Mount Everest. It has been one of the most challenging things I have done in my life. There were times, I did not think I could climb further and times I wanted to get off the mountain because my battle with imposter syndrome became too much. But every time I had the urge to give up, grit, perseverance, and sheer will, that I inherited from my great-grandmother Bertha Pence and grandmother Jane Miller, would rise within me along with a voice telling me to stay the course and keep going. For I had been burdened with a glorious purpose to tell a story that needed to be told and for people to hear. I'm proud of myself for my perseverance and most grateful for my supporters, cheerleaders, and Dreamkeepers that encouraged and supported me in reaching the top of the mountain.

Children

Delaney and Christopher Barber, you are my inspiration in everything that I do, especially when I'm trying to make a difference in this world for you and future generations. My doctoral journey has not been easy for either of you, and you both have made sacrifices that did not go unnoticed. But my hope for the two of you is the same as what Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson said to her two children during her confirmation hearing:

> I know it has not been easy as I have tried to navigate the challenges of juggling my career, doctoral pursuits, and motherhood. And I fully admit that I did not always get the balance right. But I hope that you have seen that with hard work, determination, and love, it can be done. I am so looking forward to seeing what each of you chooses to do with your amazing lives and the difference you will make in this world.

Committee

Many thanks to my dissertation committee. Dr. Marilyn Hirth (chair), you were my advisor for my higher education master's program and fate stepped in, which allowed you to be my advisor for my educational leadership and policy studies doctoral program. In addition to being a wonderful advisor, you have been one of my biggest Dreamkeepers. I will be forever grateful for the guidance, mentorship, grace, support, and dedication you provided me and all your doctoral students, we are better because of you. Dr. Stephanie Masta, you made me fall in love with qualitative research, especially narrative and storytelling methodology. Your course

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Village

In all my educational journeys as well as my career in academia, I have met people along the way that have made the journey easier, purposeful, authentic, gratifying, inspiring, hopeful, and fun, and for that, I'm eternally grateful. The following individuals are just a few of the notable Dreamkeepers, cheerleaders, and mentors in my life. Susan Brock Williams, a serendipitous encounter at the Indiana Statehouse, turned into job shadowing you and Tony Hahn, which turned into internships, mentorship, and friendship. Dr. Donna Fekete, you're a brilliant scientist and researcher that has provided me support and motivation, but I'm most thankful for our enduring friendship. Dr. Beth Holloway, your understanding, encouragement, and support in juggling my work obligations and my doctoral program are most appreciative. Dr. Donn Shilling, you taught me more about higher education and politics and the rules of the game than any of my degrees put together. Dr. Dale Whittaker, you told me I needed to enroll in an educational policy doctoral program, and you were right!

Participants

This study would not have been possible without the administration of the site school and the ten 11th grade students who took the leap of faith to participate in my study. You trusted me with your voices and your stories, and I learned so much from you. Thank you for giving me a window into your rural lived experience; I'm a better person and practitioner for knowing you. Never doubt you are amazing, worthy, enough, and can do anything!

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the rural schooling experience of ten high school students attending a small high school located in a rural county in Indiana regarding college and postsecondary aspirations. Specifically, do they have a positive, negative, or neutral view of college? Who or what is influencing their perceptions, values, and beliefs regarding college? Also, this study focused on rural Indiana, providing a Middle America "rural focus" because it is not prevalent in the literature. This qualitative single case study used a sociocultural framework and utilized information gathered from student personal essays, and semi-structured focus group interviews, which provided insights into how rural students perceive college. In addition to the student perspectives, the high school principal and college and career guidance counselor were also interviewed to provide context regarding the culture of the school, community, family involvement, and socioeconomic metrics and how these factors influence the educational and occupational aspirations of students at the site school. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded for data analysis. The data were analyzed using open coding as articulated by Given (2008) as well as the eight-step focus coding process articulated by Tesch (1990) to identify emergent themes. Six themes emerged as providing perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding college as well as the sociocultural and habitus influences concerning educational and occupational aspirations: (1) schooling experience; (2) juxtaposition of postsecondary education; (3) college is expensive; (4) guidance counselor- too many hats and limited resources; (5) influences of educational and occupational aspirations; (6) athletics – more than an extracurricular activity. Results showed the significance of the secondary schooling experience and the juxtaposition of postsecondary education, specifically concerning skilled

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trade occupations, especially for male students. The cost of college was discerning for the students as well as the burden of paying for college. Attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs differed based on perceived academic ability and gender. This study offers insights into the cultural role of the family, school, and community regarding postsecondary aspirations and how to increase postsecondary matriculation rates of rural youth.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I have chosen the topic of rural college access for my dissertation study for professional and personal reasons. As higher education access and success administrator, I know that rural college access has not received the same level of focus, attention, and support regarding recruitment and retention initiatives as other under-enrolled populations over the last twenty-five years. Regarding my personal intentions, I am a rural first-generation graduate. I grew up in a rural community and attended a small school in northwest Indiana. I had limited influence or encouragement to go to college from my teachers, school counselor, or family because I had a reading disability, and I was female. My teachers, school counselor, and family had low expectations of me and thought I would only aspire to be a secretary and/or a housewife and a stay-at-home mother. However, during my sophomore year of high school, my educational and occupational aspirations flourished because I wanted more for myself and my future. I also knew that a college degree was my only hope of having the future I desired. Needless to say, I have exceeded the educational and occupational expectations of my teachers, school counselor, and family. It was my personal drive, grit, and perseverance as well as my desire for more and different that enabled me to pursue higher education and my journey to obtain a doctorate. My personal and professional knowledge and experiences will provide context and insight throughout my qualitative dissertation study.

Background for this Study

Martin Jischke (2004), a prominent American higher-education administrator and advocate explains "With the Morrill Land-Grant Act, a young person growing up on the farm in rural Indiana had as much right and access to a college education as a young person of a wealthy

banker in Boston or New York" (p. 76). The Morrill Act of 1862 founded land-grant universities

and profoundly integrated the land-grant mission and rural communities (Sorber, 2018; Gavazzi

& Gee, 2018). However, the passing of the Land-Grant Act did not increase the number of rural

students matriculating to four-year universities. According to Rudolph & Thelin (1990), the low

enrollment statistics were attributed "to farmers' distrust of experts, the value of scientific

knowledge, and the belief that hands-on experience is the best teacher, as well as their belief that

college was a pathway for the youth to leave the rural community and their home" (p. 258).

The distrust of higher education, the need and value of a college degree and the fear that

college is a pathway for the youth to leave the rural community and their home is as palpable

today as it was twenty years after the Land-Grant Act of 1862 was signed. College access for

rural populations has been an ongoing and entrenched issue for rural students since the passing

of the Morrill Act. (Goldman, 2019; McDonough et al., 2010; Gavarzzi & Gee, 2018).

The ongoing and entrenched issue regarding rural students and higher education could prompt

the question as to why and what is causing the distrust of higher education and the sustainment

of lower college matriculation rates for over 159 years for rural populations.

Researching rural college access for my dissertation study was like peeling back an onion

one layer at a time. It became abundantly clear that the low college matriculation rate of rural

students is a complex problem. Understanding why college access for rural populations has been

an ongoing and entrenched issue is complicated and must account for multiple factors that are

interconnected and often in tension (Wells et al., 2019). Examples of the multiple factors include

cultural, social, economic, educational, and changing demographics (Carr & Kefalas, 2009;

Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Hektner, 1994; McDonough et al., 2010; Petrin et al., 2014;

Wells et al., 2019). Each factor is significant and intertwined fostering complex challenges and opportunities.

What is Rural?

The first complex challenge in researching rural college access is defining *what rural is.* It should be rather simplistic but unfortunately, this is not the case. According to Ayers et al., 2012, "Federal agencies can use over two dozen definitions of "rural" to meet various program needs" (p. 1). According to the USDA ERS (2019) "The existence of multiple rural definitions reflects the reality that rural and urban are multidimensional concepts" (p. 1). Most of the literature references governmental reports regarding census data, specifically population and distance to urban areas. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, they define rural as any population, housing, or territory not in an urban area. The NCES created a school locale classification system and defines rural (not in population) but rather the distance from an urbanized area (NCES, 2006). [Rural – fringe (less than 5 miles from an urbanized area), distant (5 to 25 miles from an urbanized area), and remote (over 25 miles from an urbanized area)]. Other metric governmental agencies utilize population density or geographic isolation. Population thresholds range from 2,500 residents to 50,000 to define rural communities (USDA ERS, 2019).

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines rural as counties that are not part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). An MSA is a merger of a county with a principal city of 50,000 or more population (Ayers et al., 2012). Another caveat of the definition is the level of commuting that is taking place either coming in or going out of a central county (USDA ERS, 2019). OMB also defines urban as metro and rural as nonmetro or micro. Defining "rural" also has its challenges in Indiana. Ayers et al., (2012) explained that "One challenge of using county

data in Indiana is that all counties are a mix of urban and rural areas. The most urban county of Marion has rural places" (p. 2). The Purdue Extension – Center for Rural Development defines rural areas that have less than 40,000 residents, less than 100 people per square mile, and less than 10,000 residents living in the largest city (Ayers et al., 2012). It appears that defining rural is not straightforward, nor consistent across governmental agencies and can be at times confusing. But overall rural is typically based on population size and distance to urban areas.

Rural Educational Challenges

Students from rural communities have historically experienced lower postsecondary education attainment in comparison to their non-rural peers (Koricich et al., 2018; Beaulieu et al., 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007). The lower postsecondary education attainment rate is further emphasized when controlling for income. Interestingly, as reported by the National Student Clearinghouse, when controlling for income and ethnicity, the highest-income white students from rural schools enroll at a rate of 61 percent, compared to 72 percent from urban schools and 74 percent from suburban ones (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017).

In addition, to lower postsecondary education attainment rates, research regarding college access for rural populations is sparse in comparison to urban and other underrepresented groups (Koricich, Chen & Hughes, 2018; McDonough et al., 2010). However, the 2016 election, thrust a spotlight on rural populations, especially in Middle America. The national attention has fostered an awakening or in my opinion, a "re-awakening" concerning rural college access by the media and higher education. The recent awakening has generated rural college access headlines in several higher education publications such as *The high-school grads least likely in America to go to college? Rural ones* were written by Marcus and Krupnick (2017). Rural Higher Education Crisis - *When it comes to college enrollment, students in Middle America – many of them white –*

face an uphill battle against economic and cultural deterrents written by Marcus and Krupnick

(2017)*; In Trump Country (Terre Haute Ind.), College is a Leaky Lifeboat* written by Beth

McMurtrie (2017).

These headlines depicted some of the challenges that rural students can face regarding

college access and upward mobility. For many generations, achieving upward and economic

mobility has been linked with attaining the American Dream (Johnson, 2018; Lazerson, 2010).

An effective lever in achieving upward and economic mobility is often associated with higher

education because a college degree has the propensity to improve employment and career

opportunities, and personal and professional success later in life (Milovanska-Farrington, 2020).

While the value of a college degree is often articulated in monetary terms, there are other

positive outcomes for those with a college degree, especially a bachelor's degree, such as lower

unemployment rates, employer-sponsored health insurance, retirement benefits, life expectancy,

civic engagement, community involvement, and volunteerism (Trostel, 2015, p. 67). Ideally,

rural students should have the same level of college access and opportunities as their non-rural

peers in improving their future career opportunities, the standard of living, life expectancy, and

the pursuit of happiness.

An additional compelling element regarding rural college access is the significance of the

rural population and small-town communities in Middle America, specifically Indiana.

Regarding rural Middle America, 62% of the population lives in places the Census labels as

rural, per *American Communities Project* (Chinni & Pinkus, 2019). According to the Rural

Health Hub (2020), "Indiana had a 2019 estimated population of 6,732,219 people – 1,459,274

living in rural Indiana" (p. 1). Furthermore, the Purdue Extension – Center for Rural

Development, Ayers et al., (2013) stated that of the 92 counties in Indiana, 42 are classified as

"rural" and 33 are classified as "rural/mixed" (p. 2). Also, nearly 250,000 students attend rural schools in Indiana. Proportionally, these students represent roughly one in four of the state's public-school students (Burke et al., 2016; Ritz, 2017; Showalter et al., 2019). The rural communities and the students attending rural schools in Indiana are a considerable population and their voices and interests should be heard.

Regarding rural voices and interests in Indiana, there is a significant study conducted by the U.S Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, Regional Educational Laboratory at American Institutes for Research (Burke et al., 2016) which articulates college enrollment patterns for rural Indiana high school graduates. While informative and useful, the report is data-intensive and articulates what is occurring but not why. Rural students are represented as a data element, but their voices are not represented. The voices and interests of rural students in Middle America, specifically Indiana need to be heard; because rural students in Indiana are under-researched in comparison to rural communities of Appalachia, specifically Kentucky and West Virginia than rural communities in the Midwest.

New Attention on Rural America and Education

In addition to the minimal rural research focusing on the Midwest, is the scarcity of qualitative research regarding rural college access. The qualitative rural college access study will help close this research gap, by utilizing rural student perceptions and stories of rural Indiana students regarding postsecondary education. The utilization of student perspectives provides a more authentic understanding of challenges and opportunities regarding education through a student-centered and individualized approach (Goldman, 2019: Eller et al., 1998; Rural Community College Initiative, 2001).

The national conversation regarding rurality and college education has garnered the attention of the media, educators, and policymakers in the aftermath of the 2016 election (Wells et al., 2019). This attention has fostered a certain level of momentum that I would like to capitalize on with this dissertation study regarding rural college access. As stated earlier in this chapter, rural college access is not a new problem or phenomenon, nor is there extensive research regarding it. Furthermore, qualitative research regarding rural college access is even less represented. I believe the time is right for educators, higher education personnel, and policymakers to hear from rural students themselves regarding their perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes about postsecondary aspirations.

In addition to the national conversation regarding rurality and college education is the statewide conversation that has been occurring. Indiana needs a strong workforce and an educated citizenry, and the role of higher education is more vital than ever. Governor Holcomb declared in his 2018 State of the State Address that "Indiana's greatest challenge is that too many Hoosiers lack the education and skills for the jobs that are here today and being created tomorrow – nearly all of which require a post-secondary education." According to the Indiana Commission of Higher for Higher Education college attainment dashboard, only around five Indiana counties have a college attainment rate at or higher than the national average and can compete in the knowledge and technological economy of the 21st century. Additionally, rural counties have more of an uphill battle as it combats educational deprivation. In many counties with the smallest school corporations, the level of educational attainment is among the lowest in the state (Camp & Waldorf, 2014, p. 2).

In addition to Hoosiers lacking the postsecondary education and skills needed for today's jobs, is a lack of confidence in higher education. The Indiana Commission for Higher Education spoke about the lack of confidence in the *2018 State of Higher Education Address*:

> We are caught in a paradox between a lack of confidence in higher education and a growing need for it. We must work to restore and build confidence in higher education because it's clear that the dividing line between the 'haves and have nots' is increasingly marked by Hoosiers with higher levels of education and those who lack it (p. 6).

The above statements from Indiana governmental entities articulate a few of the pressing problems facing Indiana regarding postsecondary education. In general, when there are educational problems to solve concerning students, it's the administrators, educators, and policymakers who are typically the only individuals in the room or have a seat at the table. While these individuals are quite knowledgeable, experienced, and have good intentions in addressing and solving educational problems concerning students; they are not a student themselves nor going through the educational experience. However, by listening to the voices of current rural high school students regarding college, K-12 administrators, educators, higher education personnel, and policymakers can incorporate their voices into their collaborative work to address the perceptions and barriers, thus making college access more inclusive for all students in Indiana who desire it.

Statement of the Problem

The problem this study will address is the emphasis on the rural student voice and perspective, which is often absent from discussions, decisions, and research regarding college access. When student voices are represented, they tend to be associated with quantitative research regarding survey results, which are prescribed responses. The unstructured, authentic voices in qualitative research are scarce. Not only are student voices not well represented in rural

college access literature, but the lack of research regarding rural college access is underrepresented in comparison to non-rural populations. (Koricich et al., 2018; Byun et al., 2015). Therefore, this study will be addressing two gaps regarding college access literature simultaneously. Additionally, in reviewing the limited literature regarding rural college access, many of the studies and articles have used quantitative methodology or large data sets. There are relatively few studies that focus on the lived experiences of rural high school students and their perceptions and aspirations regarding college. Per Goldman (2019), "Examining the stories of rural students is important to understanding access and barriers for underrepresented students in higher education" (p. 16). Also, qualitative research can provide information about "why" students choose to attend college or not (Beasley, 2011; Maltzan, 2006).

The "why" is important in understanding the fact that rural students enroll at lower rates (regardless of income or ethnicity) than non-rural students (Burke et al., 2016; Marcus & Krupnick, 2017; Showalter et al., 2019). In reviewing the research, we know that other factors can foster or restrict college access for rural students, such as the culture of the rural community and school, family expectations, socioeconomic status, college attainment of parents, and the need and desire to stay close to home (Agger et al., 2018; Ardoin, 2017; Brusoski et al., 1992; Goldman, 2018; McDonough et al., 2010). But how much influence do these attributes have on a student's decisions and choices regarding college? It is my intention for the qualitative case study to provide some insight into the "why" and "how" rural students aspire to attend or not attend college.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The primary purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate the perceptions of rural high school students in Indiana regarding college. The study will provide insight into how

perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward postsecondary education as well as, the culture of community and school, and family can influence rural students' aspirations and post-high school plans. Also, this study will focus on rural Indiana, providing a "rural focus" regarding "Middle America." But above all, this study will allow rural high school students in Indiana to be seen and heard.

As the researcher of the study and "storyteller" for the dissertation, I plan to frame the study with the student voices as the central component of the study. I believe rural students want to be seen and heard. More importantly, I think they want adults to inquire about their opinions and respect and honor their opinions and this is the intentionality of the study.

Before we can address rural college access challenges and opportunities, we need to know how students think, feel, and value college. I believe our stories, lived experiences, and voices are a powerful mechanism to bring awareness, transformation, and foster change for education and policy entities. Personal testimonials are the voices behind the statistics and quantitative data and bring a humanistic approach to solving educational problems. Also, I plan to utilize the results of the study to provide recommendations for K-12 administrators, school counselors, higher education personnel, and policymakers regarding college access in Indiana.

Ideally, I want to provide a balanced approach in articulating the advantages and disadvantages for rural communities regarding college access. There appears to be more of a deficit lens or negative slant regarding rural communities and their culture in rural college access literature. I believe this negative or deficient perspective can be damaging and undermine the understanding and responsiveness regarding rural college access. Rural students are not less than their peers living in other geographic areas of the United States. Nor are their educational aptitudes or the dreams they have for themselves. Therefore, to do justice to the rural students in

this study and around the country, I plan to frame the study and various processes with a balanced approach, providing both advantages and disadvantages of growing up in a rural community and attending a small school.

Lastly, the objective of this study is not to set an opposition of rural students against other marginalized groups regarding college access. The focus of this study is to bring awareness to another marginalized group regarding college access, but not at the expense of other marginalized groups. There can sometimes be a tendency when advocating or focusing on one marginalized group to diminish another. Therefore, it is my intention, as the researcher for this study, to bring awareness to rural students without diminishing their relevance to other groups. All marginalized groups regarding college access need to be lifted up as a collective inclusive group. As a college access and success champion, I believe education has the power to transform and improve lives…. A rising tide lifts all boats – and this also applies to lifting up all marginalized groups regarding college access (Teach for All, 2014).

Research Questions

This study will answer the following research questions:

1) What is the rural schooling experience of high school students in Indiana?

2) How does the high school rural schooling experience inform perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding postsecondary aspirations?

Significance of the Study

Why rural college access in Indiana? As stated in previous sections, there is a gap between the number of rural and nonrural high students who attend post-secondary institutions, and there are many positive outcomes related to postsecondary education. Also,

college access is not a new phenomenon but a been a long-standing issue for rural students. However, recent rhetoric and media attention since the 2016 election, may cultivate this perception (Wells et al., 2019). Encouraging college access for rural populations to seek a college degree has been ongoing since the Land Grant Act of 1862 (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018; Jischke, 2004; Rudolph & Thelin, 1991). However, the recent attention regarding rural student college access has fostered a certain momentum, that I would like to leverage, especially drawing attention to the voices of rural students in Middle America.

Rural college access is an under-researched area, especially regarding the intersection of rural cultures and higher education. The study strives to bridge this gap, especially concerning the focus on rural students' thoughts, beliefs, and values regarding college. Students' testimonials can bring quantitative data to life in a manner that statistics alone cannot. Students' perspectives provide an understanding through a student-centered lens which can be far more challenging to discount and ignore. By reading personal accounts of rural students, K-12 administrators, school counselors, college administrators, and policymakers can garner tangible authentic insights into how students, think and believe regarding college. And in return, I hope to take those insights and align them with policies, resources, best practices, and programming. Lastly, my study should provide student-centered evidence that K-12, higher education, and state agencies need to collaboratively partner together to assist rural students in maximizing their potential in K-12 and providing them the necessary support and guidance regarding postsecondary aspirations, confidence, and access to higher education.

Limitations of the Study

This study will examine the perceptions of ten 11th graders in one high school in a rural community in Indiana. One limitation of the study is that it will be a single case study. The

findings of one school, in one particular rural county in Indiana, may not represent other rural schools and counties across Indiana in the same manner. Ideally, it would be more advantageous to interview students at two or more high schools residing in different rural communities across Indiana. This would allow for more comparison and contrast regarding the culture of the school and rural community that can impact student perceptions of college.

The other limitation will be the absence of the student's family perceptions and voice regarding higher education. Families are a significant influence on the children's decision to pursue or not pursue higher education. Including the family's voice regarding how they value and perceive higher education and why or why not they are encouraging their adolescent in pursuing a college degree.

Definition of Terms

AP: Advanced Placement offers students the opportunity to take college-level courses and exams in high school and earn college credit, advanced placement, or both at many colleges and universities in the U.S. and around the world. (https://parents.collegeboard.org/college-board-programs/advanced-placement-program).

Apprenticeship: A learning program for young people, age 16 and older, that integrates on-the-job learning with school-based instruction, which bridges high school and post-secondary schooling, and that results in both academic credentials and national and global certification from the U.S. Department of Labor.
https://www.in.gov/dwd/files/STRA%20Guide%20-%20Indiana.pdf

Beliefs and Values: Tenets or convictions that people hold to be true. Individuals in a society have specific beliefs, but they also share collective values. Values are a culture's standard for

discerning what is good and just in society. Values are deeply embedded and critical for transmitting and teaching a culture's beliefs. https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-introductiontosociology/chapter/values-and-beliefs/

College, Higher Education & Post-Secondary: Educational institution or establishment, in particular one providing higher education or specialized professional or vocational training. While these terms can be interchangeable, when providing data elements, I will specify college in terms of 2-year or 4-year.

College Access: Typically refers to how educational institutions and policies ensure—or at least strive to ensure—that students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education (https://www.edglossary.org/access/).

Culture: Sociology understands culture as the languages, customs, beliefs, rules, arts, knowledge, and collective identities and memories developed by members of all social groups that make their social environments meaningful.
https://www.asanet.org/topics/culture#:~:text=Sociology%20understands%20culture%20as%20the,make%20their%20social%20environments%20meaningful. Anthropology defines culture as the shared set of (implicit and explicit) values, ideas, concepts, and rules of behavior that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself. Anthropologists understand culture as the dynamic and evolving socially constructed reality that exists in the minds of social group members. It is the "normative glue" that allows group members to communicate and work effectively together. Academic.oup.com (culture and quality: an anthropological perspective).

Dual-Credit: In Indiana, 'dual credit' is the term given to courses in which high school students have the. opportunity to earn both high school and college credits in the same course.

https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/student-assistance/doe-che-dual-credit-faqs-1419.pdf

Middle-America: Per Wikipedia Geographically, the label *Middle America* refers to the territory between the East Coast of the United States (particularly the northeast) and the West Coast. The term has been used in some cases to refer to the inland portions of coastal states, especially if they are rural. Alternately, the term is used to describe the central United States.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_America_(United_States)

Non-Rural: Everyone who is not considered rural. Typically, non-rural populations are categorized as Urban or Suburban utilizing the U.S. Census Bureau or the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Urbanized areas are considered by the U.S. Census Bureau (2018) to be areas of 50,000 residents or more.

Perceptions: The process or result of becoming aware of objects, relationships, and events utilizing the senses, which includes such activities as recognizing, observing, and discriminating. These activities enable organisms to organize and interpret the stimuli received into meaningful knowledge and to act in a coordinated manner. https://dictionary.apa.org/perception

Conclusion

Chapter 1 provided context for this study by articulating several important elements regarding rural college access. One important element is that rural college access is not a new phenomenon by a long-standing and entrenched issue. Historically, rural college access was first addressed with the passing of the Land Grant Act of 1862. The land-grant mission was

established to teach agriculture, engineering, and liberal arts, to the children of the working

class and farmers, especially in rural areas of the country (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018; Rudolph &

Thelin; 1991, p. 249). However, the major legislative policy did not increase the number of

rural students in higher education, as it was intended to.

Another important element is that rural students have historically experienced lower

postsecondary attainment in comparison to their non-rural peers (Koricich et al., 2018;

Beaulieu et al., 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007). While rural populations are smaller in

comparison to non-rural populations, they are still a significant population, with roughly one

in four students in Indiana attending a rural school (Burke et al., 2016; Ritz, 2017; Showalter

et al., 2019). While there is a good body of research regarding college access, few studies

focus on rural students. Of the limited research regarding rural college access, qualitative

research is even less represented. Therefore, the study will bridge this gap, especially in regard

to the focus on rural students' testimonies, regarding their community and school culture,

beliefs, and values regarding college. I believe our stories and voices bring quantitative data to

life in a manner that statistics alone cannot.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Friesen & Purc-Stephenson (2016), explain that "A college education can provide an individual with greater employment options, higher income potential, and improved health and quality of life, yet young persons from rural areas remain less likely to attend college than their non-rural counterparts" (p. 138). There is a robust amount of literature regarding college access, but most of the attention is focused on nonrural students, however, rural students have lower matriculation rates in higher education (Caldwell and Trainer, 1991; McDonough et al., 2010; McGrath et al., 2001; Smith et al., 1995;). Furthermore, McDonough et al., (2010) articulated "Rural college access largely has been ignored as a substantive policy issue, as most recent work on college access has focused on large inner-city schools as well as the needs of African American and Latino students" (p. 191).

There is consensus among researchers and studies that rural students are underrepresented in higher education and that rural college access is under-researched, that a majority of the studies are quantitative, that the importance of increasing college matriculation rates for rural students, has not received the same attention as other marginalized groups, and that the importance of additional research and studies devoted to rural students is now critical (Ardoin, 2017; Beasley, 2011; Burke et al., 2016; Byun et al., 2015; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Goldman, 2019; Kryst et al., 2018). However, there is variance in the literature as to why rural students matriculate at lower levels than non-rural students, especially at four-year universities. Some of the literature attributes the low matriculation rates as an educational phenomenon where rural students are not academically prepared to go to college, while others highlight the family's SES and educational attainment rate as contributing factors. But Charles Fluharty, the

president, and CEO of the Rural Policy Research Institute at the University of Iowa believes the lower matriculation to college is a cultural phenomenon, not an educational phenomenon (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). I think it is important to note that the lower college matriculation rate of rural students is just not attributed to one phenomenon, one reason, or attribute, but rather a combination of both educational and cultural features are more than likely at play. However, it appears from the literature that cultural attributes have not always received the same level of research as educational attributes.

The review of literature also uncovered that lower college matriculation rates of rural students are not a new phenomenon, but it is a phenomenon dating back to the signing of the Land Grant Act of 1862 (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018; Rudolph & Thelin, 1991). In addition to the sustained lower college matriculation rates are the long-held beliefs of the rural community regarding higher education. Twenty years after the Land Grant Act was passed, very few rural students pursued a college education. The low enrollment statistics were attributed to the farmer's distrust of experts, the value of scientific knowledge, and the belief that hands-on experience is the best teacher (Rudolph & Thelin,1990, p. 258).

Furthermore, the rural community was growing resentful of higher education because "college" was a pathway for the youth to leave the rural community and their home (Rudolph, 1990, p. 258). The distrust of higher education, the need and value of a college degree and the fear that college is a pathway for the youth to leave the rural community and their home is as palpable today as it was twenty years after the Land-Grant Act of 1862 was signed. This can make one wonder as to why and what is causing the distrust of higher education and the sustainment of lower college matriculation rates for over 159 years for the rural population.

Not only do educators and policymakers need to understand the *why* and the *what*, but they need to provide innovative solutions. There is now a sense of urgency regarding the relationship between higher education and rural communities. The nation's countryside is and has been experiencing for some time, incremental declining shifts regarding manufacturing, agriculture, and coal mining (Beasley, 2011; Carr and Kefalas, 2009; Petrin et al., 2014). This has caused industries to shift or become obsolete, elimination of blue-collar jobs, and decreasing population of rural communities, including Indiana (Carr and Kefalas, 2009; Camp and Waldorf, 2014; Jischke, 2004; Waldorf et al., 2013). Most of the jobs in Indiana that are in demand today and will be in the future, require some level of postsecondary education (Holcomb, 2018).

One means of addressing the *why* and the *how* is to examine the cultural phenomenon ideology regarding the systematic low matriculation college rates of the rural community and their long-held perceptions, beliefs, and values regarding higher education. To understand the cultural phenomenon of rural college access, I reviewed a collection of articles, books, and studies regarding, the importance of place (*habitus)* and people, sociocultural theory (cultural & social capital), and how it can influence educational and occupational aspirations and expectations of rural youth.

Rural America

Cultural Attributes

I think it would be beneficial to first explain "what rural is" beyond a governmental definition based on population size. The cultural definition of rural is often overlooked in the literature, which I think is problematic because it provides context for those not familiar with rurality and sets the stage for other facets regarding rural college access literature. Rural communities are often portrayed as being small, tight-knit, family and community-oriented.

People who reside in rural communities are depicted as valuing relationships with their family, friends, neighbors, community, school, and their place of worship. They value tradition, legacy, nostalgia, hard work, and the land (Ardoin, 2019; Beasley, 2011; Carr and Kefalas, 2009; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Goldman, 2019; Jischke, 2004; McDonough et al., 2010). According to Jischke (2004), "People from Indiana sing about open fields, gleaming candlelight, sycamores, new-mown hay, and the moonlight on the Wabash River, these are rural images (p. 75).

There are also symbols and terms frequently associated with describing rural communities such as countryside, agriculture fields, livestock, barn, tractor, gravel roads, county fairs, 4-H, isolated, absence of traffic lights, noise, and hurriedness (Ardoin, 2019; Carr and Kefalas, 2009; Jischke, 2004). These rural characteristics and symbols are the cornerstone of rural communities. They are valued, protected, and have sustained rural communities for centuries. Some of these cultural rural attributes will be referenced in subsequent sections of the literature review and their cultural influence on educational and occupational aspirations and expectations.

Cultural Theories of Reproduction

Rural Community Culture –Habitus

The rural communities or "place" as some of the literature discusses, appear to be the core or central cultural conduit of rurality (Ardoin, 2019; Carr and Kefalas, 2009; Hektner, 1994; McDonough et al., 2010; Smith et al., 1995). One prominent theory is referenced often regarding the culture of rural communities and that is "Habitus." Habitus is a concept fostered by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu's habitus theory is concerned with the effects of culture and how it's reproduced and transformed within places and family, in education and careers (Ardoin, 2017; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990;

McDonough et al., 2010). Habitus is related to rural Indiana as well. Rural counties in Indiana have the lowest educational deprivation in Indiana (Camp & Waldorf, 2014). In addition to the lowest educational deprivation is the intergenerational mobility of rural families.

Interpretations of Bourdieu's habitus theory are broad and somewhat dense. Fortunately, some of the literature clarified this concept into more basic or literal terms, which made it more practical and user-friendly. For example, Robbins (2012), explained: "*Habitus* is a unique set of ideas about what is considered possible or reasonable particular to a place" (p. 104). Also, Edgerton & Roberts (2014), interpreted *habitus* as "A set of acquired dispositions, the internalized interpretive framework, rooted in family upbringing and conditioned by one's position in the social structure, through which one perceives the social world and one's prospects within it" (p. 198). The importance of habitus and its significant role in rural communities was also evident in the literature. McDonough et al., (2010) explained habitus "As the guiding hand of the rural life" (p. 203). The interpretations and importance of Bourdieu's *habitus* theory correlate with later sections of this chapter regarding how the intersection of community and family can influence rural youth's educational and occupational aspirations and expectations.

The connection of *habitus* concerning aspirations and expectations was also articulated in the literature. Ardoin (2018), explains that "Habitus materializes as individuals' aspirations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, expectations, practices, actions, and appreciations, an enduring sense of one's place in the world" (p. 28). Furthermore, McDonough et al., (2010) state "Decisions are based on a set of possibilities within the parameters of sustaining the cultural practices of the area" (p. 203). This is a significant statement and can be interpreted as limiting. With key phrases of "based on a set of possibilities" and "within the parameters" of sustaining cultural practices. This ideology can be a sharp contrast to the notion of limitless possibilities and

that youth should follow their dreams, "think big" or "be anything they want to be." Bourdieu's *habitus* theory sheds light on the significance of *place* and its cultural practices, beliefs, and values, and the role it plays in cultivating rural youth's educational and occupational aspirations in the social and cultural reproduction of rural communities (Ardoin, 2017, Beasley, 2011; McDonough et al., 2010). Social and cultural reproduction also applies to families.

Cultural Capital – Family

Another cultural theme prominent in literature is Bourdieu's well-known work regarding cultural capital (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Ardoin (2018) explains that "Bourdieu recognizes that educational systems favor those with privileged identities whose knowledge and behaviors are perceived as highly valuable and who have tools to navigate the systems, creating a social production cycle" (p. 26). If this is true of privileged identities, then the opposite could be said for those less privileged and educated, who do not have a working knowledge and behaviors to navigate a system that does not favor them, thus creating a social production cycle of their own that does not include higher education.

The literature articulated cultural capital as knowledge, language, and values that families transmit to their children (Ardoin, 2019; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; McDonough et al., 2010). Cultural capital can also be thought of as the *habitus* of the family. Li (2019) expressed cultural capital as "Values and attitudes with cultural codes, practices, and dispositions of a family" (p. 3). Similar to *habitus,* cultural capital can also predispose rural youth to what is possible, reasonable, acceptable, and expected. The concept of cultural capital can predispose rural youth to what is possible within a specific family and also be perceived as a production cycle of sorts, either encouraging or discouraging the pursuit of college (Ardoin, 2018; McDonough et al., 2010).

Much of the literature frames the cultural capital of rural families and communities as a disadvantage or with a deficit lens regarding higher education. The deficit lens is supported by evidence that rural families tend to have lower SES and educational attainment than nonrural families (Ardoin, 2019, Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Koricich et al., 2018; Li, 2019). According to Li (2019), "Parental education levels, which represent family cultural capital, have relatively lower educational levels than non-rural parents" (p. 3). Which can be viewed as a disadvantage in navigating the system of postsecondary education.

Brusoski et al., (1992) explain "The amount of encouragement experienced by students who had at least one parent attend some college was significantly greater than the amount of encouragement perceived by students if neither of their parents attended college" (p. 230). If the level of family encouragement regarding college is correlated with their educational level, knowing the college attainment rate of working adults in Indiana might be beneficial. Currently, 39% of working adults in Indiana hold a 2-year or 4-year degree, per the Indiana Commission of Higher Education (2016). But only 17.9% hold a 4-year degree. Furthermore, according to the Purdue Extension Center for Rural Development (2014), the average 4-year education attainment for rural Indiana is 13.4%.

While family SES and educational attainment are important factors regarding cultural capital, these two indicators may distract from the positive aspects of the values, cultural codes, and other types of capital that rural families and communities possess. The close relationship between family, school, and community can foster a more supportive and caring culture for rural students regarding them as individuals who hold their educational and occupational aspirations (McDonough et al., 2010; Li, 2019; Ardoin 2018).

The concept of habitus and cultural capital as articulated above are important factors that can predispose rural youth to what is possible, reasonable, acceptable, and expected. Furthermore, social norms, traditions, and community values can directly influence perceptions regarding college (Ardoin, 2018; Li, 2019; Robbins, 2012). However, the schools that rural youth attends represent another cultural entity that is influential.

Culture Capital – School

The culture of the school also plays a role in influencing rural youth's educational aspirations and expectations. The cultural capital of schools was articulated in the literature as small, personal, close relationships between educators, students, and families and school familiarity with the community (McDonough et al., 2010). The culture of the school can also extend to how the school personnel value and perceive the educational and occupational expectations of the students they serve. Schools that have a favorable perception of higher education are sometimes referred to as having a college-going culture (Ardoin, 2019).

The significance of the culture of the school and how the school counselor and administration view and value college is significant for rural families. As stated previously many rural families have limited personal experience regarding higher education and rely on school personnel, specifically school counselors to guide educational and occupational expectations (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). School counselors are often perceived as the educated "expert" regarding post-high school planning. Ardoin (2018) explains, "Counselors have a significant influence not only on individual students but also on the college-going culture of the public high school and even the broader community" (p. 73). As articulated earlier, the culture of the community can influence the culture of the school and the school counselor to either encourage or discourage college. Also, Friesen & Purc-Stephenson (2016) articulate

The lack of school guidance and motivation to attend college may be another example of Bourdieu's idea of habitus. Specifically, educators can actively discourage young people from the idea of pursuing university, by relaying stories of hardships, debts incurred, and strains on relationships – all of which acted to reaffirm the young persons' understanding that a college education is not a realistic goal for people in a rural area (p. 148).

The power and control that culture – *habitus* of *place* has on rural schools and residents appear to be significant and far-reaching. The rural culture of the community is a driving force and a compelling force that affects the culture of the school and the mindset regarding how students are influenced or discouraged from thinking and actively pursuing college (Ardoin, 2018; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; McDonough et al., 2010). The culture of place, *habitus,* and the cultural capital of family and school are influential on rural youth and their significance regarding low college matriculation rates.

Theoretical Framework – Sociocultural Theory

My approach to understanding the problem of low college matriculation rates of rural students and the framework in which my study will be informed is utilizing sociocultural theory (Eisenhart and Allen, 2020). The sociocultural theory originated in the early 20th century by a Soviet psychologist, Lev S. Vygotsky (Scott, 2013, p. 1). However, the foundation of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory was greatly influenced by German philosophers of Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Fredrich Engels (Marginson and Dang, 2017, p. 117).

According to Marginson and Dang (2016) "Since 1960 Vygotsky and sociocultural theory have received growing attention outside of Russia and the influence of sociocultural theory continues to grow especially in educational research"(p. 120). I think utilizing the lens of sociocultural theory and its influence on economics, sociology, psychology, and political theory complements my rural college access study quite nicely. In simplistic terms, the sociocultural

theory emphasizes "the interaction between developing people and the culture in which they live" (Cherry, 2018, p. 1). Sociocultural theory resonates with me because of the relationship between the social and cultural constructs of place, family, and school in rural communities and the cultural factors and influences regarding rural college access. The sociocultural theory provides an understanding of how, values, beliefs, and perceptions are learned and adopted in rural communities; and the important role those local economies play in the educational and occupational aspirations of rural youth.

Furthermore, I found research, which used sociocultural theory to address rural college access and address the underrepresentation of young women of color in engineering and computer science through the lens of sociocultural theory (Beasley, 2011; Eisenhart and Allen, 2020). Their research speaks to my study by examining rural college access and the underrepresentation of rural youth at four-year universities. Sarah Beasley (2011) used sociocultural theory in her dissertation study of college pathways among rural first-generation students. I agree with Sarah Beasley (2011) that to better understand why rural students who are academically qualified to attend four-year universities but continue to matriculate at lower rates, it appears incumbent to explore how the social and cultural influences and "the interaction between the student and culture" could be a contributing factor (p. 75).

While Beasley applied sociocultural theory in addressing rural college access, Eisenhart and Allen applied sociocultural theory in addressing the underrepresentation of young women of color in engineering and computing. Eisenhart and Allen (2020) outlined three central components of the theory which were conceptualized from the works of Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1988) in their book *Identify and Agency in Cultural* Worlds. The three central components of the sociocultural theory as articulated by Eisenhart and Allen (2020)

1. The institutional structures that provide opportunities by organizing individuals for participation in local practices

2. The figured worlds or cultural imaginaries, which provide symbolic and discursive resources for mediating or interpreting participation in local practices

3. The social identifies and self-authoring processes that individuals wrestle with as they participate in local practices (p.795).

In applying the above components of sociocultural theory to my study, institutional structures will pertain to schooling, both inside and outside the classroom. Figured world or cultural imaginaries that provide "symbolic" resources are the community and family environments, structures, and practices that youth are exposed to and navigate as traditions, mindset, and norms. Symbolic resources of rural communities were referenced at the beginning of the chapter regarding rural attributes. The symbols, traditions, cultural norms, and way of living are impactful for developing youth. The rural youth can wrestle with social and cultural identities regarding their occupational decisions in continuing the tradition of work in their family and community or leaving their home and family for educational and occupations opportunities for something different.

As stated in previous sections in this chapter, rural cultural local practices are filled with symbols, traditions, values, beliefs, and legacy (both of family and community), where community, family, and schools are interconnected and sustaining cultural practices. Regarding rural college access, the interaction and relationship between the development of the youth and the historical culture regarding their community, family, and school are aligned with the sociocultural theory premise.

Rural College Readiness

While a majority of this chapter addresses the cultural phenomenon of rural college access, I think it is important to provide some context regarding rural college readiness metrics as it relates to rural students being educationally prepared to go to college. Another reason is to address the assumptions that rural students are not as academically prepared as nonrural students to attend four-year universities. The rural youth's academic preparedness appears to be rather comparative to their non-rural peers but does incur some gaps (Kryst et al., 2018). The national college readiness metrics, according to the *Why Rural Matters Report* (2019), 88.7% graduate from high school, 20.1% of rural juniors and seniors (males) enrolled in dual enrollment, while 26.1% (females) enrolled in dual enrollment. The national dual enrollment rate is higher at 34%. While the rural dual enrollment is lower than the national average, it could indicate access issues in taking dual enrollment courses and/or parental educational attainment.

According to a nationally representative study regarding dual enrollment, from the U.S. Department of Education, parental educational attainment has been shown to correlate with dual credit participation at the high school level (Shivji and Wilson, 2019). Another important note regarding rural dual credit participation pertains to gender differences and I will explore gender gaps in the expectations and attainment section of the literature review. Lastly, only 9.5% of juniors and seniors pass at least one AP exam, and only 46.5% of juniors and seniors take the ACT or SAT (Showalter et al., 2019). While the AP exam rate is lower than the national average, the ACT or SAT taking rate appears to be in line with nonrural test-taking rates (Burke et al., 2015).

With the focus of this study on rural youth in Indiana, it is important to understand how rural youth in Indiana compare to their rural peers nationwide. According to the report on rural education, *Why Rural Matters Report (2019)*, regarding college readiness metrics, Indiana's

graduation rate is 92.4% which is higher than the national rural average, and Indiana's dual credit enrollment rates are significantly higher than the national rural rate, 45.9% (males) and 46.1% (females) (Showalter et al., 2019). Dual credit enrollment rates can be an indication of college preparedness because high school students are earning college credit. Indiana also has a higher rate of juniors and seniors passing at least one AP exam (10.6%), however, only 38.8% of juniors and seniors took the ACT or SAT. Additionally, Indiana's ACT and SAT rate is 7.7% below the national rural average. This is a significant finding because the ACT and SAT are tests that students traditionally take to apply to college, especially at four-year universities.

The findings from the *Why Rural Matters Report* regarding the ACT & SAT test-taking rates of Indiana rural high school graduates also correspond with the findings in the *College enrollment patterns for rural Indiana high school graduates* study published in June 2015 (Burke et al., 2016; Showalter et al., 2019). A higher percentage of rural graduates did not have an ACT or SAT score than nonrural high school graduates. However, the rural graduates who do take the ACT or SAT receive comparative scores to nonrural graduates. The academic statistics (graduation rate, dual enrollment, and test scores) demonstrate that rural Indiana high school graduates are just as academically prepared to go to college, including four-year universities. However, rural Indiana students are not taking the college entrance exams at the same rate as the national rural rate nor their nonrural peers in Indiana. The lower ACT & SAT take rates might be attributed to educational and occupational aspirations and expectations of rural students in Indiana.

Aspirations and Expectations of Rural Youth

Rural students have lower college matriculation rates than nonrural students and there is also growing evidence that suggests rural students have lower levels of educational and

occupational aspirations and expectations than nonrural students (Cobb, 1989; Molefe et al., 2017). Aspirations are typically associated with goals, purpose, ambitions, plans, desires, and dreams (Cobb, 1989; Ley et al.,1996). Robert Cobb (1989) eloquently stated, "Aspirations are what drive individuals to do more and be more than they presently are" (p. 12). Expectations are associated with the likelihood of attaining a goal or outcome of what one thinks will happen (Molefe et al.,2017; MacBrayne, 1987; Odell, 1988). Aspirations and expectations are relational in the sense that aspirations are what students think or feel about "themselves" and expectations are what others (family and educators) hold for them and their aspirations (Ley et al., 1996, p. 134).

Aspirations and expectations are linked in the literature regarding the premise that they are predictors of college attendance and completion and occupational attainment (Meece et al., 2012). It is also important to note that there is a difference between educational and occupational aspirations but are often referenced as a collective component. There is one particular article by Cobb et al., (1989) that articulated educational and occupational aspirations in a succinct manner that aligns with my research question superbly,

> Education and career aspirations relate to how much value people assign to formal education and how far they indent to pursue it, i.e. do they seek a high school diploma, a four-year college degree, or other post-secondary training, or perhaps a Ph.D. or M.D. degree? (p.12)

The two important concepts in the above definition pertain to the value of higher education and its intent in pursuing it. If an individual does not value higher education nor do they or others see them as pursuing it, then it appears unlikely they will attend college. Also, if their occupational aspirations do not require formal education and they are not expected to attend college, the less likely they will attend college (Meece et al., 2012; Petrin et al., 2014).

Factors That Influence Aspirations and Expectations

Friesen & Purc-Stephenson (2016), articulate that "Some of the research suggests that the barriers preventing rural youth from pursuing postsecondary education are multidimensional and interrelated" (p. 139). The literature also indicates that rural students tend to have lower aspirations of post-secondary education expectations, especially higher-level degrees, and aspire to occupations that are considered more blue-collar or working-class positions than do nonrural students (Cobb et al., 1989; Ley et al., 1996; Molefe et al., 2017).

In addition, the literature has indicated that some influences or factors are contributing to lower or limiting aspirations and expectations of rural youth. The factors articulated in the literature attribute the limitations to geographic isolation, exposure to occupational opportunities outside their community, economic opportunities within their community, interaction with college-educated individuals, school curriculum, proximately to higher education opportunities, and social and cultural expectations that may not value or encourage higher education (Meece et al., 2013; Petrin et al., 2014; Wells et al., 2019).

It is important to note that there is not just one factor or influence but several that are contributing to the aspirations and expectations of rural youth and therefore not one factor or influence is contributing to lower matriculation rates of rural youth. Furthermore, many of these factors and influences are interrelated but can conflict with one another. This can help make meaning of why rural youth have the aspirations and expectations they do and how much value rural youth have for higher education. However, many of these factors and influences can be grouped into three main categories, family, school, and community.

Family

A rural student's relationship with their family unit can directly or indirectly affect educational and occupational aspirations (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). The research indicates that the expectations and support of the family unit play an important role in fostering rural youth's college and occupational aspirations (Ardoin, 2018; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Li, 2019). Brusoki et al. (1992), convey the important role of family "Parental encouragement has the ability to exert a powerful influence and has been shown to overcome the effects of low SES and average intelligence (p. 226).

The family unit in rural communities has been described as close-knit and somewhat unique. For example, there can be multiple generations of a family living in the same rural community or on the same road, living on land that has been handed down for generations. The small population, isolation, and neighbors who might be some distance away, can intensify the need for families to be more connected and insular. This sense of family connectedness can influence educational and occupational aspirations and be a factor if the family will encourage or discourage higher education.

One noteworthy overarching finding in the rural literature uncovered families with opposing mindsets regarding educational, occupational, and quality of life aspirations and expectations of their children. Some families have the mindset that they want and encourage their children to have a better standard of living than they have. This entails earning more money, having a career rather than a job, and exploring and living in different parts of the country (Beasley, 2011; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). These families also know for their children to achieve these goals, will more than likely entail going away to college, and more than likely their future occupation will be located outside their rural community, region, or state.

While other families have a contrasting mindset that their children should do the same type of work and live in the same community as they do. The child should have the same occupational aspirations as they do by going to work in the same industry or occupation, such as coal mining, manufacturing, or farming (Cobb et al., 1989; Charles Fluharty, 2017; Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). This perspective was also captured in Beasley's (2011) dissertation study regarding a coal mining town in West Virginia. "One community member described how some families in the area discouraged college-going because they want to prevent children from "rising about their raising" (p. 125).

What is important to understand regarding the contrasting mindsets is they both have merit and should be valued and respected. Rather than level an external judgment about which mindset is right or wrong, allow these mindsets to be informative by providing insights and cultural context regarding educational and occupational aspirations and expectations. Additionally, why, and how do some families have the expectations they do regarding their children's future.

Another theme in the literature speaks to how working-class families have a more pragmatic and short-term view of education. Also, rural working-class families perceive a four-year degree as taking too long, too expensive, and not providing the kind of jobs locally (Corbett, 2009). The factors of family SES, parental educational attainment, and the relationship between education and work, may not promote a positive influence on college. This collaborates with Li's (2019), findings that "Rural parents are less likely to expect their children to attend college than non-rural parents; their lower parental educational attainment further limits the probability of rural students' have college expectations" (p. 4).

School Personnel

For many rural youths, the only exposure to college-educated adults occurs at school. (Beasley, 2011; Ley et al., 1996; Petrin, 2014). School administrators, teachers, and school counselors are sometimes the only adults they know who have gone to college and obtained a four-year college degree. However, the role of schooling regarding the aspirations and expectations of rural youth is under-researched in comparison to family and community influences (Petrin et al., 2014, p. 296). This is surprising because school personnel is another influence regarding educational and occupational expectations for rural youth.

Similar to the role of families, school personnel can have a positive or negative impact on rural youth. Molefe et al., (2017), found that "Students whose teachers had higher education expectations for them were more likely to match those educational expectations" (p. 14). This finding correlates with Angela Duckworth's (2016) work "There's a vast amount of research on what happens when we believe a student is especially talented. We begin to lavish extra attention on them and hold them to higher expectations. We expect them to excel, and that expectation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 26). If students feel encouraged, supported, and believe that others believe in them and their abilities, their educational aspirations will rise. Sarah Beasley (2011) also found this true in her dissertation study regarding rural college access, "In such small schools, individual teachers and guidance counselors can have a positive impact on many students" (p. 190). While support, encouragement, and setting of high expectations for students can have a positive effect on youth's educational and occupational aspirations; the school's familiarity with the community's way of life may directly encourage or discourage students from pursuing college. Rural schools and rural educators may find themselves in a paradox of sorts of trying to encourage and support the educational and occupational aspirations of their students while at the same time sustaining a labor force for the local community. School

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administrators, teachers, and school counselors have to maintain this balance of shaping rural

youth trajectories between what is best for the student, respecting the educational and

occupational mindsets of the families they serve, and providing a future workforce for the

sustainment of the rural community they are a part of (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; McDonough et al.,

2010; Petrin et al., 2014).

This paradox has caused some rural schools to sort their students into groups about their

educational ability, promise, and expectations. This sorting concept is articulated by Carr and

Kefalas's (2009) ethnographic research, depicting a rural community in Iowa. In *Hallowing Out*

the Middle, Carr, and Kefalas label the grouping as Achievers, Stayers, Seekers, and Returners.

> The "best kids" are the high-achieving, most-likely-to-succeed students destined
> for college and rarely return. The ones with the biggest problems the stayers, get
> trapped in the region's fading economy. So as achievers are pushed, prodded, and
> cultivated to leave, and credit their teachers for being integral to their success, the
> stayers view school as alienating experience and zoom into the labor force
> because few people are invested in keeping them on the postsecondary track, and
> the lure of a regular paycheck is hard to resist (p. 2).

The paradox is challenging and not optimal for everyone involved. Ideally, all students should be

invested and supported in attaining their educational and occupational aspirations. But rural areas

are facing complex challenges and understanding how rural communities influence educational

aspirations and expectations is complicated and riddled with conflicts (Petrin et al., 2014; Wells

et al., 2019).

Community

The rural community is another factor and influence in shaping rural youth's educational

and occupational aspirations and expectations. Similar to family and schooling, the community is

where their home and family are, and for some youth, they may not have ventured outside their

county of residence their entire lives. Their ability to remain in the community may hinge on

local occupational and economic opportunities. Therefore, their educational and occupational aspirations need to align with what is possible and available locally.

However, many rural areas, including Indiana, have endured several changes over the last twenty-five years impacting agriculture and manufacturing specifically (Camp and Waldorf, 2014; Waldorf et al., 2013). Technology and industrialization of agriculture have reduced occupational opportunities in the local community (Petrin et al., 2014). Additionally, the manufacturing sector has also seen the closing of businesses, or the facility being relocated elsewhere and shifting jobs from production to service-oriented jobs. Unfortunately, service-oriented jobs may not be able to sustain the same type of income and standard of living as the manufacturing sector (Petrin et al., 2014; Wells et al., 2019).

The shifts in agriculture and manufacturing have reduced the already limited employment opportunities in rural communities (Wells et al., 2019). Meece et al., (2013) explain that "rural youth's future goals are shaped by socioeconomic circumstances, attachment to community and perceptions of local economic opportunities" (p. 184). The changing economic landscape for many rural communities may impact how families, schools, and rural youth view educational and occupational aspirations and expectations in the future. Meaning if the perception regarding local good-paying jobs shifts in a negative direction or job opportunities that require additional skills increase, this could raise educational aspirations for rural youth to include some level of higher education.

Gender Roles and Expectations

Gender is referenced in the literature as a possible factor providing varying influences on educational and occupational aspirations and expectations. The role of gender is mentioned regarding traditional occupational roles, family legacy, and postsecondary enrollment rates.

Rural communities tend to uphold more "traditional gender-role expectations" and beliefs of their youth, with females responsible for taking care of the house and the children and the males being encouraged to secure employment, typically blue-collar work, preferably in the local community to support his family (Beasley, 2011; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Beasley (2011) explained, "Men are to work in the coal mines, coal-related industry or another blue-collar job and the women are to either stay at home or work retail-oriented jobs" (p. 122).

Family legacy is also referenced as influencing educational and occupational aspirations and expectations. The value of tradition and continuity is regarded and respected in rural families and communities, and this includes occupations. Family legacy occupations are usually blue-collar and typically male-oriented in fields such as agriculture, manufacturing, coal mining, or skilled trade occupations. The family legacy influence tends to impact adolescent boys more than girls. Adolescent boys are typically encouraged to enter the same industry or work for the same employer as their father, grandfather, or great-grandfather. Sarah Beasley (2011) articulated how "family legacy" influences occupational expectations, especially in a rural mining town in West Virginia. One of the participants explained, "All of my family is in the coal industry, it's a family tradition"(p. 122).

Gender role expectations and family legacy could be influencing why female rural students are more likely to have higher educational aspirations and expectations than rural male students (Beasley, 2011; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Marré, 2017; Meece et al., 2013; Molefe et al., 2017). The USDA *Rural Education at a Glance 2017 Edition,* "Rural women are increasingly more well educated than rural men" because more rural women are obtaining bachelor's degrees or more advanced degrees than rural men (p. 2.). There is not a lot of research regarding why more rural women have higher postsecondary attainment rates. Some of the

literature suggests that rural women are not being held to legacy occupations and blue-collar expectations, and they are seeking college degrees in more female dominated occupations, such as teaching and nursing (Beasley, 2011). These occupations may also allow rural women to return to their rural communities with a college degree.

However, even with the pressure and challenges of gender-role expectations, family legacy, low educational attainment of parents or socioeconomic status, and schooling, some rural students appear to be persevering and forging new pathways in deciding to attend college.

Individual Mindset and Characteristics

The role of personal attributes and how it influences or factor into rural educational and occupational aspirations is sparse. Very limited research alluded to how personal attributes, such as mindset, grit, perseverance, and self-efficacy can influence and shape an individual's educational aspirations and expectations (Ardoin, 2017; Beasley, 2011; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Meece et al., 2013). Much of the research is focused primarily on external factors and influences (family, school, community, college readiness, and financial) regarding aspirations but little research or consideration regarding the significant influence that individuals have regarding how they think or feel about themselves. While the external factors are important and can influence educational and occupational expectations; the internal factors are just as important and influential and should be researched in greater detail. Regardless of attachment to family and community, educational attainment of parents, socioeconomic status, schooling, and expectations of others, rural students can and do overcome external barriers to achieve their hopes and dreams (Ardoin, 2019; Meece et al., 2013).

The Juxtaposition of Staying or Leaving

If the rural youth of today want to have an opportunity for the "American Dream" and upward mobility, it may entail leaving their family, community, and everything they have ever known for what could be. The pathway to upward mobility is a risk and a gamble on a future that is not guaranteed and usually not well paved for rural students (Ardoin, 2018; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; McDonough et al., 2010). This also implores two things, why rural youth are faced with this juxtaposition of sorts and why can't rural students be "leavers and returners" as Carr and Kefalas lay claim to in their book *Hollowing Out the Middle* (2008). Being a "leaver and returner" has possibilities but most of the literature regarding rural college access frames the "American Dream" as one or the other, but not both. There appears to be a perception that a four-year college degree equates to leaving home permanently, thus fostering quite a paradox for rural students. McDonough et al., (2010) articulate the paradox of staying versus leaving and created a metaphor "golden cage" to illustrate the internal conflict regarding pursuing college, especially a four-year college degree:

> "*The Golden Cage*" leaving it would cause pain and hardship that many students do not feel prepared for, or that they do not feel the benefits outweigh leaving. But the economies of many rural areas and the fast-paced changing economies of the postindustrial United States will not be able to sustain the cultural practices of these regions as is. The comfortable living of these students' parents will not be achieved with the same preparation and vocations. Career opportunities will change, and students will need to be more prepared and more flexible than previous generations. All this is to say that the rural life, as fulfilling and sustaining as it is to these students now (or golden) is also trapping them into a low mobility, low flexibility, and low socioeconomic status that might very well limit their capacity to obtain and sustain a comfortable rural life experience (p. 204).

The above passage from McDonough et al., (2010) articulates not only the paradox of staying and leaving regarding college but also speaks to the economic dynamic of many rural communities today. They illustrated succinctly and thoroughly the complex issues impacting

many rural communities currently. The economies of postindustrial America and the ability to improve or sustain a standard of living are in jeopardy. This is fostering a more compelling case for a greater emphasis on the important prerequisite for postsecondary education in "Rural America," including Indiana (ICHE, 2018; Holcomb, 2018; Lumina Foundation, 2015).

Another compelling dynamic is that rural students, who are contemplating college, also confront the trepidation about fitting in and feeling a sense of belonging and maintaining their rural identity at college (Ardoin, 2019; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Tinto, 1987). A large public four-year campus can be populated far greater than their rural community. Not only the size but the diverse demographic population of different races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses. Per Ardoin (2019) "What rural students know is often different from what is needed to fit into the higher education culture; thus, rural students feel unprepared for and unwelcome in the collegiate environment" (p. 29). Some rural students might also fear becoming a different person (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016).

Additionally, the look and feel of large college campuses might be a stark contrast to what they have always known. Also, the individualistic culture of the college can be contrasting to the culture of their community. Per Friesen & Purc-Stephenson (2016), "It may be difficult for students from other cultures to negotiate the mismatch between the university's values and their own" (p. 140). For some, it might be similar to navigating two different worlds, but the two different worlds might reside in the same state or region they are from. This might also leave some students believing and feeling that they don't have a sense of belonging in either world (Tinto, 1987).

As evidenced in this section, the decision to pursue college may incorporate the paradox of staying or leaving one's family and community, which can be multidimensional and fraught

with internal and external conflicts for rural students. This finding is noteworthy for educators, policymakers, higher education personnel, and families to be aware of as they assist rural students in navigating college and career planning.

Conclusion

The literature articulates that rural student are the least likely to attend four-year universities. In addition, the low college matriculation rates of rural students are not a new phenomenon. The distrust of higher education, the need and value of a college degree and the fear that college is a pathway for the youth to leave the rural community and their home is as palpable today as it was twenty years after the Land-Grant Act of 1862 was signed. However, rural college access is under-researched in comparison to other under-enrolled populations. In regard to college readiness, it appears that rural students are just as academically prepared as their non-rural peers. The only factor of concern is that rural students are not taking the SAT/ACT college entrance exams at the same rate as nonrural students. This is especially true for Indiana rural students. If rural students are academically prepared to go to four-year universities as their nonrural peers, why are they not attending college at the same rate?

The literature regarding rural college access articulated several themes. The culture of rural communities, families, and schools are significant influencers and factors regarding educational and occupational aspirations and expectations and can either encourage or discourage college. The cultural dynamics of place (habitus), family, and schools are interconnected and complex. There is not just one cultural factor or element at play but several and they can conflict with one another. Therefore, I think rural college access is a complex problem.

At the center of the complex problem or equation is rural youth. Just like their nonrural peers, they have the pressure and stress of trying to decide what they want to do or be when they grow up. However, rural students are faced with additional complexities regarding educational and occupational aspirations. Their educational and occupational aspirations can be limited by what they see and are exposed to in their small communities. Also, rural youth, especially adolescent males may have the added pressure of sustaining tradition or family legacy of blue-collar occupations. Another factor influencing their educational and occupational aspirations is the paradox of *hope* and *fear*. The paradox of staying or leaving, or as McDonough et al.,& (2010) articulate in *The Golden Cage* regarding the conundrum that rural students find themselves in. Because local rural economies do not always provide opportunities for bachelor's degrees like urban and suburban communities can. This can be a lot of pressure and complexity for rural adolescents to have to navigate.

Not only are rural adolescents experiencing a paradox but families as well. However, the literature is deficient regarding the paradox that rural families may find themselves in. It appears from some qualitative studies that some rural families want their children and grandchildren to succeed but their success might come at a cost (Beasley, 2011; Friesen and Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Goldman, 2019). The cost of leaving home and not returning to the rural community they have always known and a rural community that depends on the youth to continue to live and work (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Furthermore, by going to college, rural youth might adopt different values and beliefs than those of their family and community (Friesen and Purc-Stephenson, 2016).

Maybe the construct of families either encouraging or discouraging rural students from pursuing college may not be about the perception or value of "college" but may represent the

divergence of hope and fear. In some respects, families and rural youth may find themselves at similar crossroads regarding the hope of a better future and the fear that rural students will go away to college, propelling them forward and leaving their families and the hope of their rural community behind (Ardoin, 2018, Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Friesen and Purc-Stephenson, 2016).

Higher Education and rural America are facing a watershed moment in this country. It's time…. it's been 159 years since the Land-Grant College Act was passed and rural students continue to enroll at four-year universities at lower rates. It's time to listen to and understand the culture of rural communities, their way of living, and their concerns and perceptions regarding higher education, especially four-year universities. Also, the role higher education can play in helping rural communities address current economic challenges and provide opportunities "hope" for educated rural youth to return to their communities. Furthermore, higher education needs to get in touch with the rural communities they serve and ensure that all rural youth have access to the education they need to obtain their American Dream.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The scope of this study has both personal and professional connections for me as the researcher. First, I identify as a rural first-generation high school graduate from Indiana, and secondly, I have worked in academia for over twenty-five years in various college access and success positions. However, I have been rather complacent regarding the under-enrollment of rural students at four-year universities and overlooked the challenges that rural students may incur regarding college access and success. In addition to the professional and personal implications of this study, the research contributes to the deficiency of rural college access research, utilizing qualitative data that highlight the voices of students and providing answers that we may never find combing through quantitative data. This chapter outlines the purpose of this qualitative study, research questions, the rationale for the research methodology selected, data collection methods, data analysis, researcher role and trustworthiness, and limitations of the study.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative single case study explored the rural schooling experience of high school students and how their schooling experience informs the perceptions of ten rural high school students attending a small high school located in a rural county in Indiana regarding postsecondary aspirations. The information gathered from student personal essays and focus group interviews provided insights into how rural students perceive their schooling experience and college. Specifically, how do they define college? Do they have a positive, negative, or neutral view of college? Who or what is influencing their perceptions, values, and beliefs

regarding college? Will their post-high school plans and occupational aspirations include college? Also, this study focused on rural Indiana, providing a Middle America "rural focus" because it is not prevalent in the literature. In addition to the student perspective, the high school principal and college and career guidance counselor were also interviewed to provide context regarding the culture of the school, community, family involvement, and socioeconomic metrics and how these factors influence the educational and occupational aspirations of their students. But above all, this study allows rural high school students in Indiana to be seen and heard.

From the beginning providing a diverse mindset regarding college perceptions was imperative. This approach allowed me to compare and contrast various perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and mindsets regarding their rural schooling experience and college. Additionally, it allowed me to articulate diverse perceptions and voices which might be representative and applicable to the perceptions and mindsets of other rural adolescents' regarding schooling and college. Lastly, the study investigated the connection between the students and their family, school, and community, and how these connections impact their perceptions, choices, and decisions regarding their post-high school educational and occupational aspirations. It is through knowing how students perceive college and what or who might be influencing those perceptions that educators and policymakers can educate and assist rural students more intentionally regarding college and how best to serve them in realizing their post-high school aspirations.

Rationale for Qualitative Study

A qualitative single case study research method was utilized for this study because this method of inquiry emphasizes the personal perspective (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Qualitative research is utilized to foster extensive information about people's underlying reasoning and

motivations and to also develop a better understanding of a particular topic, issue, or problem from an individual perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 13). If we want to understand why rural students' matriculation and attainment rates lower concerning postsecondary education are then we need to go directly to the source of inquiry: the students themselves. We need to understand their thought process, viewpoints, beliefs, and concerns regarding college, and believe the preferred manner of comprehending this information was through a qualitative lens. Even though I did not use narrative inquiry as a methodology, the voices of the student participants were prominent throughout the data collection process and the findings of the study. As cited in *What is Narrative Research?* (Squire et al., 2014), Graham Crow explains "Narratives have the potential to be highly revealing about people's understanding of themselves and of their social world" (p. viii). Once we understand and can make sense of rural student perceptions, we can assist rural students more proactively and intentionally regarding higher education and post-high school planning.

Research Questions

This study will answer the following research questions:

1) What is the rural schooling experience of high school students in Indiana?

2) How does the high school rural schooling experience inform perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about postsecondary aspirations?

Research Design

The qualitative study was bounded by an intrinsic, single-case design study of a small high school, in Indiana, focusing on a group of 11th grade students, concerning their rural schooling experience and perceptions regarding college. According to Stake (1995), "We study

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a case when it is of very special interest. We look for the detail of interaction with its contexts" (p. xi). Additionally, he explains that case studies allow us to "understand people in their uniqueness and commonalities," and the desire to hear their stories "with a sincere interest in learning how they function" (Stake 1995, p. 1). Stake's definition of case study correlates with my desire to hear the student's stories with a sincere interest in learning about their rural schooling experience and how they think and perceive college as well as their educational and occupational pursuits. Above all, I learned so much from the students and administrators, and hope that others will learn from them as well through this study.

Another element of utilizing a case study as the research design is articulated by Merriam & Tisdell (2015), "Provides a means for the researcher to capture an organization or a set of relationships – in all its complexity, in a way that quantitative approaches cannot do" (p. 51). This case study captured the real-world dynamics of one small high school located in an Indiana rural community and the influence of various relationships (parents, grandparents, teachers, administrators, coaches, friends, and siblings) on rural youth's perceptions regarding their educational and occupational aspirations. The influential relationships within this rural community are interconnected and interwoven, providing both complexity and simplicity, enriching the narrative of how rural high school students perceive college. Furthermore, utilizing a single-case study research design captured and deeply investigated the cultural phenomenon of rural high school students and their perceptions regarding college.

Lastly, the voices of the students and their perceptions are prominent and a central component of the data analysis chapter. The coupling of a single case study with a significant narrative theme complemented each other and provides validity for their stories, their voice, and what they have to teach us.

Site and Participant Selection

Site Selection and School Profile

The selection of the site school was purposeful. As Stake (1995), explains "case study research is not sampling research. In intrinsic case study, the case is pre-selected" (p. 4). The site school needed to meet certain criteria to correlate with the purpose of the study and amplify what we can learn and the impactfulness of the findings. The high school needed to be small with a high school enrollment of under 450, surrounded by open countryside nestled in a county classified as rural. To be classified as rural, towns should have fewer than 2,500 people and urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of larger labor market areas (USDA-ERS). In addition, the county would be classified as rural according to Purdue Extension Center for Rural Development and adhere to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) nonmetro classification (urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area). Lastly, the county could not be adjacent to a county where a four-year university is located. Proximity to a postsecondary institution, especially a large or prominent one, may provide exposure and engagement and may influence perspectives regarding college.

To ensure the privacy of the school and participants, the high school was given a pseudonym. The high school will be known as Dewey Wirt HS (DWHS), a small school located in a rural county of Indiana. According to the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) 2021, there were 226 enrolled students. The overall enrollment is on a downward trajectory, in 2019 there were 262 students enrolled. The diversity of the school is as follows: 88% White, 6.6% Hispanic, 1.8% Native American, 1.8% Multiracial, 0.4% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0.4% Asian, and 0.0% Black/African American. For the 2020-21 school year 48% of students were on Free/Reduced Lunch and 49.6% were economically disadvantaged. The school grade as reported by the IDOE for 2018-19 is an A. In previous years, the school grade was a B. Graduation rates

are at 88.3%, about one percentage point about the state average. However, the diploma strength (which measures whether students completed the requirements of Indiana's Core 40 diploma designation or higher and did not receive a waiver from any graduation requirements) is 73.3%, lower than the state average of 79.1%. According to the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (ICHE), the 2019 graduates earned the following Indiana diplomas: 21% Honors, 63% Core 40, and 15% General. Around 71% of the honor diploma graduates enrolled in college and 51% of the Core 40 graduates enrolled in college. Of the students who enrolled in college, 38.5% enrolled in an Indiana public college, 4.6% enrolled in an Indiana private college, and 4.6% enrolled in an out-of-state private college. Even though 44% of the graduates qualified for free/reduced lunch only 1% of them were a 21st Century Scholar. Also, additional metrics regarding college readiness are as follows: 83% received dual credit from an Indiana Public College, however, less than 1% took and passed an AP test, and 26% took but did not pass an AP test.

Additional county metrics include: 22% of residents have an associate or higher, below the state average of 39%. According to the US Census Bureau, only 12.85% have a bachelor's degree and the per capita income is 45-50K. According to *STATS Indiana*, the population has decreased by 7.4% since 2010. Also, per the Indiana Department of Workforce Development (2021), the top three sectors of employment for residents are 29% manufacturing, 21% government (federal, state, local), and 10% agriculture. However, the accommodation & food service sector has increased by 29.5% over the last five years.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

Once the high school had been identified and I received the appropriate permissions from the school district and IRB, I began the recruitment process by utilizing criterion sampling which is a form of a purposeful sampling technique (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). It was important to recruit participants enrolled in diverse classes (honors, regular, and CTE), rather than just an honors class. If the participants were all selected from the same class, the findings might be skewed and provide a narrower range of perspectives that might be more homogenous than different. Also, the various classes could represent diverse post-high school plans and aspirations providing a much broader scope of perspectives for the study. Additionally, providing all students an opportunity to participate was important because I wanted the study to promote being inclusive and a "sense of welcoming" to all who wanted to participate.

The selection of the junior year was intentional because it is an action-oriented year regarding post-high school planning, as many students need to take the SAT and/or ACT, dual credit, and/or AP courses, CTE, or participate in internships. The 11th grade was also selected because of the potential for possible programming and interventions regarding college and/or post-high school planning that could be developed as an outcome of this study. The 11th grade class has 49 students, with 33 identifying as male and 16 identifying as female. Initially, I intended to select six 11th grade students (gender being equally represented) who are enrolled in either honor, regular, or CTE courses to participate in individual interviews.

However, the initial recruitment plan of presenting to all three levels of English classes and the school counselor sending personalized emails on my behalf to students and parents of the 11th grade did not yield enough participants. While there was some student interest in the study, many were hesitant to participate because they were apprehensive about the individual interviews. Therefore, after seeking advice from my dissertation committee, I modified the data

collection format to utilize focus groups instead of individual interviews, which turned out to be a much better approach. I was able to form three focus groups derived from the three different 11th grade English classes (honors, regular, and basic) which generated ten participants, representing 20% of the class. Of the ten student participants, seven identified as male, and three identified as female. Four of the students (two females and two males) were enrolled in the honor's English class, three students (three males) were enrolled in the regular English class and three students (one female and two males) were enrolled in the basic English class. Unfortunately, gender was not equalized, only three of the student participants identified as female but the gender distribution was representative of the gender composition of the 11th grade class.

Another adverse situation that arose during the recruitment process was regarding the 11th grade class itself. A few individuals associated with the school indicated that utilizing the 11th grade class at DWHS was not the most ideal class to involve in the study. The 11th grade class was described as performing below their abilities, having several behavior issues throughout their middle and high school years, peers not lifting each other up, but being rather mediocre, as well as several students being impacted by family instability (parents divorced multiple times, economic strife, drugs, and some students living with their grandparents). The less-than-ideal depiction of the 11th grade class reminded me of a statement that Shrek wrote in her essay "We have all sort of developed a loser's mentality from all the years of coaches, parents, fans, and peers telling us that we will never be good in sports." In some instances, this mentality may have permeated their academic abilities as well as their educational and occupational aspirations. Nevertheless, what I witnessed and experienced were ten students who had a lot to contribute to

the study, they care about their schooling experience, and more importantly, they wanted to be seen and heard.

Collective Participant Snapshot

The spectrum of personalities, educational abilities, and school experiences among the ten student participants in this study was diverse and insightful. While each of the student participants was living in the same rural community, attending the same high school, and enrolled in the 11th grade, their perspectives were both common and diverse. The student participants articulated the advantages and disadvantages of growing up in a rural community, as well as attending a small high school in their essays. Many of the students wrote about their schooling experience in both positive and negative contention. Some of the positive common references were the ability to receive individual assistance from teachers, the ease of participating in athletics, as well as getting to know many of their classmates. They also mentioned rural living fostered a sense of safety and security because of the low crime rate associated with their community. Several of the students compared rural living versus urban living and small schools versus large schools. However, some of the students disliked living in the middle of nowhere, having to contend with small-town drama, and many referenced the impact of drugs in the community, one student reflected on how some people perceive them as attending a bad school and living in a white trash area.

To introduce and provide a better understanding of the student participants, their biographical profiles are provided. Each profile encompasses the participants' own words from their essays. The students were asked to write an essay that explains what it's like for them to be living in a rural community and attending a small high school. They were prompted to articulate

one of their favorite memories from school or extracurricular activities, their family and friends, and their feelings about the good and/or challenging parts of living in their hometown. The intention was to get a sense of who they are and to provide an understanding or conceptualize their schooling and rural lived experience.

Student Participant Profiles

 Billy Bob lives on a farm and believes this has provided him "with a whole new set of skills, including being disciplined and mature." He also thinks "a rural community is very different from life in a city or at least he assumes so." One of his favorite things about living in a rural community is that "all of his extended family lives only two minutes away." He also enjoys being a part of Future Farmers of America (FFA) and his welding classes. However, one of the negative things about living in a rural area is that "my family needs to drive at least 30 minutes to get groceries and there aren't as many job opportunities." Billy Bob also mentioned that "the majority of people are either farmers or have something to do with the trades and he does not plan on going to college."

 Dillon also likes living in a rural area because "there is not a lot of noise and believes if I lived in a city, I would not get much sleep because of the cars and construction." Dillon also likes not having any neighbors to contend with and attending a small high school is a plus "because there aren't too many kids." He also believes "bigger schools like New York, do not allow teachers to have one on one conversations with students or help you out if you are not understanding what is going on." Dillon also likes the fact that small rural schools "have more trade classes which help kids like him who aren't looking to go to a college after school." One of the trade classes Dillon enjoys is welding because "it's a good trade to learn and there is plenty of money in it and they are always looking for new welders."

DJ had to familiarize himself with the term "rural" in writing his essay because he identifies more with living in a small town and "living in a small town is all I've ever known." Going to a small school means "everyone knows everybody, but word gets around quickly." DJ believes that going to a small school "is way nicer than a school with thirty-one thousand people." He also likes some of his teachers especially the welding and advanced manufacturing instructors because "they are cool." Also, DJ doesn't think he would "know teachers like this in a big school." However, he also commented that "our small school does have our share of weirdos and druggies."

Edward thinks growing up and living in a rural small area is good because "it has fewer problems than a bigger school would have with drugs, fights, and violence." However, there are challenges living in a rural town because there is "always small-town drama or someone doesn't like a person." Even though our school is small, we have "a lot of opportunities, like welding, shop class, coding, and animal science." Edward is also enrolled in the welding program because when he graduates from high school he plans to go into the Union and become a welder. However, he's been told that "I should or need to go to college for a "good job" but for me, I don't think I need college."

Lori believes living in a small town offers a less stressful life because "there is never any traffic to be worrying about and most of the time you have neighbors you can count on, and there is less crime." But there are also challenges, "a couple of years ago we lost our grocery store and pharmacy, but we gained a Dollar General." She also thinks attending a small high school is better because "it allows more one-on-one attention from teachers." Another advantage of a small school is "playing sports because you can play any sport you want to play but sometimes, we barely have enough to make a full team." She also believes DWHS is very short-staffed,

because "many teachers are also the coach for the sports team, and we have a few teachers who teach more than one subject."

Sally reflected on the lack of diversity at DWHS and also compared small schools to bigger schools. However, she does have a close friend who is Mexican, and her friend "has struggled with racism at school." She also thinks that the "other kids don't know when they are being racist because they are so used to being racist from their parents." Regarding learning, Sally learns much easier with few students in a classroom, "like last year in my biology class there were only seven of us the first semester but then more kids got moved in there and there were eleven of us." Sally is also involved in sports but had to quit softball because "when you live in a rural area you get treated better when it comes to your last name, which is why I hate doing sports at DWHS." One of the good parts about living in a rural area is that "you don't have to deal with many robberies or being scared to walk outside, however, we have crackheads, and you can tell where they live." However, the lack of stores is a challenge "we literally only have a gas station and Dollar General."

Shaquille is a four-letter athlete and enjoys several sports and also reiterates the ease of making the varsity team "because we hardly ever have enough players to start a JV team." He also believes he is a good student because "he's ranked 4th in his class, but this isn't saying much due to the fact there are only 45 students in my class." He also thinks that a small school is different than a big school "because everyone knows everyone, and I heard from one of my friends that went to a big school that they saw a new face every day." Another advantage about going to a small school is "the student to teacher ratio is pretty low and everyone in this school can get pretty close to a least one teacher and this enhances the learning experience." However, Shaquille believes:

Small schools don't prepare you for college as well as a big school can and while we learn stuff, we don't have the money or the number of teachers to give us the proper education to simulate college and I feel like this is a big reason why most of us don't like college and feel that going straight into the workforce is the best option, including me.

Shrek who identifies as female is also involved in athletics at DWHS and reiterates that

"it's pretty easy to get on a sports team, but we don't tend to have winning teams."

Unfortunately, this has gotten worse over the years and states:

All of the students have given up on being good at sports because we have all sort of developed a loser's mentality from all the years of coaches, parents, fans, and peers telling us that we will never be good in sports.

Shrek does not like the small number of students at school because "everyone knows everyone and everyone is in each other's business." Another challenge about living in the rural community is that "we live in kind of a white trash area, and everyone knows which kids have parents who are on drugs." But there are some positive aspects of going to a small school and that is student-to-teacher ratio is pretty good, which is nice because then you get to know your teachers and they can help you with your schoolwork if needed." Shrek is also ranked very high in her class but attributes this to "having less than fifty other students to compete with." Furthermore, she reflected:

People think I must like school because I do well, but ironically, I do well in school because I hate it. I genuinely hate school and I'm miserable every day that I am here. I am so excited to graduate and move on with my life.

Thomas believes that living in a rural community has changed and affected his life "in a lot of big ways." One of those big ways is "the house I live in, and the many acres of land allow me to do whatever I want." Thomas is also involved in sports and most of his friends are in the same sports. Thomas enjoys sports "because of the experiences with other people and the competition." He also reiterates that "making the team is easy because there are not many

people at the school who try out." Also "our school does not have many sports, just the regular ones." Aside from sports, Thomas enjoys his welding class.

Tim also believes "living in a rural community is pretty great." He loves working at a restaurant in the next town over. He also does yardwork for his neighbors, "I like to make money so I can afford a vehicle soon." Tim is also enrolled in the welding program at school "I love welding classes because it interests me." He also likes helping people out with work or welding and such. He is close to his family, especially his grandparents "since they have basically raised me all of my life." Like others, Tim thinks "living in a rural community is nicer than in a city." While he has "lived in many houses and gone to many schools, he's glad to be with his grandparents. However, he does not have "many real friends, some like to disrespect me and talk behind my back." He also tries his best in all his classes, "while most teachers are nice to me some can be a little rude."

The above student participant profiles articulated similarities but also distinct differences. Their essays were just a glimpse of the unique characteristics and personalities as well as thoughts, opinions, and beliefs that were articulated during the focus group sessions that cultivated engaging discussions and interactions.

Principal and Guidance Counselor Profiles

The middle/high school principal and college and career readiness counselor were also interviewed to provide context regarding the school culture, preparing students for college and careers, culture of the community and the families they serve, and the influence it may have on the educational aspirations of the students and how K-12 and higher education can work collaboratively to enhance the college and career readiness of rural students in Indiana.

Anna is the middle/high school principal and has been in her position for one year. Before becoming the principal, she served as the assistant principal at DWHS for two years. Before moving into school administrative roles, she taught middle school English for twelve years at two different small school corporations and taught high school English for three years. All of Anna's life she wanted to be a teacher, however, after teaching for a while, she realized that being a teacher only allowed her to make an impact and difference in the lives of those who entered her classroom. As an administrator, she can make an impact on everyone who walked through the front doors. She knows the name and face of every student in her school and the small school allow her to be more involved with the students, and that is why she is in education in the first place. Anna also grew up in a rural county north of where DWHS resides.

Mary is the middle and high school college and career readiness guidance counselor who has worked at DWHS her entire career (33 years) and lives in the community, only a few miles from the school. She has spent most of her life living in rural communities as she grew up in a rural community. Her background, length of service at DWHS, and living in the community that is serviced by the school provided a wealth of information, perspective, and insight regarding the study; especially providing historical context on how the needs of the students and the demographics of the students and families have evolved over several decades.

The School Itself

DWHS is located on several acres of land surrounded by agricultural fields on all four sides. In traveling to the school one will not incur any stoplights or flashing lights, but a four-way stop sign can be found near the school. The DWHS sign that sits prominently in front of the school advertises important events and during one site visit, the sign advertised the student council food drive and a mobile dental clinic that was taking place. The elementary, junior high,

and high schools are interconnected buildings and students matriculate through their K-12 experience by moving from one wing of the building to another. From an infrastructure perspective, the school building appears in working condition both externally and internally and is very clean and well-kept. In addition, the classrooms are equipped with technology for instructional purposes and each student is provided a Chromebook. According to the school website, DWHS offers the core curriculum of math, language arts, science, social studies, and health. In addition to the core curriculum, students have an opportunity to earn a certificate in welding, be licensed as a certified nurse's assistant, or earn credits in advanced manufacturing as well as take agricultural-related courses.

The high school presents as a typical school with classrooms, lockers, and offices as well as signage about school pride and athletic events and activities. In the center of the high school is where the school cafeteria can be found, which is a prominent common area. In the mornings, students can be found clustered in groups socializing before the school day begins or eating breakfast. The school cafeteria provides breakfast and lunch to both junior high and high school students. Behind the serving station of the cafeteria is a vast industrial-size kitchen and before the Covid-19 pandemic, meals were prepared from scratch. A kitchen tour was afforded to me during a site visit, which allowed me an opportunity to speak with the cafeteria staff. It became abundantly clear that the staff enjoyed cooking and baking for the students because the students get excited and appreciate it when the meals are prepared from scratch versus processed meals. The homemade meals also afforded a more personalized approach and family-like atmosphere of feeding and addressing the nutritional needs of the students and have become a part of the school culture. While the cafeteria provides a space for students to eat and hang out with their friends

before school starts, it also houses a stage where drama productions take place and school presentations for students and families are conducted.

In addition to academics and auxiliary spaces, there are several extracurricular opportunities that students can participate in. Many of the students articulated an involvement in athletics. DWHS has an updated expansive gymnasium where PE is taught, and basketball and volleyball games are played. DWHS also has a football team and stadium, which the principal explained: "it's somewhat unique for a small rural school to have a football program because of cost." Additionally, DWHS offers baseball, softball, track, cross-country, golf, and wrestling. Other extracurricular activities include band, choir, drama, FFA, Family Career & Community Leaders (FCCLA), and a few others. The teaching and learning, auxiliary and extracurricular activities are elements that contribute to the schooling experience for students. Another element that contributes to the schooling experience is the school culture.

School Culture

Upon entering the high school from the main entrance, individuals are presented with a prominent graphic that displays the standards, beliefs, expectations, and potential of the students, educators, administrators, families, and visitors of the school. The graphic exemplifies for others "to work hard," "dream big," "never give up," "be human and kind," "we are here for you," "you matter" and "hope is a dream that never sleeps." In another hallway, a large glass display case reads "Do you have high high hopes?" The new Middle-High School Principal has adopted the song *High Hopes by Panic! At The Disco* as the theme for the 2021-22 academic year. Anna provided high high hopes t-shirts for the staff and plays the song during convocations and other events. She came across this song a few years ago and believes the lyrics are very instrumental

for the students who attend DWHS, specifically "burn your biographies, rewrite your history."

Anne explained that the High High Hopes theme is relatable for DWHS because:

> So many of these kids live in generational poverty and heart-wrenching conditions with very little support. The song is everything I want them to realize about themselves. Go be something greater. You aren't defined by what other people say about you and where you come from. Leave a legacy. Be that one in a million. They're all capable; I just need to figure out how to get them to see their inner greatness.

Mary also spoke about the importance for the new administration to focus more on a culture of excellence. She explains:

> It's not that our school doesn't desire to have students who go on and be successful and hopefully this includes some postsecondary training, but it's that kids and parents here are willing to settle for less than excellence. I think the principal is trying to raise the level of what personal expectations should be. To me, it all works together. When I settle for mediocrity, it doesn't matter whether I go to college or not. I'll just get a humdrum job. I mean, I think it's overcoming those whole cultural dynamics of poverty.

Both Anna and Mary commented on how poverty and the socioeconomic status of families have shifted over the last 20 years from a prominently middle-income to a significant number of families from low-income backgrounds. This is a significant finding and therefore will be expanded upon in themes three and four regarding paying for college and the influences of educational and occupational aspirations.

In addition to the "high high hopes" theme, there are several other visual positive affirmations for students and others posted in the hallways, doorways, and classrooms of the school. Some of the visual messaging pertain to student learning, and the commitment of DWHS:

> We believe all students can learn at a high level. We take collective responsibility to ensure that students learn. We collaborate because we believe no one teacher holds the key to ensuring learning for all. We will align all school operations with this focus.

Other educational visual messaging includes information regarding a 2024 spring break trip to Peru. The flyer states that the trip is an opportunity of a lifetime and to not let funds keep you from the experience as fundraising is available. In addition to spring break trips are senior trips. Anna explains "The senior trip is an exposure trip for many as it allows them to see beyond the walls of their little community." Another element of the senior trip is to go somewhere where the students need to get on a plane "because so many of our kids have never been on an airplane before."

Concerning college and career readiness visual messaging, each door to a teacher's classroom has their name, degree(s) awarded, and the college(s) they attended. Another nod to teachers and college is the usage of "faculty" for the designation of restrooms and lounge areas. During the spring, a wall in the cafeteria displays certificates of senior students who have been admitted to a particular postsecondary institution. However, this endeavor did receive some negative feedback from a parent. Mary explained:

> Some families were upset because some kids got into Purdue and others didn't and that made others feel bad. This upset the Assistant Principal last year because she's like, why shouldn't we celebrate success where success is? Success does not just apply to postsecondary but the military as well. We recognize our students at graduation that are going to the military.

There are also plaques in the hallway by the library that exhibit prestigious scholarship recipients and plaques for the valedictorian and salutatorian of each graduating class for several years.

Another metric of success and achievement that is embedded in the culture of the school is athletics. Several display cases house trophies, plaques, and other accolades of athletic achievements over several decades, not to mention the various banners that hang in the gymnasium. In addition to the athletic trophy, cases are the trophy cases dedicated to the junior and high school band achievements. The academic, athletic, and musical achievements are

prominently displayed throughout the school corridors for students, teachers, administration,

families, and visitors to acknowledge and appreciate. I think it is also noteworthy to mention that

the academic and extracurricular activity achievements demonstrate several decades of success.

Not only do these accolades demonstrate success but it also is a visual representation of the

history, nostalgia, and tradition of the school for those connected to the school and for visitors.

Another visual display is the medium-size mural dedicated to graduating seniors in the

corridor outside the cafeteria. The school mascot and the word "Seniors" are painted on the wall.

Each letter of "Seniors" represents a different graduating class ranging from 45-60 students per

class. To provide context and scale, the names of all the students in a particular graduating class

can fit in one designated letter.

Lastly, the school has been referred to as a family. Anna articulates that the students "feel

like family to us and those are my kids and I'm invested in them and their success." Anna

further explains:

> When we have an assembly and I walk into the gym, one of the cool things about
> being here, I look in there and I think, I know every one of those kids by name. I
> don't have them in class, but I'm the principal and I was the assistant principal. I
> know every one of those kids and I know almost all of their stories.

Additionally, Anna also stated that when we hold an IEP conference or event, it's all hands on

deck. Everyone pitches in to help regardless of title and position. Another reference to family

was articulated by Anna regarding teacher turnover and attrition:

> For so many of our kids, school is their constant and their safe place. This is the
> only normal they see. The students, teachers, and administrators build
> relationships with each other. Teachers are constantly being told that they need to
> build relationships with these kids, if you want them to be successful, you have to
> build a relationship. But then teachers leave and some of the kids here in this
> community feel like somebody else is gone from their life.

The family-orientated dynamic of DWHS, made-from-scratch food that is prepared by the cafeteria, visual positive messaging, raising personal and educational expectations, display of college and career aspirations and attainment, and the exhibition of academic and extracurricular achievements contribute to the culture of the school (Byun et al., 2012; Hoffman et al., 2017; McDonough, (1997). As well as the senior mural, travel opportunities both domestic and abroad, and the athletic programs and facilities.

Data Collection

The overall data collection strategy was varied and encompassed observations, document review, artifacts, conversational semi-structured interviews with the principal and school counselor, and focus group interviews with student participants. The strategy was well thought out to provide a more in-depth and well-rounded approach to collecting data from multiple sources to capture the essence of the case study and triangulate the data. (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1984). Also collecting data from various sources could provide more robust data to analyze and increase the trustworthiness of the study. Furthermore, collecting data from the student participants in both verbal (interviews) and written (personal essays) enhanced the voices of the students and provided a comprehensive amount of data regarding perceptions of college and post-high school aspirations.

Document Review

The use of document review as a case study data collection strategy is common and noteworthy (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1984). Obtaining data from documents provided an opportunity to use a data source that was easily accessible and not dependent on human interactions. The review consisted of reviewing the school website, specifically vision, mission,

and belief statements, and the Superintendent and High School Principal's welcome message. Additionally, I reviewed the Guidance Office webpage, regarding information for students and families about college and career planning links, tools, and information about affordability (scholarships and financial aid) were also reviewed. The document review process also provided context for the focus group discussions regarding what the high school was communicating to students and families and if the actions of school personnel were in alignment with what is being published and visual messaging.

Observations

The utilization of observations allowed me to be an active participant in the study and become familiar with the people and the school environment. I made several visits to the school to observe the physical setting of the school and how students, teachers, administrators, and staff interacted and presented themselves providing me with a deeper awareness and understanding of the study (Stake, 1995). Observations encompassed walking the halls, cafeteria, classrooms, guidance counselor office area, and other common areas to observe the physical infrastructure of the building and the visual messaging of walls, and bulletin boards regarding college and career planning. Being an observer allowed me to witness students in their school environment (cafeteria, halls, and classrooms) uninterrupted. Additionally, with the utilization of observing, I was able to engage in conversations with staff and teachers throughout my visits which allowed me to build a rapport and connect with the people and the school I wanted to learn from. Furthermore, the organic impromptu conversations with teachers and staff fostered meaning-making and context for the interviews with the students and administrators. I also observed the rural community surrounding the high school. This allowed me to see how the community and its landscape may influence the culture of the high school and post-high school aspirations.

Personal Essays

Another mechanism of data collection for the student participants was the utilization of a two-page essay articulating the student's perspectives about growing up in a rural community. The personal essays allowed the student participants to articulate who they are, their family and friends, and how they feel about the good/challenging aspects of living in a rural community. The essays also provided insight regarding the culture of the community and school as well as their schooling experience. The personal essays were completed and turned over to me before the focus group discussions which provided me the ability to get to know each of the student participants in a personable manner that would also provide context for the focus group interviews. Additionally, this provided me time to read over the essays and craft some additional interview questions based on what the students articulated. Furthermore, the personal essay allowed each student participant ample time to reflect and provide more in-depth information that would not have been possible during the focus group interviews. Lastly, some participants were more candid in conveying their thoughts and perceptions in written form as opposed to a discussion with their peers. The personal essay also serves as a written artifact. Collecting artifacts is a large component of qualitative data collection and a common strategy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009).

Conversational Semi-Structured Interviews

Once I received IRB approval, I conducted conversational semi-structured interviews with the school principal and guidance counselor. These two individuals have a significant influence on the culture and intentionality of the school, regarding college and career readiness. Examining their values, beliefs, perceptions, and expectations regarding college and career readiness provided insight into the schooling experience and the culture of the high school

concerning the educational and occupational aspirations of the students. Additionally, the types of messaging they are providing to the students and families regarding college and post-high school planning can also be influential.

The interviews were conducted in-person and on-site, in their offices at a time when it was convenient for their schedule. The conversational semi-structured interviews encompassed a balanced approach for an authentic conversation with some structure that provided ample opportunity for follow-up questions or questions which permitted a deeper level of discussion regarding a particular point but also afforded fluidity and flexibility. Interviews lasted around 60 minutes and the semi-structured interview questions can be found in Appendix B. To ensure accuracy, the transcripts of the interviews were sent to the participants to review for clarity and truthfulness as well as incomplete thoughts and statements. The review process also provided an opportunity for the participants to provide additional context regarding a particular statement or topic.

Focus Group Discussions

According to Merriam & Tisdell (2015), **"**the use of focus group interviews is a social science research method used since the mid-twentieth century" (p. 93). Focus group interviews are constructed within a social group setting and ideally with individuals who are comfortable with each other and can talk about topics that are general and usually not sensitive or personal (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The focus group format appeared to be more appealing for the 11th grade students as many more decided to participate after the individual interviews were no longer going to be utilized. There was a total of three groups and each group was associated with a particular 11th grade English class (honors, regular and basic). The honor's class had four

participants. The regular and basic groups each had three participants. Also, the use of the three 11th grade English classes provided an adequate overall representation of the 11th grade class. Additionally, the various groups provided a diverse array of perceptions regarding college and post-high school aspirations.

The focus group discussions were conducted at school during the time of their English class in a conference room in the main office. The student participants entered and exited from a side door leading out of the office area. The location of the conference room afforded the participants some level of privacy. Also, each student participant created a pseudonym and was provided creative autonomy in establishing their fictitious name that would be used for the data analysis portion of the study. In addition, I reminded each focus group to respect the privacy of their fellow participants and not to repeat what is said to others. Before each focus group session, I met them outside their English classroom, and we walked together as a group down to the conference room. Meeting the student participants outside their classroom and the walk down to the conference room provided me an opportunity to introduce myself again as well as provide guidance regarding what to expect and the format of the focus group discussion and tried to minimize any nervousness they might have had. In addition, there was food and beverages in the conference room for them to enjoy during and after the focus group discussion.

The student focus group discussions lasted between 50-60 minutes. This minimized the disruption of the participants' schedule and class time. The focus group discussion questions centered around how the participants perceive college, how they value college, their aspirations, and what or who might be influencing their aspirations. There were also questions about the expectations of their family, and school regarding their post-high school plans. The focus group, discussion questions can be found in Appendix C. Each participant was asked the same question

and went in order around the table. This allowed everyone equal time to respond and provide

thoughtful responses. The focus group structure also allowed participants to build on top of previous

responses. While there was agreement there were also ample instances where participants were not

in agreement and provided contrasting viewpoints.

Reflective Field Notes – Memoing

Utilizing a qualitative single-case study design allowed me as "the researcher" to be the

primary instrument of data collection and analysis, however, a sense of "power" or "ownership"

in relationships can be a danger for these particular design elements (Atkins & Wallace, 2012,

p. 34). Therefore, I utilized reflective fieldnotes to assist me with the potential dangers of power

and ownership during the research process and in my interactions with the participants. The

reflective fieldnotes include both a personal journal and memoing.

The reflective journal was used for my personal and professional reflections and provided

a mechanism to capture interactions, thoughts, statements, feelings, and emotions that arose

throughout the research study experience. The research study did unearth my own rural lived

experience and having a reflective journal to capture and process these thoughts and feelings

was beneficial.

In addition to the reflective field notes the utilization of memoing was also beneficial.

According to Birks et al., (2008), "Memos work alongside other sources of data such as

transcripts and fieldnotes to provide supporting documentation for a study" (p. 70). He also

describes "Memos are contemporaneous, a snap-shot of the thought process at a given stage of

the research that facilitates an understanding of what perspectives were held and why decisions

were made" (p. 71). Also, memoing provided an opportunity for me to reflect on the decision-

making process throughout the study, and observations, and provide a mechanism to write brief

synopses after each site visit. The personal journal and memoing also functioned as an accountability partner throughout the research study process and provide some additional insights concerning data collection.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process of the study occurred throughout the study and in tandem with data collection. It was beneficial to visit the school several times to become familiar with the setting, administrators, and teachers as well as gather the personal essays of the student participants which allowed me to learn about the participants and their lived rural experiences. After the data was collected (observations, document review, personal essays, individual and focus group interviews, and memoing); the data was organized, transcribed, and processed. The process was grounded in how Jones et al., (2013) illustrate:

> Analysis and interpretation should be fluid and reflect themes or is emerging rather than focusing only on fixed categories. This fluidity in the breaking down of data into manageable parts can feel ambiguous but is a necessary part of the process for the voices of the participants to be heard and for new understandings around the phenomenon to emerge (p. 159).

Data Management

Maintaining the confidentiality of all participants in the study and securing the data that was collected throughout the study was imperative. The only people with access to the research records and that data were the principal investigator and key personnel. Digitally recorded research records and data were stored in two places: an external hard drive, and in a secure Box folder on the Purdue server. The individual interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed using a third-party professional transcription service, Rev

Transcription. In addition to the nondisclosure agreement, Rev securely stores and transmits files using 128-bit SSL encryption, the highest level of security available.

Coding Strategy

I utilized an open and focus coding process because I wanted to look for ideas and concepts in the text without preconceived themes and let the text speak for itself, which leads to a data-driven coding scheme (Jones et al., 2013).

An open coding process in an initial stage of data analysis as articulated by Given (2008) in the *Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*:

> The process of open coding begins with the collection of raw data (e.g., interviews, fieldnotes, art, reports, and diaries). Open coding intends to break down the data into segments to interpret them. Detailed word-by-word and line-by-line analysis are conducted by researchers asking what is going on. The researcher discovers, names defines, and develops as many ideas and concepts as possible without concern for how they will ultimately be used (p. 582).

After the initial coding process was completed, I then followed a focus coding protocol which allowed me to compare the personal essays, interview transcripts, and reflective fieldnotes to identify themes or categories that were relational and merged some. I followed the eight-step coding process articulated by Tesch (1990) for analyzing the interview transcripts:

1. The researcher should get a sense of the whole data collection. Read all the transcriptions carefully. Writing down some ideas as they come to mind as you read.

2. Select one interview and go through it, asking yourself "What is this about?" Do not think about the substance of the information but its underlying meaning by writing thoughts in the margin.

3. When the researcher has completed this task for several participants, make a list

of all topics. Cluster together similar topics under and arrange them in columns with different headings. Some heading examples could be major, unique and leftover topics.

4. Take the list and go back through your data. Abbreviate the topics as codes and write the codes next to the appropriate segments of the text. This should foster a preliminary organizing scheme to see if new categories and codes emerge.

5. Find the most descriptive wording for the topics and turn them into categories. Look for ways to reduce the total list of categories by grouping topics that relate to each other.

6. Make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes.

7. Review the data belonging to each category and perform a preliminary analysis

8. If necessary, recode your existing data (pp. 142-149).

The coding process was personal. I needed to see and feel the data because it's sensory work for me. I'm a highly sensitive person, empathetic and intuitive. Therefore, coding is a process that took some time. Time to reflect, time to step away, and go for walk and allow my mind to ruminate on the information. Allowing sufficient time for reflection provided an opportunity to massage the data and take in what the participants revealed and how it fits within the research study.

Researcher Role and Trustworthiness

The researcher's role in qualitative research serves as the primary research instrument; therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge my relationship to the study (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). My identification and positionality in the context of this study intersect

in a personal and professional capacity. I'm a first-generation, rural Indiana graduate from a middle-class, blue-collar background. Additionally, as a seasoned practitioner in higher education, specifically, college access and success, I have first-hand knowledge of some of the challenges and constraints that rural students in Indiana may face accessing higher education. While my background and expertise could pose a threat to credibility, they also provide a level of insight regarding the methodology, analysis, and implications of the research study.

While my high school experience occurred more than thirty-three years ago, bias and projection of one's own rural lived experience could impact the results of the study. Therefore, it was important to be mindful of this inherent bias and control for it throughout the study. I utilized two strategies to control for bias and researcher influence, by seeking guidance from my dissertation committee and keeping a reflective journal throughout the research experience to record observations, experiences, thoughts, feelings, opinions and guiding decisions (Ortlipp, 2008). This allowed me to track any ideological changes, reflect on guiding decisions during the research process, and provide some level of transparency.

The utilization of a case study and a moderate sample size could pose a threat to dependability. While students living in rural counties and attending a small school in Indiana, more than likely have similarities, there are differences. Not every student's rural lived experience or the culture of rural communities and small schools in Indiana are the same.

Regarding validity, the utilization of thick descriptions for observations and interviews provided a detailed account of data collection and field experiences. Thick description is a term that is prevalent in qualitative research which allows the researcher to describe the phenomenon in rich expansive detail and establish empathy and understanding (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Stake, 1995). Additionally, according to Denzin (2001)

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> A thick description goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feeling. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard (p. 83).

Utilizing thick descriptions as articulated by Denzin can enable a reader to evaluate the extent to which conclusions were drawn to be valid and trustworthy. In addition, member checks were conducted, which provided an opportunity for participants to review and provide alternative language regarding the accuracy and context of their thoughts and perceptions (Stake, 1995).

Limitations of Study

There are three main limitations of the study. The first limitation is that the study only represents one small high school in a rural county in Indiana. Furthermore, it just represents students enrolled in the 11th grade. Rural counties, small high schools, and different grades within the same high school can vary regarding culture, characteristics of the community, school, and students enrolled in a particular grade. While there are generalized similarities regarding rural counties, small schools, and student enrollments, there are varying differences that should not be ignored or underestimated.

The second limitation is that gender was not equally distributed among the student participants, which impacts the findings in two distractive ways. The research as articulated in the literature review indicates that female rural students have a greater propensity to matriculate to post-secondary institutions after high school graduation than male rural students. In addition, the larger male population of the study took more career technical education (CTE) courses, welding courses in particular as the school has a prominent AWS welding certification. The welding program is more male-dominated with an emphasis on career and technical aspirations and may impact findings.

The third limitation is that the 11th grade class at DWHS has been described as not

performing at the level of other grades at DWHS. The 11th grade class was described by the

guidance counselor and teachers as performing below their abilities, having recurring behavior

issues, and having family instability issues. While this class may not have been the most

motivated and high-achieving class, it was a class worthy of being seen and heard. In addition,

the study provided an opportunity to engage in a caring and respectful manner with a group of

students who were afforded the ability to convey their thoughts, opinions, needs, and wishes

without judgment regarding their schooling experience and their educational and occupational

aspirations. Regardless of the label that has been associated with them, they provided significant

insights regarding their rural schooling experience and various factors and influences concerning

educational and occupational aspirations.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the findings from various forms of data collection: focus group interviews with the ten student participants, semi-structured interviews with the high school principal and college and career guidance counselor, student essays, site visit observations, and document review. As stated in previous chapters, a significant emphasis of the study and thus the findings are associated with the student participants. Their depiction offers both uniqueness and commonalities providing contrast and uniformity regarding their perceptions. In addition, the intentionality of this chapter is to synthesize the data analysis in a manner that provides an authentic narrative depiction providing informative context in answering the research questions that guided this study which was: What is the rural schooling experience of high school students in Indiana and how does the high school rural schooling experience informs perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes regarding postsecondary aspirations??

The collective narratives of the student participants and the other data that was collected are organized into six broad themes that emerged during data analysis. The broad themes are embedded with interweaving verbatim quotes from the student participants, high school principal, and college and career guidance counselor. With the utilization of thick descriptions and verbatim quotes, the student participant voices provide informative insights regarding how they perceive their rural schooling experience and their educational and occupational aspirations after high school

Emerging Themes

The main focus of the study is to synthesize the rural schooling experience of high school students in Indiana and how the schooling experience informs perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes regarding postsecondary aspirations. To provide a contextual basis for their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding postsecondary aspirations, knowing how students define college is beneficial. Many of the student participants described college as "additional, or advanced schooling." One of the students described college as "where you can learn more about something that you enjoy" and "allows you to find out what you want to do when you're older." Another student stated that "college could help you in the long run." Two of the students articulated a connection between "college" with getting a specific job or getting a better job that allows you to do more and achieve more as well as prepares you for the "real world." Many of the students commented on how expensive college is.

However, it was somewhat surprising that none of the students defined college as a four-year degree or attending a four-year university. Although their concern regarding the cost of college could be associated with the concept that college is associated with an additional four years of schooling. But overall, the consensus was that college means additional schooling beyond high school. However, if college means additional schooling past high school, then the student's secondary schooling experience and academic structure may influence or impact if a student plans to consider postsecondary education after high school

Theme One: Schooling Experience

This theme addresses the first research question concerning the rural schooling experience of high school students in Indiana. Several of the students articulated both positive and negative aspects of attending DWHS in their essays and during the focus group discussions.

Overall, many of the students expressed that liked the small class sizes and individualized attention with some of their teachers but they also wanted more connections and relevancy inside the classroom, especially regarding college and career readiness. All of the students regardless of the focus group affiliation felt somewhat discouraged and frustrated with their schooling experience, especially concerning the general education classes. However, the students enrolled in CTE classes had a more favorable perception regarding connections and career relevance. This theme encompasses various elements of the schooling experience: supportive environment applied learning connections, real-world connections, an affinity for CTE courses and dual credit, college and career relevance connections, and connections with teachers.

Supportive Environment

The structure and the culture of the school and the small class sizes lend themselves to fostering a supportive environment for cultivating student success, as well as educational and occupational aspirations. Regarding a supportive environment inside the classroom, several students articulated that the teachers can provide more personalized assistance. Dillon provided an example of personalized assistance he received from a teacher "In my math class I didn't understand how to solve a problem and I didn't have to wait for the teacher to get done helping 18 other people; he saw I was struggling and came over to help me." Shrek also commented about the small class size, "Our student-to-teacher ratio is also pretty good, which is nice because then you get to know your teachers and they can help you with your schoolwork if needed." Shaquille shared "I think everyone in this school can get pretty close to at least one teacher, this enhances the learning experience." Sally also likes smaller classes "because there is less drama, and no one will feel awkward to ask a question about what they are struggling with." It appears

that many of the students enjoy the small class size at DWHS and have benefited from individualized attention from their teachers.

Connections and Applied Learning

Learning can take on many forms for individual students and several of the students articulated that they would like more connections in the classroom, concerning the subject matter and with their teachers, especially those that teach general education classes (Corbett, 2009; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Petrin et al., 2014). Some of the students articulated that they learn better by doing or an applied learning approach, similar to their Career Technical Education (CTE) classes, and wish more classes were instructed similarly. Several of the students had strong convictions regarding the type of courses they are required to take and the method of instruction. It appears for many students they would like to have a connection regarding the subject matter they are learning which is relatable and has real-world application.

> *DJ*: I just want to learn more and to know more than knowing one thing really well I wish I could drop English. I wish I could drop the math that I'm doing right now. I wish I could drop these courses for an extra welding class or another manufacturing or design class. I prefer more applied learning than sitting in a class being lectured to.

> *Billy Bob:* I don't learn well from just reading out of the textbook or jotting down notes in any subject, but if I can actually do something....hands-on, I learn it so much better. I'm very much an applied learner.

> *Lori:* I wish teachers would teach more of a wide variety of different things in class, because I feel like we focus a lot on one thing, in each class. For example, in English, we do a lot of reading, but I feel grammar for some people, and punctuation for some people is needed. It's the simple stuff that a lot of people struggle with.

I think it is encouraging that students desire more connections inside the classroom and would like an opportunity to utilize more applied learning, especially in non-CTE classes. This

information might be beneficial for teachers, administrators, as well as policymakers who are

often the drivers of learning outcomes, standardized test benchmarks, and graduation

requirements. I plan to expand on this observation in Chapter 5.

In addition to more applied learning in the classroom, they would also like learning to be

fun.

> *DJ:* Welding is very fun! You can make whatever you want, you can fix whatever you need to fix. It's fun, it's useful and it's kind of easy, once you know what you are doing. And our welding teacher is super cool, an awesome guy, and smart. It's fun!

> *Thomas:* Welding class is one of my favorite classes, welding is a very useful talent, and I am happy to do it.

> *Edward:* The best memory of high school is being with my friends in welding class.

It appears that when students have a connection or relevance to the subject they are learning and

have a positive connection with the teacher, the learning process and experience can be

optimized). Again, the excitement and enthusiasm that the students had regarding their welding

classes are significant and valuable regarding what students want and need for them to be active

learners and successful in the classroom, but they also want to have a connection with what they

are learning, especially information that is relevant or shown to be relevant regarding

occupations and/or real-world applications.

Connections: Real-World Application

Several of the students referenced the term "real world" in their essays and during the

focus group sessions. The real-world application appears important for the students, especially

the male students who are taking welding classes. The concept of real-world application is often

associated with CTE classes, skilled trade occupations in rural communities, and work-bound

rural students (Ardoin, 2017; Burnell, 2003). This type of learning is associated with a more pragmatic view of education where education is linked to a specific occupation. According to Corbett (2009), "Apprenticeship-style, hands-on, real-world learning is preferable to academic and classroom-based forms of educational engagement" (p. 168). Furthermore, several of the male students talked about utilizing the welding skills they have already acquired on the farm or at home. If also appears that having a skill such as welding is revered and part of the habitus of rural communities). Some of the students also see a connection between real-world applications and future occupations

> *Tim*: The welding teacher teaches us something that we will use in the real world whether or not it's for a job or just a good skill to have to help other people out. I think it's crazy how teachers think that we're going to use an eight-step problem in the real world when we're going to weld and we're not going to need that eight-step problem.

> *Edward:* I also like when teachers teach you stuff that goes with what you want to do in the future. Say I'm a welder, doing stuff that goes toward welding is what would be pretty nice to do. I'm looking for more connections between what I'm learning and my occupational goals.

The schooling experience between CTE classes and general education courses is quite contrasting. Several of the male students prefer the learning environment of CTE classes and also find the skills and knowledge they are learning to be useful to them today as well as provide a real-world application.

Affinity for CTE Courses and Dual Credit

During the interviews with the three student focus groups and the interviews with the Anna and Mary, Career Technical Education (CTE) courses dominated the conversation in comparison to postsecondary or college preparatory coursework. There was a lot of excitement and momentum regarding CTE classes and some excitement regarding dual credit. Certifications

and preparing students for the world of work garnered more attention. This is an important observation and takeaway because school personnel, school structure, and coursework can influence the educational and occupational aspirations of rural youth.

Since CTE garnered a lot of attention during the study, it might be helpful to provide context regarding CTE in Indiana. According to the IN.gov Career and Technical Education website:

> The mission of Career and Technical Education (CTE) in Indiana is to ensure an education system of high quality and equity for the academic achievement and career preparation of all Indiana students. Students in Indiana's secondary CTE programs will gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for success in postsecondary education and economically viable career opportunities.

Anna stated that one of the opportunities that are available to help students prepare for college and careers is CTE courses. Anna also reiterated that the "previous principal was working toward early college, with the intention that by the time you get out of here students could earn a two-year technical degree, which we're not anywhere near that." Mary also commented on the prior administration's focus on more certification programs for the students. "When students leave DWHS they may need one credit or one class from getting a certificate or associate in welding. While CTE can prepare students for postsecondary education, it appears that many of the CTE classes that the student participants are taking are preparing them to go directly into the workforce, not postsecondary education, especially the welding program.

Annal was also asked about the school culture and how she perceives it in promoting the pursuit of college education, and she explained that:

> It would be nice to be able to offer a wider variety of CTE courses, but you just can't, you're small and you can only offer so much. We have phenomenal CTE courses that we offer like our CNA nursing program is number one in the state. Our welding teacher is great. We've got kids that come from another school district in the next county over all the time. We've got even more this year. The

welding teacher doesn't even have a prep. He gave us his prep so that he could teach another class. We need to double him and double the CNA teacher.

Mary also had a very positive perception of the welding program at DWHS.

> I have a huge group of students that if they want to leave here, for example, prepared to be a welder and get a job, they can do that. When I look at those 20 kids or so that I'm seeing every year who say they're going right to work, wouldn't shock me if at least 50% of those students went through our welding program here.

According to Mary, the average class size can vary but a good average is around 55 students. The 11th grade class that was involved in the study has 49 students. About 50% of students are going right into the workforce after high school. In addition to CTE classes, both Mary and Anna also spoke highly about the dual credit offerings at DWHS.

Another influence regarding educational and occupational aspirations can be associated with college preparatory courses taken in high school, for example, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or dual credit. The ideology of students taking these courses is for students to start thinking about college and/or obtaining college credit in high school. Mary explained that "college is mainly being promoted at DWHS through the utilization of dual credit." Mary thinks highly of dual credit and the class offerings that are available at DWHS.

> The whole dual credit thing is huge because when I first came here, it didn't even exist, but dual credit is now "king." Dual credit does allow students to see a connection, hopefully between what they're doing here and what's at the next level.

Anna also thinks dual credit offerings are a good pipeline for postsecondary education:

> We offer dual credit in English, which is huge because everybody's going to have to take that at a postsecondary institution and they can knock that out here when they have a little more hands-on help. We also offer Math from a community college and so between English and Math, they can complete two major courses that everybody's going to have to have when they go to a community college. You pair that with your dual credits with CTE from welding or the health career classes, and you're almost there to an associate degree.

There is a connection between the dual credit courses they are taking at DWHS with postsecondary education. While the connection between high school and postsecondary education is being established at DWHS, the connection appears to guide students to a community college rather than a four-year college or university. Maybe there is an assumption being made that students will most likely matriculate to the nearest community college than a four-year college or university.

As stated above Anna wishes DWHS could offer a more variety of classes, especially CTE classes, she was also asked if additional courses also included college preparatory like Advanced Placement (AP), and she explained:

> I think AP classes are great, but I would much rather have dual credit. Our socioeconomic status is a huge battle for us and some of the kids are not at the level they need to be with that. If the kids get it done now, it's already paid for. I think when you're in a school with the socioeconomic status that we have, dual credit is more beneficial. In addition, students may not get the score they need to transfer the credit. At Purdue they are only going to take a four on the Chem AP exam, well, that's stinking hard to do.

The above statement by Anna was insightful because she reiterated the low socioeconomic status of the students and the challenges it presents regarding academic excellence and college readiness. Dual credit can be more advantageous for students because it is more economical to take a dual credit course, which can be offered at no cost to students versus paying for an AP exam that you may not pass and be able to use as college credit as Anna reiterated above.

Mary also provided more insight regarding the dual credit offerings for both general education and CTE and the push regarding dual credit course offerings at DWHS.

> We have a lot of dual credit here. We talk a lot about dual credit in both general education courses like English and Math and several CTE courses. We have students who can now leave here and be CNA certified.

The dual credit offerings at DWHS are beneficial for students to take especially if they plan on enrolling in a postsecondary institution after high school. But according to Mary offering dual credit classes is also good for the school.

> There is a huge push in Indiana right now for dual credit. I think you get a bump in your grade if you have college or career readiness. I think the number of dual credit courses we offer keeps us in the B range as a school.

> The affinity towards offering more dual credit courses in comparison to AP or IB courses

at DWHS correlates with the research regarding rural schools." While students attending DWHS may not have access to many AP courses as their urban and suburban peers, they do have access to dual credit which is still considered college-preparatory courses.

However, the ability of DWHS to simulate college or prepare students to be successful at college was raised by two of the student participants regarding postsecondary education. The two students provided a perception that DWHS does not adequately prepare students for postsecondary education. According to DJ:

> My sister went to college and she's still taking classes to be a nurse but has really struggled. She states that DWHS did not prepare her for all the math and stuff she is learning at college. She was completely unprepared for college.

DJ's takeaway was that students who go on to college might struggle because they are not academically prepared. Shaquille similarly shared this perception and opinion. Shaquille provided the following statement in his essay about going to a small school:

> Small schools don't prepare you for college as well as a big school can and while we learn stuff, we don't have the money or the number of teachers to give us the proper education to simulate college and I feel like this is a big reason why most of us don't like college and they feel that going straight into the workforce is the best option, including me.

Shaquille provides a powerful statement regarding his perception of academic preparedness at a small school and college readiness. I think it is important to note that Shaquille is associated with the honors focus group session and ranked 4th and appears to have a more favorable perception

regarding going straight into the workforce than postsecondary education. Also, he stated that

the lack of preparedness is why many students don't like college. I thought this was an

interesting comment because how can you like or dislike something you've not experienced yet.

More will be learned from Shaquille and the other student participants concerning their

perceptions and beliefs regarding postsecondary education and their educational and

occupational aspirations in Theme 2.

Connections: College and Career Relevance

In addition to applied learning and real-world application, several students indicated that

they would like teachers to connect general education subjects such as science, math, and

English to careers, occupations, or majors they could explore in college. Again, students would

like to have more connections regarding what they are learning and how it might apply to them

regarding educational and occupational aspirations.

> *Thomas***:** I've had a hard time figuring out what I would like to do in terms of college or my education. For example, in math, you could show what an accounting job would be like, or what a mathematician would do, or something like that, to just help those students who may have a passion for numbers and don't realize it, so then they just grow up not ever knowing that they could have been something that they would have been really good at and maybe I should pursue it in college.

> *Shrek:* I wish teachers would talk to us about what jobs we can go into. Say it's a business-related class or something like that, have them tell us, oh, if you like this class, you need to go into this. I wish they would just give us more job options. Because I really don't know what I want to do, and I wish people would give me more examples of what you can do.

> *Shaquille:* Show us more options on what we can do after high school. Because I feel like we learn stuff to get out of school rather than just expanding our knowledge in different occupations in the classroom.

The above narrative speaks to the students wanting to connect the subject matter of general education courses with college and career relevance. During the focus group sessions, I observed several of the students frustrated regarding this topic. Their family and school personnel are asking them what they want to do after high school and for some, they don't know. They don't feel like they have enough information, exposure, or experience to make an informed decision regarding educational and occupational aspirations. There were a few students that indicated that the only career relevance is occurring in CTE classes. But they also view these classes as preparing you for a skilled trade job, not postsecondary education.

Career relevance in the classroom is important for rural students because their exposure to what they can see or be exposed to in their communities could be limiting because of their size, also, the community where DWHS resides is isolated. Several of the students indicated in their essays that the only businesses they have locally are agriculture, Dollar General, and a gas convenience store. The nearest grocery store, medical offices, banks, and hospital reside in a town thirty miles away. While the town provides the basic living necessities, it is limited. For larger big box stores, a variety of professional offices, restaurants that are not fast food, hospitality industry, entertainment, and business enterprises providing employment, require individuals to travel around fifty minutes north or south of DWHS. Therefore, exposing students in the classroom concerning occupations and possible majors to pursue in college outside of what they can see in their local community could be very insightful, useful, and impactful for students

Lastly, some students expressed interest in teachers providing guidance and strategies in preparing students to be successful in college, providing yet another connection for students regarding what they are learning and doing in high school and the connection to postsecondary education and their future.

>*Shrek:* I wish teachers would prepare us better for college by teaching us how to take notes during class and teach us how to study better. Because they don't go over that. They just expect us to know how to do that and we were never taught any of that. So, it's just hard when all of sudden you have to learn how to study by yourself.

Learning how to study would be applicable for the students now but also as a component of college readiness. Having more college relevance would also provide an opportunity for teachers to speak about postsecondary education as a linkage to high school and an option and opportunity for students to consider. Furthermore, teachers at DWHS have attended college and can speak from personal experience about what to expect and how good study habits in high school can prepare them for college or other questions or concerns students may have about college. Teachers can sometimes be one of the few individuals in the local community who students know that went to college and have a college degree.

Connection with Teachers

In addition to wanting more connections inside the classroom regarding learning and college and career relevance; the student participants expressed a desire to connect with their teachers and school counselors in a more interpersonal manner. Dillion provides an example of what appears to be occurring in some of his classes.

>They just say this is what needs to be done they don't ask us a whole lot of questions. They never really explain why we must do certain things that we have to do. No school really can get to know every student 100%. Because after you graduate that's it, you just leave, and they don't really care to get to know everyone individually.

However, the male students in the welding program articulated that the welding teacher does get to know and care about them. When the male student participants spoke about the welding teacher there was enthusiasm in their voices regarding their interactions. It appears the welding

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teacher has had a positive and impactful influence on the students, not only in an academic and

occupational manner but in a personal way.

> *Dillion:* The great thing about the DWHS welding program is that the instructor is nice and really gets to know you. The instructor is very informative and supportive, if you ask him a question, he helps us.

> *Edward:* The welding teacher is a very nice guy, we always joke and laugh together.

> *DJ:* We got some cool teachers like the welding teacher, straight to the point, smart, super awesome guy, if you ask him a question, he'll answer it, and if he doesn't know he finds out. Also, the math teacher, put any problem in front of her and she can solve it or one of our tech education teachers, the guy is a genius car engine to jet engine or new spacecraft, just don't bring up aliens because the guy can talk all day.

> *Tim:* The welding instructor is pretty cool, he's not rude. If he doesn't know what you're talking about, he makes sure he finds out, it's just what he does. If you are doing something wrong, he will assist you and won't just let you struggle. He's out there to help people. He wants students to succeed and that's why he does what he does.

The student participants conveyed that they would like teachers and others at DWHS to get to

know them as their welding teacher has. From my observation of reading the student participant

essays and listening to the focus group discussions, the relationship between the welding teacher

and the students has been built around mutual respect and engagement regarding learning and

personal development.

As stated previously the teacher-to-student ratio is more favorable at DWHS for a more

individual and interpersonal approach between students and the teachers, guidance counselors,

and administrators. The smaller class sizes could provide more opportunities to have more

collaborative and dynamic connections inside the classroom. The connection students want with

their teachers correlates with a statement Anna made during her interview "Teachers are

constantly being told that they need to build relationships with these kids if you want them to be

successful, you have to build a relationship." Anna's ideology is exactly what the students

conveyed they wanted and needed more of during the focus group sessions.

Conclusion

The schooling experience can be impactful and influential for students and how they

perceive and value education, not only their current high school experience but educational

aspirations and pursuits after high school. The student participants were consistent in how they

defined college as extra schooling or furthering one's education past high school. As stated

previously, a student's current schooling experience could influence their educational and

occupational aspirations and if they will consider postsecondary education, especially a four-year

college after high school.

Another notable takeaway from this section is the students' desire to connect general

education subject matter with more applied learning, similar to their CTE classes. Overall, the

student participants had a more favorable schooling experience regarding CTE classes than

general education classes. Anna and Mary also have high regard for CTE classes and would like

to offer more CTE and dual credit classes but being a small school poses limitations. Also, dual

credit classes are how DWHS primarily promotes postsecondary education.

Many of the students articulated a need for teachers to demonstrate how subject matter in

general education classes has utility in the real world, for possible occupations, or potential

majors to study in college. Not only do they want to interact with knowledge in an applied

manner, but they want to connect with their teachers and other school officials collaboratively,

similar to the interaction that many of the male student participants have experienced with the

welding teacher. The fact that these students want to engage in a more intentional, cooperative,

and interpersonal manner speaks volumes for the students and the school officials at DWHS. It

was observed during the focus group sessions with the students that they care about their schooling experience and how and what they learn. They want to be active participants in their learning, in what classes they take, and their educational and occupational aspirations and would like to have collaborative partners within the school.

Theme Two: Juxtaposition of Postsecondary Education

The information in this theme begins to provide insights into the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of the student participants regarding college and postsecondary aspirations. Specifically, how do they value college, and if they have a positive, neutral, or negative perception regarding college? In addition to the main theme, sub-themes regarding the variation of perceptions by academic ability, college changes people and postsecondary plans.

In regard to the value of college, is postsecondary education held in high regard, important, or necessary? Additionally, is postsecondary education a priority, expectation, an aspirational goal, and is postsecondary education being considered regarding the students' post-high school plans? To explore their perceptions regarding college and get a sense of their thoughts and attitudes each focus group was asked "When you think about going to college, discuss some of your opinions or beliefs about choosing to pursue a college education or not pursue a college education." The student perspective regarding this question varied across the various focus groups and within the same group.

The first focus group consisted of students enrolled in the honor's English class and they had the most favorable perceptions regarding college.

> *Lori:* I have a neutral belief regarding college. I want to go to college to become what I want to be in the future, but the debt is concerning. You can be in debt for a very long time, so there are negative and positive things about going to college. But I'd say mainly positive because it will most likely get you to what you want to be in the future if you work for what you want.

>*Shrek:* I'm definitely more favorable to going to college because that's what everybody in my family has done But also, I really don't want to be in debt for the rest of my life. I want to be able to have a nice house, a nice car, and all that stuff. So it's a trade-off, I don't know, you might end up making more money in the long run, but you're going to have to spend a lot of money at first.

>*Thomas:* I've always thought that going to college was a good thing, and that's what you must do because that is what I grew up around. Everybody was always like, for you to become successful you need to go to college and get an education so that you can get a good job.

However, not all students in the honors focus group perceived college as the preferred choice regarding educational and occupational aspirations.

>*Shaquille*: I think it all depends on what you want to be. You can also go to a trade school for a trade occupation, you don't have to go to college to become something, and spend all this money, you could just go to a trade school, spend less money and get a similar job.

Shaquille provided a neutral perspective and alluded to college and trade schools more as equivalents in preparing a student for similar jobs. Also, he believes trade school might be a better option because it's more affordable. While "similar jobs" was not expanded upon, the reverence for skilled trade jobs and the ability to secure a "good job" without having to attend college or obtain a college degree will be expanded on in Theme 4. Shrek and Lori both had rather positive views regarding postsecondary education. But they also had concerns about the amount of debt associated with college. Thomas grew up believing that going to college was a good aspiration and that there is a link between college and being successful. Thomas's perception also speaks to the influence that a family can have on rural youth regarding educational aspirations

The second focus group consisted of students enrolled in the regular English class and their perceptions align more closely with Shaquille, providing a contrasting perception regarding college and there are other educational pathways to pursue in getting a good job.

Billy Bob: I don't think college is necessary and a waste of time. For some people, it's really helpful and they can get really good jobs from it. But for me personally, I just don't really need it. I don't think I've had much influence from anybody regarding college.

Edward: I've always been told you have to go to college in order to get a good-paying job. Which is what I'm looking into doing is just getting a good-paying job, to support my family and myself. But looking at my dad, he dropped out his freshman year of college, but he has a good job, with good pay, with no college education or anything. So, that's kind of what I'm going to do because I don't want to be a student in debt and stuff like that.

Dillon: I just think college is just a lot of money you waste basically. I don't really see what the big deal is. There are certain pathways that college helps and others they don't.

This group does not see the need to go to college to get a good job because they can get a good job without a college degree. They also think college is a waste of time and money. While Edward has been told about the connection between college and a good-paying job, Billy Bob has not received any type of influence to attend college. Overall college is good for some people and certain pathways, but college is not right for everyone nor them.

The third focus group consisted of students who were not enrolled in the honors or regular English class and provided similar responses to the second focus group.

Sally: I don't think it's really that important depending on what you want to do with your life. It's good for some people.

DJ: I believe I'm not right for it or don't need it because there are other options like I could go learn under the Operators Union 150. You can work under people as an apprentice, learning all their trades that they know, and then get certified for it, so that's the path I'd like to take.

Tim: I feel like college would help me, but it's to where? Also, I will need to get scholarships, they would help pay for it because it's just me. The other is whether I would be able to get through college because sometimes people struggle and that struggle leads to them not getting very far in life. While some people might have the capability of getting through college and then getting that high-dollar job.

Similar to the second group, this group does not have high regard for college and thinks college is not that important or necessary. DJ also referenced alternative pathways after high school that

allow you to get a good job. Many of the students referenced "good job" but Tim linked college to a "high dollar job" and so for him, there is a distinction between what type of job you can get regarding a college degree.

Variation of Perceptions by Level of English Class

The perceptions of the students were varied but also consistent across the three focus groups. Much of the focus group associated with the honors English class tended to have a more favorable perception of college. Their responses articulated the value of college as preparing them for occupational aspirations for their future and to get a good job. Having a good job affords them a certain lifestyle, such as a nice house and car. It also appears that their favorable perception has been fostered by their family, who have attended college themselves "because that's what everybody in my family has done" or they have family who is encouraging them to pursue postsecondary education. The other interesting dynamic is that this focus group is associated with students who have the higher ability. Is there a connection between the perception of college and the student's perceived academic ability? Either by the student themselves or their family, teachers, and guidance counselor?

The remaining students did not revere or value college in the same manner. They do not see the importance or the need for college. They view trade schools or Unions as an acceptable educational pathway to obtaining a good job. Another interesting element for the third group relates to self-efficacy and their beliefs in their abilities and qualifications. The self-efficacy belief that emerged from the third group related to the various comments that college is good for "some people" or "other people" but not for them. Tim, spoke about the concern of struggling and not being able to get through college, but others will. I did not observe a lot of confidence from this group regarding academics. Which prompted a few questions. Do they not feel capable

of college because of their perceived level of academic ability? Are they not expected to consider college as an educational aspiration? Overall, it was just interesting to observe the mindset of the various focus groups regarding college in relation to the English class they were enrolled in.

The influence of family or lack of influence may also contribute to the perception regarding college. As Billy stated, "he's not had much influence from anybody regarding college." While Edward and Thomas had been influenced to go to college by their family. However, Edward's dad has also modeled that you can get a "good job" without a college degree and Edward plans to follow in his footsteps. I plan to expound on the influence of family on educational and occupational aspirations in Theme 4 of this chapter. While there was variance among the three focus groups, there was also consistency regarding beliefs and attitudes regarding postsecondary education. Overall, postsecondary education did not seem to be as important or valued by most of the student participants and several students believe you can get a good job without a college degree. Another consistency among the three groups is the high cost of college and the concerns regarding student loan debt. The concerns regarding the cost of college and student loan debt will be addressed in Theme 3 concerning affordability.

College Changes People

Another element that cultivated perceptions for students regarding college is older siblings who have attended college. For two of the student participants, this has cultivated a more adverse perception regarding college. DJ and Tim have both personally experienced older siblings going off to college and they indicated that "college changes a person and college takes family members away from one another."

> *DJ:* I have two sisters who majored in nursing. My one sister went to Purdue and pretty much disappeared. We didn't hear from her for a long time and then when she did come back, she was different. She used to be just a cool sister, she would

be outgoing, and we could hang out, play video games, and stuff together, and then she comes back and she's into weird rock stuff and she's completely different, she was a stranger.

Tim: You're a family and you see them at home and school all the time and then they go off to college and you hardly see them or think about them. But then when they come home, it's weird because they are not the same person. They have changed because of college life, and I don't like the changes because it makes you hardly know who they are anymore.

Both DJ and Tim had siblings who went off to college and while older siblings could positively influence younger siblings to follow in their footsteps and attend college; the opposite appears to be the case for DJ and Tim. Partly, because the personal experience they've incurred regarding college has been negative. It appears both students missed seeing their siblings and then when they did come home, they had changed, so much so they saw them as a stranger. The changes they saw in their siblings were not well received. Perceptions regarding "change" for rural communities are often not viewed as a positive outcome or something that one should seek. Perceptions regarding change correlate with the literature regarding how rural communities view change as a negative or not a good thing.

If college is associated with something that is somewhat feared or not thought of positively, could the concern or fear of "change" or changing who you are as a person be deterring rural students from considering college as an educational aspiration? This would be an interesting concept to investigate further.

Postsecondary Plans:

The previous sections described the various beliefs, values, and attitudes as well as the people and experiences that have influenced the individual students regarding educational and occupational aspirations. To build upon their perceptions regarding college and occupational

aspirations, each of the student participants was asked: "if their current post-high school plans include college." The responses are displayed in groupings by focus groups, beginning with the students associated with the honors English class.

> *Lori:* I plan to go to a four-year college because that way I can get into everything I need to know and everything I have to do for the occupation that I would like to pursue. And even if there's more schooling after four years, I would go immediately take it because I want to be the best I can be for the job that I'd like to do.

> *Shrek:* I plan on going to a four-year college because I will get more opportunities and stuff like that. And also I want to experience college and all the different things and new experiences that come with it.

> *Thomas:* I think I might go to college, if I figure out something that I really enjoy, and I'm really passionate about, then I would go. But if I never find anything like that, I do not think I will go because college is expensive and it's a big risk to spend all that money going and then figure out there's nothing you even want to do there anyway.

> *Shaquille:* Yes and no, I don't know...maybe. If I find the job that I want to do and it requires a college education then, yes, I will go.

Both Lori and Shrek indicated a convincing affirmative regarding attending college after high school. Lori indicated that years of schooling were associated with getting the best job she could. While Shrek also alluded to having more opportunities by attending college, she also articulated the desire for new and different experiences that college can provide. Shrek also would like to go outside her comfort zone and be exposed to new and different things. Her attitude regarding college aligns more with an exploratory perspective regarding personal and professional growth (Corbett, 2009).

However, Thomas and Shaquille are undecided regarding college. They both believe that college can prepare you for a particular job, but you need to figure out what you want to study or do before you go to college. Thomas and Shaquille represent a more pragmatic perspective where college is to prepare you for a specific job (Corbett, 2009). Adding to the pragmatic

perspective for Thomas is the expense of college and the risk involved, so one might need to

figure out what you want to do in life before pursuing a college degree.

The next group of responses is from the focus group who were associated with the

regular English class. The responses again were varied but insightful.

> ***Dillion:*** I'm probably going to just go into the workforce after high school. Go to
> the workforce and get certifications. My uncle has been trying to get me into the
> Union but the Ironwork Union is out in Austin Texas. But personally, I don't
> want to move that far for a job. I'm probably going to work on getting all my
> certifications so I'm better qualified for different positions. However, if
> technology like Artificial intelligence (AI) takes over welding, then I will
> probably go to college. I think I would go to school and try and work on the
> machines that replace humans, so I can try and get a job.

> ***Billy Bob:*** Living in a rural community does make it harder to attend college
> because the nearest two-year college is over thirty minutes away and I don't think
> they offer what I'd be wanting to do personally. However, I might go to college in
> the future. It depends on the scenario because in twenty years we might not even
> need certain jobs anymore. So I might then go to college to get an education in a
> different field that has more jobs than a field that you're good in, but there is no
> demand for it anymore.

> ***Edward:*** It would be a very slim chance that I would go to college. Our school
> allows us to get our welding certificate in our second or third year of welding. So,
> we don't even have to go to community college or trade school to get our
> certifications. However, if someday they don't need welders that much anymore
> and it's going to be pretty hard to get a job as a welder, then I'll go to college and
> find another thing that I'd like to do.

All three students indicated that they do not have aspirations to go to college after high school.

This group aligns more with a pragmatic view of postsecondary education, where apprenticeship,

or one-year programs at a trade school would be preferable (Corbett, 2009). However, if

technology, for example, AI impacts the demand for their current occupational aspirations then

they would consider going to college in the future. I think it is a positive indication that these

students are looking into the future and realizing that jobs will more than likely change or

evolve, and they might need to seek some type of postsecondary education in the future to have a

good job. I also think it was interesting that Dillion expressed that moving to Austin, Texas was

too far to move for a good job. Staying or leaving one's rural community can influence

educational and occupational aspirations as indicated in the literature review (Ardoin, 2017;

Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; McDonough et al., 2010). The influence of students staying or

leaving their rural community concerning educational and occupational aspirations will

discussed further in Theme 4.

The final group of responses is associated with the students associated with the basic

English class. Their responses correlate with the previous group but are also just as insightful.

> *DJ:* I don't really think I have a chance at it. I don't feel good enough for college, I don't feel like I'm prepared to go to college. I guess I will look more into apprentice programs, I just want to get as many certifications under my belt as possible and this might include going to a trade school or community college.

> *Tim:* I don't intend to go to college. I want to find a job in either manufacturing or welding. I'd probably go for manufacturing before welding or if there was a job that had both, this would be ideal. Hopefully, I can get an internship somewhere during my senior year and see where that will take me as far as a permanent job.

> *Sally:* I think I will go later on, once I have a family and raise them, and then finally do something for myself and go to college.

DJ's response correlates with his earlier response about not being good enough for college. Self-

efficacy, mindset, and personal expectations will be disused in greater detail in Theme 4. Tim

and DJ plan to investigate options regarding welding and jobs associated with a particular skilled

trade occupation. Lastly, Sally's response was interesting, she thinks she might go, but only after

her family is raised and she can then do something for herself. Her response speaks to the

perspective of traditional gender roles in rural communities that were discussed in the literature

review.). Also, several of the male respondents do not intend to go to college but aspire to work

in a skilled trade occupation which other male members of their family have done, which speaks

to the influence of family legacy, which will be discussed in Theme 4.

Overall, two of the three female student participants stated they intend to go to college after high school, and both students are associated with the honors English class. The other female student participant who is associated with the basic English class plans to enroll in a cosmetology program after high school. Two of the male students associated with the honors English class are considering college if they can find something that is of interest to them to study or a specific job that they are interested in that requires a college degree. The remaining five male students associated with the regular and basic English classes plan to go into the workforce after high school in a skilled trade occupation, such as welding. Therefore, about 20% of the participants state they plan to attend college, another 20% might attend college and then 60% of the students do not plan to go to college after high school. Some of the student participants plan to seek other types of education, such as a trade school, apprenticeship, or beauty school. While others plan to start working right after high school with the welding certification, they obtained from DWHS.

Conclusion

Postsecondary education aspirations about occupational aspirations varied to a certain extent among the three focus groups based on their enrollment in either honors, regular or basic English classes. The honors focus group had the most favorable perception regarding college and also indicated that their parents have influenced them to consider postsecondary education as an educational aspiration regarding their occupational aspirations. This group perceives college as a way for them to have better job opportunities as well as a job that will allow them to live a nice lifestyle someday. In addition, attending college would allow them to experience different things. However, not all students in the honors group were completely sure that college is in their future directly after high school. A few of the male honor students have been positively influenced by

their welding classes and welding teacher and are considering welding as an occupational aspiration instead of college.

The other two focus groups were more in alignment regarding their perceptions, beliefs, and opinions regarding postsecondary education and occupational aspirations. Most of the students indicated that they do not intend to attend college after high school, but rather participate in union apprenticeships, internships, or attend a trade school to be certified in welding or manufacturing. However, the variance regarding postsecondary aspirations by their English class and gender was interesting. As stated earlier, the honors focus group had the most favorable perception regarding college with many considering attending after high school.

Concerning gender, two of the female student participants had the strongest indication that they will go to a four-year college out of all students. While many male students are considering a skilled trade occupation either outright because they do not have any intention of attending college or as an alternative to attending college because they don't have a clear understanding of what they want to study or other career options. The gender difference in this study correlates with the research presented in the literature review that rural female students have a higher postsecondary matriculation rate than rural male students

However, one consistent theme among several of the students is the concern they have regarding how expensive college is. Given the consistent theme among all groups regarding the high cost of college, and how it relates to their perception, beliefs, and attitudes regarding postsecondary education as well as how it relates to previous research findings, college affordability will be addressed in the next section.

Theme Three: College is Expensive

The perceived high cost of postsecondary education was something that almost all students referenced in the previous themes regarding how they defined college and also their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes concerning postsecondary education. The sticker price of postsecondary education can be alarming and could deter students from considering college as an educational aspiration, especially students from low or low-middle socioeconomic status. In addition to the cost of college, this theme will encompass perceptions regarding the burden of paying for college, financial aid, and if college will pay off in the long run.

The concerns of the students regarding the cost associated with going to a four-year university are warranted, given the rising costs associated with a four-year college education over the past decades For the 2021-22 academic year, the average tuition and required fees for Purdue University, West Lafayette was $9,992 (Purdue Bursar; 2022). Over the last couple of decades, there has been a significant increase in the average tuition and required fees to attend four-year universities.

In addition to their perceptions regarding the cost of college, several of the students are also concerned about the amount of debt they may need to incur for a college degree. While all three groups were concerned about the level of debt, the honors group believe a college degree will provide them with a greater return by allowing them to earn more over their lifetime. A few students stated that going to college is also a waste of money. A few notable comments about the cost of college and loan debt are articulated below.

Lori: You can be in debt for a very long time.

Shrek: I really don't want to be in debt for the rest of my life. You might end up making more money in the long run, but you're going to have to spend a lot of money at first.

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Shaquille: You don't have to go to college to become something and spend all that money.

Thomas: College is expensive and it's a big risk to spend all that money going.

Dillion: I just think college is just a lot of money. My mom went to college, and she is still paying off her student loans and that does not seem to be anything I want to do. College just takes too much money and money is definitely a factor for college.

Burden of Paying for College

In addition to the high cost of college, it appears the burden of paying for college might fall on the students because many referenced incurring significant about of student loan debt. Students assuming the burden of paying for their college education is not uncommon for low and low-middle-income students. However, for many low and low-middle SES, the cost could be a significant factor in determining if and what type of postsecondary institution they could attend after high school.

The low SES findings are applicable for DWHS because as referenced in Chapter 3, almost 50% of the student population is on free or reduced lunch and the per capita income is between $45-50K. Additionally, Anna articulated at the beginning of this chapter "So many of these kids live in generational poverty and heart-wrenching conditions with very little support." If students are just focusing on the advertised sticker price and assuming most, if not all of the burden in paying for their college education, it could discourage students from considering a college degree and compel students to consider more affordable options such as attending a trade school, apprenticeships or no additional schooling and just plan to enter the workforce directly after high school.

Financial Aid – Levers and Barriers

While several of the students articulated the high cost to attend college and that it would entail a lot of money, and were concerned regarding the amount of loan debt they would need to incur to pay for college, not any of the students articulated or mentioned that need-based financial aid, such as grants and scholarships could offset some of the cost. It appears many of the students might be focusing on the "sticker price" associated with college without factoring in any grants, scholarships, and other free types of assistance they may qualify for. Maybe they are not aware of the resources financial aid can provide, or just failed to mention it when speaking about the cost of college and loan indebtedness. Given the socioeconomic metrics of DWHS and the county average earnings, federal and state aid could assist in making college more affordable.

However, given the complexity that some families and students may incur applying for federal and state financial aid, it can sometimes be viewed both as a barrier and a lever For students and families to be considered for federal and state financial aid, they must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The FAFSA completion rate for DWHS is 44 % which is slightly below the state average of 49% (Office of the U.S. Department of Education, n/d). However, given the socioeconomic metrics of the students and families at DWHS, and their ability to qualify for financial aid the FAFSA completion rate could be higher. However, the FAFSA can be quite lengthy and difficult to complete, given the number of pages and questions students and families must answer, navigating the process could be viewed as a barrier. Financial aid is a system comprised of policies, processes, timelines, deadlines, complex lingo, and language. The SES groups who most need financial aid and qualify for financial aid can often be the same populations that can incur the most challenges in navigating the system of financial aid because they may not have the level of social and cultural capital needed.

While navigating the system of financial aid can be challenging, the benefits could be articulated as a lever or an equalizer. One of Indiana's most significant need based financial levers is the 21st Century Scholarship. According to the Learn More Indiana website, the 21st Century scholarship, which is Indiana's largest state financial aid program, provides up to four years of undergraduate tuition to income-eligible students at participating colleges or universities in Indiana. As stated in Chapter 3 , only 1% of the DWHS seniors are graduating with this impactful financial scholarship, which is extremely low considering that 48% of the students at the school qualify for free or reduced lunch, which is one of the main eligibility qualifications in the 8th grade. This is a significant gap regarding eligibility and obtaining and receiving the 21st Century scholarship. This gap might have to do with how the 21st Century Scholarship program is being coordinated. According to the guidance counselor, Mary, "they barely have a 21st Century scholars person that they ever see now." DWHE used to have a local liaison but the program was reorganized and moved to a regional representative and this has contributed to a reduction in interaction and services.

Another form of financial aid that several of the students did reference during the focus group discussions was student loans, aid that needs to be repaid. Additionally, several of the students shared concerns regarding the amount of loan debt they will need to take on to attend college and obtain a college degree. Incurring debt, especially for students who have parents, such as DJ, who are still paying on their college loans, or students and families who are loan adverse, might deter students from considering or attending college if their only way to afford college is taking on student loan debt.

Postsecondary Return on investment (ROI)

The rising cost of college, especially four-year colleges and universities has prompted various individuals and entities, specifically families and students, policymakers, and postsecondary institutions to address the return on investment of a college degree (ICHE, 2022). Specifically, is college worth the cost and the debt that might need to be incurred to obtain a college degree? The return on investment concern is what few of the students alluded to when asked if they plan to attend college after high school. Lori stated, "College is going to most likely get you to where and what you want to be in the future." Shrek explained, "College is a trade-off, you might end up making more money in the long run, but you're going to have to spend a lot of money at first." The college payoff in the future can also be seen as a gamble with a certain measure of risk. Thomas stated, "College is expensive and it's a big risk to spend all that money and time going and figure out there's nothing you may want to do." To a certain extent, the students are assuming the burden of paying for college and also assuming the risk involved in that decision. This could be a heavy burden to bear when you are thinking about educational and occupational aspirations.

However, Lori and Shrek have aspirations to attend college and understand that the future lifetime earnings should outweigh the initial cost and loan debt they may need to incur. Their perception aligns with the *ICHE 2020 College Value Report*. The report articulates that the lifetime earnings from a college degree will exceed the cost to obtain the degree. Additionally, the ICHE report articulates that "Hoosiers with an education beyond high school are likely to earn one million more than those with only a high school degree." Value, 2020).

Conclusion

Several of the students articulated that college is expensive, you must spend a lot of money and/or incur the burden of paying for college by taking on significant loan debt and there is a certain amount of risk associated with going to college if the investment does not pay off. All these perceptions and beliefs regarding college could discourage students from considering a college degree. Additionally, the cost and the burden of paying for college could be a barrier for some who want to go to college. The costs associated with a college degree are often articulated in terms of the "sticker price" before financial aid is applied or before tuition and fees are discounted. While financial aid may not be able to reduce the entire cost, it could bring down the cost to a more affordable price, providing a lever for more students to consider postsecondary education (ICHE College Value, 2020).

However, the process of applying for financial aid can also be a barrier because it has the propensity of being cumbersome, difficult to understand and navigate, and laden with jargon that many students and families may not understand especially low-income families and/or first-generation students. Additionally, financial aid is a system of postsecondary education and it favors individuals who have "social and cultural capital" which affords them the tools and relationships that can help them navigate the financial aid process.

While some students believe that college is a waste of money because other educational pathways are more affordable and provide you the ability to get a good job. Others believe the return on investment or the payoff of going to college will allow them to make more money, live a certain lifestyle and get them to where they want to be in the future. Regardless of perception, the cost of college could influence postsecondary aspirations.

Theme Four: Influences of Educational and Occupational Aspirations

Families, school personnel, socioeconomic status, college attainment of parents, and community can influence rural youth regarding educational and occupational aspirations. (The focus of this theme incorporates the various influences on rural youth's educational and occupational aspirations, such as teachers, family expectations and support, socioeconomic status, as well as the family legacy of skilled trade occupations and if staying or leaving their local community is influencing education and occupational aspirations of the student participants. These various influences can also contribute to lower educational aspirations of rural students and the lagging college matriculation gap. . Concerning lower educational aspirations, Thomas commented on this perception in his essay regarding rural communities and factors not encouraging educational aspirations such as postsecondary education. "A lot of people in rural communities are probably not going to get a doctorate degree in physics or something like that, because there are a lot of factors that don't really encourage people to do that."

Regarding encouragement, while the families and community members were not active participants in the study, the student participants, as well as Anna and Mary, were asked specific questions about the influence of families regarding support and resources, as well as the needs of the community concerning educational and occupational aspirations of rural students. Their responses provided some insight regarding these two influential entities.

Family, Teachers & Experiences

To garner information about how students were thinking about their current educational and occupational aspirations and how those aspirations might have been influenced by people, experiences or exposures the students were asked "When you think about your educational and

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occupational aspirations after high school, have there been any specific experiences, exposures, or people in your life that have influenced your choices?" The student participants enrolled in the honors English class all stated that their parents have influenced or encouraged them to think and pursue a college education, but the welding teacher has also influenced some of the male student participants to consider a certificate or trade school after high school.

> *Lori:* My parents just encourage it, I guess. I don't think anybody's really influenced me to go to college. I think it's just what I want to do and my parents encourage it.

> **Shrek:** I wouldn't say they influenced me that much, but my parents have just encouraged me to want to go to college because it's what they did. They always talk about how it helped them and stuff like that. I would say my dad has influenced me to not worry too much about what I want to major in when I go to college because he started with one major, I think he changed his major at least three times, so he ended up going for years or something like that.

> *Thomas:* I think that my parents have influenced me a fair bit, just as I was growing up they would say "Oh, when you get older, after you go to college or when you're in college, do this." It's just been in my mindset that I was going to go to college. But recently, my welding teacher has shown me other opportunities that I can pursue in that field, like a trade school or just get my certificate and do that for a living.

> *Shaquille:* My parents have influenced me to consider both college and trade school. If I want to go into the workforce, then I can but if I don't want to do that, then go get some extra schooling, get a few degrees, get some knowledge and then go to the workforce. With the hope that I will have a better chance of getting a better job.

The families of this group have influenced or encouraged the students to consider college as an aspiration after high school but are also open to them obtaining a certificate or attending a trade school. While Thomas has been influenced through conversations with his parents growing up that he attends college when he gets older and has had a college-going mindset; the welding teacher has influenced him to consider welding as an occupation. Overall, student participants are receiving a message that having some type of extra schooling after high school would be beneficial to obtaining a good job.

The student participants enrolled in the regular English class have also but influenced by their families, welding program, and welding teacher.

Billy Bob: My dad went to a welding school in Tennessee and then my uncle also went to that school. So they both showed me how to weld probably three years ago. So I've been doing it for a little bit now. So, that is probably what influenced me the most about what I plan to do after high school.

Edward: My family has influenced me the most to go into welding, instead of college, because I was going to go to college to be a veterinarian, but my grandfather had welded for his entire life, as a pipefitter and he showed me one day and I just kind of got hooked on it and now I've been doing welding classes and stuff.

Dillon: The welding program here has really helped me figure out what I want to do when I get older instead of going to college. I can go to a trade school and get my certification so I can get a job in the welding field. The welding instructor here helped me figure out that is what I want to do and where I can go for additional welding classes. Also, where I live we sometimes weld and this has really influenced me to weld.

This focus group was also influenced by their family but in a slightly different manner than the honors group. The family influence has defiantly fostered a focus on welding or attending a trade school after high school rather than college. Billy Bob and Edward, have direct family members who are or were welders who may have predisposed them to enroll in welding classes and consider welding as a legacy occupation. The family legacy of skilled trade occupations, such as welding will be articulated specifically in a separate section of this theme.

The students enrolled in the basic English class have also been influenced by people and experiences regarding their educational and occupational aspirations.

DJ: My sister's boyfriend has influenced me about apprenticeship stuff. I've also seen it throughout my life hanging out with my uncle, he was a mechanic. He worked on semis and stuff. I watched him work and also helped him work on stuff. Then this past summer I had a job helping a level III Electrician and I watched him run wires and stuff in walls and all that. It was really cool.

Tim: I've gone to different workplaces and see how things get done, and there are people in the community who know I'm interested in welding and people tell me that it's a good trade and they always need welders. I even had a guy from a local

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welding business come to my job and ask me about the welding program at school and hopes to see me working for the local welding business someday. The positive impact that people tell you about welding and what you can turn it into…a better-paying job and life by being able to achieve more and buy what you would like. I think the people I've talked to about welding are putting a positive impact on that.

Sally: My family has always asked what I plan to do after high school, and I just tell them that I want to go to beauty school and not college right away and they are ok with that.

This focus group has been influenced by people and experiences in skilled trade occupations such as welding, a mechanic, and an electrician. The experiences DJ has had throughout his life have been hands-on and skills he can use in the real world. Tim has been influenced regarding his interest in welding by people in the community. It appears he has received positive affirmation that welding is a good local occupation and allows you to make good money and they look forward to him joining the profession someday. Other than Sally, these students have been most influenced or encouraged by people outside their nuclear family. Whereas the first group referenced their parents as the prominent influencer regarding educational and occupational aspirations. Regardless of the connection, people, interactions, and exposures are influencing the student participants' educational and occupational aspirations.

Another experience that has been influential in exposing students to educational and occupational aspirations at DWHS is internships with the private sector. Mary understands the value of internships as a way to foster educational and occupational aspirations for DWHS students. She provided an example of how internships can provide students with more information regarding their intended occupation and educational aspirations:

We had a student who did a welding internship, who after said "I do not really think I want to be a welder for the rest of my life. I think I need to go to college and get more education." He is still working there because I think he realized that it's good money and it will help pay for his current expenses while he is going to college.

Mary also predicts that internship experiences will expand at DWHS:

> We're doing more and more internships and that will probably just keep increasing as the new requirements for the graduation pathway are taking effect. Currently, we have a few students participating in internships associated with welding, drafting, childcare, and food service.

Having more internship experiences for the students to participate in, is a positive development, as students indicated in Theme 1, they want more exposure to possible occupations. however, students will need access to transportation as some internship experiences will be located several miles from school and home. Unfortunately, given the socioeconomic status of some of the students at DWHS, they may not have access to transportation and therefore it could restrict some students from being able to participate in an internship experience.

In addition to the influence of family, members of the community, the welding program, and the welding teacher have been a significant influence on the educational and occupational aspirations of the male students in the study. All the male student participants are considering welding as an occupational aspiration after high school, including the two male students associated with the honors English class. The male student participants have been influenced by the welding program but also the teacher regarding welding as a future occupation. As stated previously in this chapter, the male students have appreciated the guidance they have received from the welding teacher regarding the various educational pathways to obtain further classes and credits in welding. The students have also found the welding classes to be very fun, engaging, and useful, but they are just as equally impressed with the welding teacher and hold him in high regard. The welding teacher is a notable example of how teachers can be very influential and impactful regarding educational and occupational aspirations for rural youth.

Anna and Mary are also appreciative of the influence and impact the welding teacher has had on students enrolled in the welding program. Anna thinks the "welding teacher is great." Additionally, the welding program attracts students "from other school districts in the next county over." He loves teaching and "gave up his prep so that he could teach another class." Anna wishes she could "double him." Also, Mary estimates that half of the students who are going directly into the workforce after graduation every year are going into welding. It appears the welding teacher has been very influential to students in his classroom and has increased the number of students who are seeking welding jobs after they graduate from DWHS.

Low Socioeconomic Status

Another significant influence concerning educational and occupational aspirations is the socioeconomic status of students. Both Anna and Mary expressed profound concerns during their interviews about the growing low-income population at DWHS and the challenges it is posing regarding support from home, expectations, academic excellence, and college and career readiness. Anna, and Mary articulated that the poverty and low-income status of students and families they serve, is one of the primary challenges at DWHS in preparing students for college and careers.

> *Anna:* The low SES of our students is a huge battle for us. Some of our kids are really measuring low, in regard to ability and that's a challenge in preparing them for college because they are not quite up to where they need to be with that.

> *Mary:* I would say that the low socioeconomic level of many of our students is an issue. If parents have difficulties registering their kids for school, the level of support and help that parent can provide their kids with anything college-related is not as great.

> Mary's comment regarding the limited amount of support and guidance that parents can

provide their kids concerning educational aspirations, such as attending college also speaks to the

amount of cultural capital their kids may have access to. While Anna has only been associated

with DWHS for three years, Mary has been at the school for over three decades and has

witnessed the SES of students move from middle-income to low and low-middle and explains

the shifting demographics:

> We have a larger and larger population of free and reduced lunch students whose
> parents are needy themselves. We used to have enough students that didn't grow
> up in poverty, and that outweighed its effects on our school. But I think the
> pendulum has swept the other way for us.

Regarding her statement about DWHS used to have enough students to counteract the poverty

effect on the school. Mary elaborated that the change in socioeconomic status and college

readiness might be correlated with the decrease in family farms.

> It seems like the farm kids were more academically prepared and had the higher
> academic ability. Farm kids are different....it might be the level of support they
> are receiving at home. However, the number of farm kids has declined.

Another change that is occurring at DWHS is related to family dynamics, Anna explained that

more students are living and being raised by their grandparents:

> A lot of grandparents are raising their grandkids as a result of broken families.
> The grandparents who are in their seventies and raising teenagers and lower,
> they're exhausted. A family unit provides support and conversation with the kids
> regarding what they want to do when they grow up and I do not know if this is
> occurring.

In addition to family dynamic changes and disruptions, teacher turnover at DWHS is another

concern for Anna and its negative impact on students.

> For so many of our kids, school is their constant and their safe place. This is the
> only normal they see. They build a relationship with a teacher and then the
> teacher leaves, and it feels like somebody else from their life is gone.

As stated previously in the school culture section of Chapter 3, , to combat some of the

challenges the students at DWHS are experiencing at home and to raise standards and

expectations of the students regarding their success at DWHS and beyond, Anna adopted the

High High Hopes campaign because "so many kids live in generational poverty and heart-

wrenching conditions with very little support." The campaign is focused on increasing personal

expectations and levels of excellence.

During the interview with Anna, I had an opportunity to ask her what she hopes to

provide and give to the students attending DWHS and their families. Her response was

encouraging and uplifting.

> I want them to have the best education we can give them, and I want them to have
> fun and to learn and to feel safe. For a lot of them, I want them to see what ten
> minutes of normal looks like and to aspire to be better and do better for
> themselves and their future children. I want them to have a great foundation and
> be better prepared for college, the workforce, or whatever they decide to do after
> high school.

The above passage, along with the *High High Hopes* campaign and eliminating the cost of

attending athletic events for DWHS students, articulates the level of need, resources, support,

and encouragement, which is required in serving the students at DWHS, as well as their

limitations regarding social and cultural capital. Anna garners the impression that she

understands the needs of the students and families she is serving and trying her best to improve

and impact the lives of the students at DWHS.

Anna and Mary expressed their concerns regarding how the low SES of the students at

DWHS is impacting the preparedness of the students for college and career readiness. The low

SES of the students and families can impact support at home as well as a sense of normalcy,

stability, and consistency. In addition, it can impact, self-efficacy, confidence, and mindset

regarding excellence, and settling for mediocre which could be linked to the culture of the family

or community.

Family Expectations and Guidance

The literature review conveyed the idea that the expectations and support of the family unit can play a significant role in fostering rural youth's educational and occupational aspirations). The family unit in rural communities has been described as close-knit and unique because rural communities can be very isolating and for many families, the nuclear family or extended family are the people they interact with the most. Billy Bob referenced the closeness of family in his essay, "My favorite part about living in a rural community is that all of my extended family on my dad's side live two minutes away if I ever need them."

As stated previously, while the scope of the study did not include interviewing the parents or guardians of the student participants; the students were asked how their parents or guardians talk to them about college. This question was trying to determine if postsecondary education is a priority and if there is an expectation in families that rural youth obtain a college degree. The responses are arranged into three groupings with the honors English focus group first.

> *Lori:* They encourage me to go to college because they did not attend themselves, so they want me to be one step better than what they were. They just encourage me to get a college degree.

> *Shrek:* My parents have always said, "You don't have to go to college if you don't want to, as long as you get a good job and you can support yourself, that's fine." I think they expect me to go to college though.

> *Thomas:* I think my parents have always just expected me to go to college. I just grew up thinking I was going to college, but lately, they've been telling me that if I really don't want to do that, I don't have to. But I feel like they want me to do that, and they want me to get a better education so I can get a better job if I have a college degree.

> *Shaquille:* My parents recommend me to go to college because some of the jobs that I've talked about require a college degree. However, they also do not want me to just go to college, because that could be a big money spender and could leave me in debt for a long time.

The students enrolled in the honors English class have parents who are encouraging them to go to college so they can get a good job or a better job. As articulated in the research family encouragement is a significant influence and can counteract the effects of low socioeconomic status and college attainment of parents. Regarding Lori, her parents did not go to college, but they want her to aspire for more than they have, which is not always the case for rural families. As indicated in the literature review some families don't want their kids to be better educated or attain a higher standard of living. While Thomas's parents have encouraged him to go to college, they will also support him if he chooses not to go to college and pursue welding. Lastly, Shaquille has the support of his parents but there is also concern regarding the cost of college if he does not know what he wants to do in the future.

The second group of responses pertains to the focus group associated with the regular English class.

> *Dillion:* They say it's completely my decision if I want to go or not. They will support me either way. College is an option for me if I decide to go.

> *Billy Bob:* Well, my mom, she really wants me to go to college. She wants me to go into medical stuff, but I don't want to do that. My dad went to a welding school in Tennessee, so I'm probably going to go to a welding school and not go to college.

> *Edward:* My parents, are not really big on wanting me to go. They do not mind if I go…. it's okay…. it's just whatever. So, I just plan on going into the Union for welding.

The second group of responses provides more of a mixture regarding postsecondary aspirations. All three students had the support of their parents, and college is an option if they want to pursue it. While Billy Bob's mom would like him to go to college, it appears he will follow in his dad's footsteps and pursue welding. Edward's parents do not appear to be advocates of postsecondary education but would be okay if he went, but he intends to go into welding.

The last group of responses pertains to the focus group associated with the basic English

class.

> **DJ:** My mom talks to me about it, but I don't really think I have a chance at it. I
> don't feel good enough for college, I don't feel like I'm prepared to go to college.

> **Tim:** My grandparents have talked about it and they think that college helps you
> and prepares you for the real world, but you can also go to a trade school not too
> far from here for welding. If I want to weld, I can do that, get my certification
> and all that and be ready for the workforce, without going through years of
> schooling at college.

> **Sally:** My parents say it's up to me, about what I want to do. They never went to
> college. Right now, I want to go to beauty school and get my beauty license.

All three students have had conversations with their parents or grandparents regarding college,

which can be viewed as a positive indication that conversations are occurring at home regarding

educational and occupational aspirations. DJ's words about not being "good enough" echo what

Anna is trying to address regarding expectations "They're all capable; I just need to figure out

how to get them to see their inner greatness."

Given the significance of family influences regarding educational and occupational

aspirations, the students were also asked about conversations they are having with their families

about their opinions and beliefs about college and what they would like their families to know

about their perceptions.

> **Dillion:** I think my parents know me better than me personally and if I ask my
> dad or something how to do what I want to do, I want them to answer me honesty
> and they should just help me out and try and sway my decision in certain ways
> that would benefit me.

Dillion's response speaks to the influence parents and guardians can have regarding educational

and occupational decisions. It also alludes to the assistance students would like from their

families regarding important decisions such as post-high school plans.

> **Thomas:** My parents have helped me a lot with everything, and I guess I like to
> tell them that I really appreciate their help and advice. But I also would like some

more advice about what college will be like and what majors there are. Also what college life, in general, is like and affording college, and how the experience is different compared to high school? But I'm still not completely knowledgeable about what I want to do still. So, if I could get some more help with that, and figure out what I want to do after high school, I would really appreciate that.

Thomas has also received assistance from his parents, and lucky for Thomas because his mother went to college and can assist him regarding information about possible majors, college life, and affording college. The knowledge and perspective regarding college that Thomas is seeking can be afforded to him through the cultural and social capital of his mother.

Lori: My parents could help me prepare better by giving me real-life situations that could happen because you never know what could randomly just pop up in your life. I want to be prepared for things that could happen.

Similar to Thomas, Lori is wanting to know what to expect and be prepared for life after high school.

Shaquille: I think my parents do a very good job of showing me things I can do after high school. I work a lot with my dad on roofs, siding, and construction. But also, there's a limit to what I want to hear about this college stuff. Put the decision in my hands and let me make my decision, quit throwing stuff at me because I can only handle some much about hearing about college and that I'm about to graduate and you need to figure everything out. I want to kind of do it by myself, but I will ask them questions when I need their help.

Shaquille's response of needing guidance but also independence in arriving at a decision regarding his post-high school plans is somewhat different than Dillion's approach. Also, Shaquille is being exposed to skilled trade occupations by working with his dad in construction.

Shrek: My parents do help me a lot with things regarding college. However, I wish they would understand how draining and exhausting school can be.

Again, Shrek can discuss her aspirations regarding college with her parents and would like some understanding regarding the challenges of going to school.

DJ: I think my parents have my back regarding post-high school planning. My decisions are my decisions, as long as I don't do anything stupid, I'm good.

Similar to Shaquille, DJ wants to take the lead regarding post-high school planning but also enjoys the security of having the support of his parents.

> *Tim:* My grandparents support me in what I want to do after high school. I tell them I want to weld, and they tell me that's a good trade to have and you should try and pursue that.

Tim is also able to have conversations with his grandparents regarding his post-high school plans and they are supportive of his desire to go into welding.

Overall, the above responses demonstrate that students are having intentional conversations regarding their future after high school, which is a positive and encouraging indication regarding engagement. Also, the conversations are helpful and supportive. But for some students, the conversations might get a bit too intense, or the students are feeling pressured to know what they want to do after high school. Again, I observed this frustration during the focus group sessions. Students feel pressured to know what they want to do after high school but do not feel like they have enough information or experience to make an informed decision regarding post-high school plans. The various responses in this section indicate that the students have people in their immediate family with who they can talk about their post-high school plans, and this is encouraging.

Skilled Trade Jobs and Family Legacy

In previous sections, several of the students indicated that they plan to work in a skilled trade occupation of welding or manufacturing after high school. Also, many of the students indicated that they have a family member, or they know someone who is currently a welder or in the Union. Billy Bob also articulated in his essay that "Out here, the majority of people are either farmers or have something to do with the trades." Billy Bob's statement regarding the greater propensity of people in rural communities who aspire to work in a skilled trade occupation aligns

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with the research. Regarding the rural economy of the county associated with DWHS, the three top sectors of employment for residents in the county are 29% manufacturing, 21% government (federal, state, local), and agriculture accounts for 10%, as referenced by the Indiana Department of Workforce Development. The county workforce demographics, educational attainment of residents in the county, and Billy Bob's statement illustrate a propensity for occupations to be associated with skilled trade occupations that do not require a bachelor's degree.

In addition to the county's workforce sectors is the habitus of family legacy regarding skilled trade occupations. It appears from the personal essays and the focus group responses that many of the male participants have been exposed to occupations associated with the trades by male family members.

> *Billy Bob:* My grandfather is a welder. My dad and uncle went to a welding school in Tennessee, so I'm probably not going to go to college and just go to a welding school.

> *Edward:* I was going to go to college to be a veterinarian, but my grandfather was a welder-pipefitter for his entire life. One day he showed me and I just kind of got hooked on it and now I've been taking welding classes at DWHS, and this has influenced me to go into welding instead of college.

> *Shaquille*: I think my parents do a very good job of showing me things I can do after high school. I work a lot with my dad on roofs, siding, and construction.

> *DJ:* I've also seen the trades throughout my life hanging out with my uncle, who is a mechanic.

The relationships and exposures that the male student participants have influenced them to consider welding as a trade occupation or reinforced their aspirations to follow in the footsteps of family members. The family legacy and the trade occupations associated with the rural community are part of the local culture, a form of habitus that can be a powerful influencer regarding what types of occupations rural youth are exposed to and interested in.

However, none of the female student participants talked about or alluded to family

members exposing them to welding or other trade occupations. But just because they did not mention anything does not mean they have not. Though their lack of comparable experiences could also indicate the gender norm and occupational dynamics of rural communities and family legacy which tend to impact more male-dominated trade occupations.

Anna and Mary also provided their perspective regarding the affinity of skilled trade occupations for rural youth. Anna shared some of her thoughts and opinions regarding the allure of trade occupations, the Union and not going to college but straight into the workforce.

> I can't blame students for not wanting to go to college, why would you want to when you can get a good-paying job without a college degree. My friend works at a prominent utility company in the northern part of the state, and he makes six figures and has a high school diploma. My husband has a bachelor's degree and has taught for 15 years, and his salary is $43K and he has student loans for that. Start earning money now unless you're going to be an engineer or something like that. There are good jobs that students can get with a two and four-year degree but also sometimes without.

Anna has also incurred the desirability of the trades and the Union in her own family.

> My brother-in-law is helping my daughter's boyfriend (future son-in-law), get into the Union. He went to a community college for a year and a half and said that's not for him. He is going to start at $31.75 an hour, free insurance and he's going to have a pension. I pay almost $1,000 a month for the best medical plan.

The starting salary and health insurance benefits can be a compelling reason for rural youth to start making money now rather than go to college, where they may need to outlay several thousands of dollars before they can start earning money which may or may not be comparable to what you can earn in skilled trade occupations. The above salary and benefits package could be quite enticing for students to consider. Especially, with the influence and support of your family, community, and school.

In addition to Anna, Mary provided a perspective regarding the allure of trade occupations and the influence of family on students to either continue with a similar occupation or aspire to a college-educated occupation.

> We have a few kids whose parents are teachers or who may still have family farm connections and a few professional people in the area. But most of our clientele have parents who either don't work at all or are more in the blue-collar workforce. I know some of them probably aspire for their kids to do better than them but yet they're not showing them what better looks like, or they've made a decent living and they're okay with their kid doing the same thing. Some parents are fine if their kid gets training in welding and goes and makes $25 an hour welding because that's a decent wage around here.

Mary also affirms the occupational demographics and local habitus of the surrounding community. She described how some families aspire for their kids to do better than them by either going to college or choosing an occupation that will provide them with more earning potential as other families might be satisfied with their child having the same type of occupation and earning potential. Mary also alluded to the fact that some parents don't work at all. Again, this references the low SES of many of the students and families. As discussed earlier the low-SES can impact how much support and resources (financial, social, and cultural capital) they can provide their children regarding educational and occupational aspirations.

Mary has been with DWHS for her entire career and understands the local habitus and family legacy regarding trade and blue-collar jobs have been an integral facet of the community over the years. While the population around DWHS is shrinking, the affinity for students to be educated in trade occupations appears to be just as important. This might be one of the reasons why DWHS has invested significant resources into the welding program. The current and previous administrations want to provide students with the ability to acquire technical coursework that will allow them to be certified in welding or be able to take minimal coursework after high school to obtain certifications that will allow them to go directly into the workforce.

This type of endeavor is enabling the students, to be college and career ready when they graduate from DWHS. The credentials will also allow the students to enter the workforce in a relatively brief time locally, regionally, or in another part of the state, or outside of Indiana.

Which prompted another question for the student focus groups concerning if their educational and occupational aspirations were associated with staying or leaving their rural community. Their perceptions, thoughts, and opinions are articulated in the next section.

Staying vs. Leaving

As referenced in the literature review, the desire to stay or leave their rural community and family can foster different perceptions, opinions, concerns, and emotions regarding educational and occupational aspirations among rural youth. Additionally, for rural youth to have an opportunity for upward mobility may entail them leaving their family and community. This can foster the perception that students who aspire to obtain a four-year college degree will need to leave their rural community permanently because of attending college and their inability to return because they cannot find a job that requires a college degree in their hometown.

Several of the student participants articulated in their essays and focus group responses that they have enjoyed growing up in a rural community and prefer living in a rural community as opposed to an urban area. To garner their thoughts and beliefs regarding staying or leaving their rural community, the students were asked: "Tell me how you feel about leaving your rural community to pursue your future educational and occupational plan."

> *Sally:* I'm going to stay here because there are beauty schools around here. So, I think I'm just going to stay here for a while and then eventually I will move out.

> *Shaquille:* I would like to stay in this area or another rural community, I really don't like big places, I like small places where I know everybody, but I don't want the community to make my decision for me because if there's a better option for me to leave the rural community then I will do that in a heartbeat. But I would like to come back here someday.

Even though Shaquille expressed a desire to stay in the area or another rural community, he also indicated that the influence of the community is not as influential as his desire to seek better

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occupational options. Billy Bob is another student who indicated he would like to stay in the area

but realizes that he may need to commute long distances for a welding job.

> There aren't too many welding jobs locally, that's, to say the least. I may need to commute 40-60 miles north to find a good union welding job. But I sort of plan on staying because I like the house I live in and my parents said they're going to hand it down to me in their will. The house and community are definitely impacting my occupational choices after high school.

Inheriting his parents' house appears to be an incentive to stay for Shaquille to remain in the rural

community.

There was one student, Tim, who indicated that he intends to remain in the area to

continue his restaurant job but realizes that he may need to leave the community to find a

welding or manufacturing job.

> Initially, I will stay in the community and continue to work at the restaurant I currently work at until I can find a better job in either manufacturing or welding, or a job that had both would be ideal. But I may need to leave to find a good job. But the farthest that I'd want to go would be possibly Lafayette because you can move down there and work at Wabash or Subaru and put your welding education to use. But yet I could stay here and put my welding education to use in places that are within 40-50 miles away. It's a 50/50 thing. Like you could move away, but what would you lose if you did move away?

Also, Lori is the only student who indicated a desire to return to the rural community after she

obtains her bachelor's degree.

> I will be leaving the community to attend a college for exercise science. It will probably be very overwhelming because of how many people there will be at college. But I'm hoping to come back, and work in a school, maybe not this school specifically, but it would be nice to be around people that I grew up with and so coming back is what I hope to do. Being in a big city is very overwhelming with traffic, all the people you don't know, crime, and just all these other obstacles that we don't face in this community because everybody pretty much knows everybody. It would be overwhelming to leave and not come back.

Lori's comment regarding how college will be overwhelming because of how many people will

be at college presents a quandary of its own between going away to a four-year university or

staying at home and attending a community college locally (Ardoin, 2017; Beasley, 2011;

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Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Goldman, 2019; McDonough et al., 2010). Also, Tim and

Lori's comments do resonate with the conflict that some rural students are presented with

regarding occupational aspirations. Both students articulated that the occupational benefits may

not outweigh the cost of leaving the local community.

However, several of the other student participants have a different perspective regarding

their decision to leave the rural community so they can be afforded more occupational options

and opportunities. Dillon, Shrek, Thomas, DJ, and Edward explain why they intend to leave their

rural community.

> *Dillon:* I think I'm going to move because other areas have more options than where I live now…which is just basically in the middle of nowhere. I intend to move to a more suburban or urban area because they have more factories and stuff out that way. The farthest I think I will move is maybe Lafayette. I know I want to stay in Indiana, but I'm probably going to leave my rural community.

> *Shrek:* I don't really want to come back after I get my college degree. But that's not really influenced by a career path that I want to go to, but rather I just really hate the weather here. I don't want to live in Indiana after I graduate from college. But I still want to go to an in-state college because it costs less unless I find some other college out of state that I want to go to.

> *Thomas:* Coming back to the community doesn't have as much of an effect on my college or occupation aspirations, because I wouldn't say that coming back to this community is one of my goals. Because some of my aspirations are to go to new places and just explore the world, I guess. And if I had a job that would complement that or allow me to do that easily, that would be really nice. But I definitely would like to come back and visit every now and then to see my family or to see others that I know. But I wouldn't say that not being able to come back to this community really does not influence my college and occupational plans.

> *DJ:* I want to explore and see what else is out there, I guess. That's just the best way to put it. If I choose to do welding, then I can do that around my community because there are welding places within driving distance.

> *Edward:* I don't think I plan on staying, but it's kind of helpful that I'm not staying because, as another student said, there are not very many welding jobs locally. So, once I travel, find that right spot, then I'll get a job and live there.

Pragmatic and Exploratory

Thomas, DJ, and Edward all spoke about exploring and seeing what is out there or traveling.

This speaks to their willingness to get out of their familiar comfort zone and seek new

experiences and be exposed to different surroundings. While they may have pragmatic views

regarding education, they also have exploratory views as well (Corbett, 2009). Overall, only half

of the participants indicated a desire to stay or return to the rural community after they obtain a

degree or credential.

> Anna also was asked if the rural community, businesses, and families want the students to

stay here to meet the talent needs of the community and stay close to family.

> Some people must be leaving because our enrollment numbers have significantly
> shrunk over the years. I also know that some people are choosing to stay here but
> they need to drive 30-50 miles to where the work is.

Anna emphasizes again that the rural community population is shrinking, which is a common

occurrence for many rural communities in Indiana (Waldorf et al., 2013). Mary also provided her

perspective regarding retaining talent in the rural community.

> I feel like we need students to stay here, but the question is, stay here to do what?
> If they came back, I mean there are limited opportunities for them in this area,
> especially for college-educated students. That is why I say, what are they going to
> come back to do? Not that there isn't a need for more doctors, but most of our
> kids aren't going to be doctors.

Mary articulates the depressed economic state of the local community and limited opportunities

for employment, especially jobs that require a bachelor's degree. In addition, occupational

opportunities in the local community have changed and decreased in some respects over the

years, especially family farms.

> The family farm is no more, they've all gotten big. They're either bought up by
> big corporations or cash rented out by somebody else. Agriculture used to be a
> significant industry for this community and provided an opportunity for farm kids
> to go back to the family farm after they graduate but this has decreased over time.

Farm kids are also the ones that typically go to college and become doctors, lawyers, and engineers but they typically do not come back here.

As stated previously in this chapter agriculture is still an important sector of the local community but it is changing and may not present as many employment opportunities as it once did to allow students to remain in the community. Also, this is the second reference Mary has made regarding the perception that "farm kids" are more academic achieving and better supported and prepared for postsecondary education, however, this population is shrinking.

However, even the male student participants who want to be welders recognize that the local community cannot support everyone that wants to weld. For those that choose to stay, they may need to commute long distances to find work. For others, the lack of job opportunities for college-educated as well as those who want to work in skilled trade occupations will more than likely have to leave their rural community and move to where the jobs are.

Conclusion

The focus of this theme incorporated the various influences on rural youth's educational and occupational aspirations, such as family expectations and support, socioeconomic status, as well as a family legacy of skilled trade occupations, school personnel, and the local community. Some of these influences are more powerful than others and can overcome the effects of other influences regarding educational aspirations, such as the influence of the welding program and the welding teacher can overcome the effects of family encouragement regarding postsecondary education. Additionally, the family legacy of skilled trade occupations, as well as exposure and experiences related to skilled trade occupations, appear to be a noteworthy influence on educational and occupational aspirations, especially for the male student participants.

Lastly, socioeconomic status is one of the main challenges that Anna and Mary encountered regarding college and career readiness at DWHS because of the level of need, support, and resources these students and their families required.

The influence of family legacy, the welding program, and the welding teacher, as well as hands-on exposure to skilled trade occupations, have been rather impactful in fostering the educational and occupational aspirations of the students in the study, especially the male participants. This theme in conjunction with the previous three themes is providing some insights regarding various elements that could be influencing educational and occupational aspirations and the lagging college matriculation gap of rural students.

Theme Five: Guidance Office – College and Career Readiness Limitations

The college and career readiness guidance counselor has been referenced throughout this chapter and she represents another key component regarding the rural schooling experience and postsecondary aspirations at DWHS. Guidance counselors can often have a significant influence on the college and career aspirations of students but also on the college-going culture of the school and the community they serve because of the expertise and leadership they possess. Mary's role as a college and career readiness guidance counselor, rural background, the number of years working at DWHS, and a resident of the community affords her considerable influence on students and families regarding educational and occupational aspirations. Additionally, her years of service and background provided a wealth of information, perspective, and insight regarding the study. Mary is the individual primarily responsible for assisting students in both middle and high school regarding college and careers. She is tasked with being the "school expert" providing accurate information to school personnel, students, and families regarding graduation requirements, four-year academic pathway plans, scheduling classes, and talking

about their educational and occupational aspirations. In addition, she coordinates college and

career programming, events, and opportunities for middle and high school students to learn about

occupations, postsecondary education, and internships.

Guidance Counselor Challenges and Concerns

Mary's role as the college and career readiness guidance counselor is not the only hat she

wears. She is also the High Ability Coordinator, EL Coordinator, data specialist for state

reporting, lunch duty, and Corporation Test Coordinator, to just name a few. However, taking on

several different leadership roles is not unique to Mary as many rural guidance counselors are

expected to take on many responsibilities, even outside of the guidance office. Anna also

affirmed that there is "a large workload in a small school, and that isn't for everyone; many hats

are worn in a school like DWHS."

Fortunately, there is a middle school guidance counselor who has been tasked with

attending to the social-emotional needs of students in middle school through high school. This

allows the division of responsibilities to be shared as well as provides each guidance counselor a

focus area in serving the students at DWHS. Since their offices are just down the hall from one

another, they can meet frequently concerning student issues and concerns as well as assist one

another regarding programming and other duties. When I referenced the college-going visual

messaging regarding the signage on every teacher's door regarding where they obtained their

college degree(s) from and the wall of college acceptances in the cafeteria, Mary explained:

> I have to credit the social-emotional counselor for some of that stuff because with
> my other responsibilities that I do, I did not have the time and she had the time,
> which is great. She did a wonderful job on the door signs and the wall of college
> acceptances.

In addition to the various hats, she wears, and the demands placed on her time, Mary indicated that there are other challenges in preparing students for college and careers at DWHS. Some of these challenges pertain to the increasing low socioeconomic status of students and families, family involvement and engagement, the new and changing IDOE Graduation Pathways, certification of teachers to teach dual credit courses and transporting students to college campuses.

As discussed in the previous theme, the poverty and low socioeconomic status of DWHS students and family dynamics are posing some challenges regarding educational and occupational aspirations. Mary expressed a correlation between low socioeconomic status and the assistance that is needed for both students and parents. "If the parents are needy themselves how much help can they provide their child." Mary's concerns are warranted as low socioeconomic status can have a negative impact on students' school experience, academic ability, and educational and occupational aspirations. Concerning family involvement and engagement with the school, Mary, "As far as parents go, one of the biggest struggles here is, just trying to get people here for events and information nights." She also stated

> Getting parents to complete the online registration as many parents don't
> understand the technology and they require a great deal of assistance and if they
> have a challenging time registering their child for school, they're not going to be
> very helpful or involved in helping their child with anything college-related
> because everything connected to college is online and technology-driven.

Another element that is impacting the level of family involvement and engagement relates to what Anna stated earlier about "seventy-year-old grandparents raising their grandchildren and may not have the capacity to be as involved and engaged as they should be." The increasing population of low socioeconomic students and the changing family dynamics of DWHS students have increased the level of support that school personnel must provide in meeting the needs of the students and sometimes parents regarding expectations, academic

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excellence, and college and career readiness. While the guidance office has a collaborative

approach to serving students at DWHS, the other responsibilities, and leadership hats that Mary

wears can often take her away from the main responsibilities of serving the needs of the students

regarding college and career counseling.

College and Career Readiness Programming

Several of the participants indicated that they need and want more information regarding

occupations and possible majors to study in college than what is currently being offered. A few

of the students were frustrated that the adults at home and school are asking them about their

educational and occupational plans after high school but they don't feel like they have been

provided enough information or exposed enough to make a well-qualified decision regarding

their educational and occupational aspirations. Additionally, Thomas articulated:

> As someone who is considering college as a very strong option, I feel like I don't know
>
> what I'm going to do. And the only experience that I'm getting in terms of what I could
>
> do for a job at school right now is welding, which is not even a college option, it's a trade
>
> school.

However, according to Mary, she does provide various college and career readiness

programming and meets with students individually regarding their college and career interests.

Mary referenced several college and career readiness endeavors:

> The college/career class in eighth grade, ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational
> Aptitude Battery) is given and conducts post-interpretation sessions with the
> students and there is another career inventory that goes with that, dual credit and
> CTE classes, internships, job and college fairs. We also have military and college
> recruiters that visit DWHS annually.

Additionally, Mary provides programming to assist students and families regarding

educational aspirations. One type of programming encompasses providing information nights for

juniors and seniors. In the spring she provides an information night for juniors regarding

planning for their senior year, which incorporates scheduling for classes and thinking about

college. In August she holds an information night for seniors and their families regarding local

scholarships, applying to college, and financial aid. I had an opportunity to observe the senior

information session and around twelve students and family members were in attendance. Mary

was disappointed and frustrated with the attendance because more indicated they would come,

but more importantly, the information presented would benefit more students and families.

Another college and career readiness resource offered is the *Preparing for College and

Careers* course. It used to be required in high school and was moved to the eighth grade. The

course was moved because it allowed students to begin thinking about college and careers earlier

and provide them with a better idea about which graduation pathway they wanted to follow in

high school. During the interview with Anna, she also referenced the college and careers course

as one of the opportunities that have helped prepare students for college and careers. She spoke

at length regarding the "Reality Store" component of the course:

> Purdue Extension comes and coordinates the experience so students can learn
> about different careers. The premise of reality store is for students to do some
> career exploration stuff to identify careers they are interested in and the
> educational requirements needed. The students are assigned a career based on
> their interests and current academic ability. A variety of local businesses (bank,
> insurance, utilities, etc.) come to the school gymnasium and set up tables to
> provide them with a real-world experience. The students go to the bank table, and
> they will be given a paycheck based on their career assignment. They learn how
> to work a checkbook and pay for bills based on marital status and if they have
> kids. Then they see how much money is left at the end. For some students, they
> have no or too little money left at the end. Maybe that's not a career you want or
> lifestyle you want.

The reality store experience allows students an opportunity to modify their intended high school

educational and occupational pathway. In addition, the reality store experience allows DWHS to

partner with the county extension office and other businesses throughout the county.

Lastly, another college readiness opportunity that Mary would like to offer but cannot because of limited finances and availability of her time, pertains to taking students on college campus visits. Unless they are going to attend an athletic, academic, 4-H, or FFA event finding their way to a college campus may not occur very frequently. This concerns Mary and she explains why this beneficial opportunity to be exposed to postsecondary education is currently not being done.

> Location is a bit of a concern because we are out in the middle of nowhere. I wish we had more resources to take students on the road and visit colleges as this would provide an opportunity to explore. But I do not have the time or resources necessary to be running them on a bunch of college visits. This aspect of college and career readiness is not getting done like it could or should be done because it's time and resources for us. But it might be a resource for students because if parents don't have transportation or the kid doesn't have their own car and is comfortable driving then this can be a barrier for students.

But DWHS did not always have this limitation, at one time the 21st Century Program provided transportation to various colleges for students enrolled in the program. But the 21st Century program had to stop this endeavor when the local liaison was discontinued.

It is unfortunate that this endeavor had to be discontinued because students at DWHS could benefit from being exposed to college and postsecondary education by visiting college campuses. In addition to being exposed to what a college campus looks and feels like, visiting college campuses may also provide DWHS students with a transformative experience, especially if the campus is large and the students who attend look quite different than what they are accustomed to. To provide some perspective regarding size, the enrollment at the main campus of Purdue University is three times larger than the population of the county DWHS is associated with. The population difference is quite significant and could be overwhelming for some rural students. Nonetheless, visiting a college campus is important in cultivating educational

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aspirations because DWHS students would be exposed to what college is, the structure of college including instructional spaces, residential, and engagement inside and outside the classroom.

More Counseling Time and Classes

Each of the three student focus groups was asked what is one thing they would like school administrators to know about their opinions and beliefs about college. A couple of the students commented about having more intentional conversations regarding what they plan to do after high school or providing more time and assistance in helping students figure out what they want to do. Overall, the students want more time with Mary regarding career development and exploring educational and occupational pathways. They would also like the conversations to be more collaborative, not a one-way conversation with Mary telling the students what they should take or do.

> *Dillion:* Ask us what we plan to do after high school. Sometimes, they call us in and we will pick our classes but they never really ask us in detail what we are trying to get done. Because sometimes people do not know what they need to do or where they want to be. They just make assumptions and put you in classes where they think you should be. They do not ask questions about what is better for you, they just assume. And they put you in places that they think will benefit you.
>
> *Thomas*: I feel like if Mary could help us out a bit more in terms of just maybe not deciding for us or telling us what we should do but giving us options on what we should do.
>
> *Shrek:* I would tell Mary to maybe spend more time with each student and really get to know them and what they want to do. Then support them and their decisions and stuff. Because I feel like it's really just our parents helping us with college related things. It's not really one-on-one with Mary like, oh you want to do this...okay, this is like a really good college for that career. I expect Mary to help us a little bit more in decisions regarding college and careers. I don't think that we get that kind of support.

Dillion and Shrek both indicated that they wanted more intentional and dedicated time with Mary would foster an opportunity for the students to be seen and heard. They want Mary to know who

they are and what interests them. They also would like to receive more assistance regarding exploring careers and assistance with college related matters.

The needs of the students above also correlate with their need to have more connections regarding career relevance in general education classes. While having more connections in the classroom and with Mary are positive indicators; the need for more information and assistance regarding college-related matters and careers might also suggest the social and cultural capital restraints within the families at DWHS of the student participants. While socioeconomic status was not disclosed by the student participants nor inquired about during the interviews, because of sensitivity and confidentiality reasons; the students were asked if their parent(s) or guardian(s) obtained a college degree. It was determined that six out of the ten students would be considered first-generation students if they pursue postsecondary education. Being a first-generation student may not afford DWHS students the same type of cultural capital from their families regarding postsecondary education or careers outside of what they are exposed to in their family or community. These limitations could explain why the student participants expressed the need for more college and career readiness information and time with Mary. Additionally, given Mary's position, her own experience regarding college, and she is one of the few college-educated individuals concerning college and careers that DWHS students have access to. Also, a higher first-generation population at DWHS could be another reason why the guidance needs of the students and families are greater.

According to Mary, she is meeting with each student at least once during the academic year but did not indicate the average time that she is spending with each student. When Mary was asked if she has the dedicated time and resources to provide career counseling in a manner that is helpful, informative, and useful, she responded: "there's never enough time." When I

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asked her what she would like to have or implement regarding college and career readiness at DWHS if financial resources were available, she stated "a designated college/career coach or at least part-time would be helpful." Her suggestion of a designated college/career coach is a great idea and believe it would assist the guidance office in meeting the needs of the students at DWHS. I plan to expound upon this further in Chapter 5.

In addition to having more access and dedicated time with Mary, students would also like to have more internships and a class exploring occupations. Shaquille provided some insight regarding this.

> Focus on what students want to do and expand those resources and expand different internships and more classes like the welding class that can teach us another trade and a class that you can learn about occupations and occupations that require a college education.

While DWHS offers *Preparing for College and Careers* in the eighth grade. Shaquille expressed a need to have a college and career readiness course in high school. Having a college and career course or workshop might be more applicable now that the students are in high school and post-high school planning is taken on a different level of urgency.

The other students expressed the need to have more classes available at DWHS that were more in line with their CTE or college-bound educational pathway instead of having to travel to another county to take those classes. Lori was offered to take a course related to what she wants to major in at college, but it would require her to travel some distance and she would also miss the whole first half or second half of the school day. Mary also referenced the ability of students to take classes at another school within the vocational cooperative DWHS is associated with.

> For a school our size, we actually offer a lot of classes and pathways. But can I offer something and everything that the kids are going to like? No, and that's why we're part of a vocational cooperative, where different schools offer different classes. However, their ability to take these classes through the cooperative is dependent on transportation. Also, some of the districts in the cooperative are in different time zones which can be challenging for students to navigate.

Again, another opportunity that is contingent on having access to reliable transportation, in addition to the constraints of having to navigate different time zones and missing several hours at school, may not make this a preferred option for students. Offering more classes at DWHS is something Mary would like to do as well but adhering to state graduation requirements is causing some challenges. Mary explains:

> Offering courses can be a real scramble for us. I mean, that is probably the hardest thing for us. We have been able to provide a lot of opportunities for our size, but as the state keeps changing its mind and becomes more restrictive on what counts toward graduation requirements, we may have to make some tough choices in terms of what we can offer and what pathways the kids have.

Another challenge and concern regarding additional classes pertain to dual credit. Dual credit was referenced at length in the schooling experience theme regarding the number of dual credit courses DWHS provides and the general education dual credit courses are the main mechanism for promoting and encouraging postsecondary education. They would like to offer more dual credit classes but the state certification requirements for high school teachers in Indiana to teach a dual credit course are also changing and evolving and this is impacting the expanding dual credit courses at DWHS.

Hopefully, the above challenges can be worked out because the students already have concerns about being put into courses that do not align with their interests or what they want to do after high school. While DWHS might be a small school, its challenges concerning college and career readiness are anything but small. Again, I do not think the challenges DWSH is facing are unique but impacting likely impacting other small school districts in Indiana.

Conclusion

The college and career guidance counselor at DWHS wears many hats including non-guidance responsibilities, and this is nothing out of the ordinary for guidance counselors at small

schools.). These additional responsibilities can restrict guidance counselors' time in providing effective counseling and programming concerning postsecondary education and career development at DWHS. This concern can be even more problematic because the guidance counselor is serving a community where almost half of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and the college attainment rate of the county is much lower than the state average, fostering a lot of first-generation students if they decide to pursue college. Low-income and low college attainment of parents or guardians may limit access to a knowledgeable family member who is familiar with the college to assist them in navigating the wealth of information and processes associated with postsecondary education or talk to them about different career options. These low indicators can also limit the amount of social and cultural capital the students could leverage regarding educational and occupational aspirations.

This limitation amplifies the significance and crucial role of the guidance counselor because she is regarded as the expert regarding college and careers. She is also one of the few individuals in the community who has a college degree. The additional emphasis on her role also increases the demand for her expertise and knowledge regarding college and careers for students and families. However, given all of her other responsibilities, the supply of her time is not aligned with the demand and causing a gap between what is needed and what can be provided effectively. This gap is being backfilled somewhat by teachers, and maybe coaches, and at one time the 21st Century program liaison was in a position to provide extra services to augment what DWHS could provide, but those services have been discontinued. Unlike urban and suburban school districts, there are no local after-school programs, foundations, non-profits, or businesses nearby that the school can partner with to assist with college and career readiness. The gap

between what is needed and what can be provided, and the lack of local partners provide the rationale for why a dedicated college and career coach would be pertinent.

Theme Six: Athletics - More Than an Extracurricular Activity

The athletics program at DWHS is one of the various extracurricular activities that students can engage in after school. About half of the student participants referenced athletic participation in their essays as a component of going to a small school and growing up in a rural community. Athletics is considered a component of the schooling experience, and it might have been logical to include athletics in the first theme, however, athletics emerged as more than an extracurricular activity after Anna declared "We're struggling here academically and athletically." After interviewing Anna and Mary and reviewing the student essays, along with observations of the athletic wing, facilities, and interaction with the physical education teacher and girls softball coach, it became evident that high school athletics emerged as a significant theme regarding its impact on academics, postsecondary aspirations, access regarding participation and attendance, mindset, and self-efficacy, , as well as the culture of the school and community.

As stated previously about half of the student participants referenced athletic participation in their essays. Shaquille was one of the students who articulated the connection between school sports at a small school. "I'm a four-letter athlete and at big schools, this is a huge accomplishment but, at a small school it's rare to not be." Athletic programs in rural schools can take on other facets than students participating in sports and fostering educational excellence. Athletic programs can also be a representation of the culture of the school, and identity, fostering pride, tradition, fan loyalty, and extension of the surrounding community.

For rural schools in remote and isolating areas similar to DWHS, there is not a lot to do after school. Life can encompass just school and home and maybe a part-time job on a farm or neighboring community. Athletics provides an opportunity to extend a student's time at school, and as Anna "for many of the kids, school is their "constant and safe place." Athletic participation also provides an opportunity for friends to hang out after school, develop or refine one's athletic ability, learn how to be a team player, discipline, achievement, strive for excellence, learn how to win and lose, conflict resolution, and time management as well as physical, social and emotional wellness.

Student-athletes may also have an opportunity to be mentored by one or more of the coaching staff or encouraged and developed to compete collegiately someday fostering postsecondary aspirations This is important because there is research linking athletic participation in high school with academic achievement and college readiness (Hardin, 2015). The academic and athletic link was illustrated with the honors focus group as all the students in this group are involved in sports and they are also the group who are considering postsecondary education after high school.

Additionally, rural school athletic programs extend beyond the school itself into the community. For rural communities which find themselves in the middle of nowhere, similar to DWHS, there is not a lot of entertainment, shopping, restaurants, and things to do locally, but there are athletic games, matches, and meets going on at the school that can fill the lack of entertainment opportunities. Community members can provide a loyal fan base supporting students and the various athletic teams at home or away. While DWHS is where students are educated, it can also be the sociocultural entity where the community comes to interact in a

social capacity, supporting school events and functions and cheering on relatives and strangers alike.

Athletics is Struggling:

Anna articulated during her interview that athletics at DWHS is struggling regarding attendance and participation. . Regarding student attendance, Anna explained:

> This has been a brainstorming session for a long time for me on how we get kids here for athletic events. In fact, we just decided we are going to let all students in for free. Hoping it gets some more kids here. I think what I always come back to on this is, when we were in school if you wanted to see your friends, you went to the game on Friday because everybody was at the game. Now, they are attached to their phone, and if they want to see their friends, they can just get on the phone, text, or facetime. In my day, you went to the football or basketball game to hang out and socialize with your friends. The whole sense of community is kind of gone.

When Anna stated that she thought the "whole sense of community is kind of gone." this was very surprising and concerning for me. I think it is important to note that the struggles of the athletic program and its significance resonated with me because of my own rural educational lived experience and how athletics is often a central part of the school, community, and student achievement.

Several of the students articulated their struggles regarding the athletic programs in their essays. Many students articulated that most if not all students who try out for a sport make the team and usually obtain a varsity spot because there are not enough players to start a JV team and sometimes, they barely have enough to make a full team. Another concern for students regarding the athletic program at DWHS is the lack of being on a winning team. A few of the students articulated that while making the team is great the lack of competition and talent pool at their school is impacting their ability to have winning records. Sally and Shrek also commented that DWHS "does not have winning teams except for wrestling and maybe cross county and

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softball." Mary had a similar perception as she commented that "Our wrestling team is great, we had two students go to state, but our football and basketball team can hardly win a game to save their life." Additionally, Shrek expounded on the lack of winning and provided an insightful reflection:

> Over the years all of us have given up on being good at sports. We all have sort of developed a loser's mentality from all the years that coaches, parents, fans, and peers tell us that we will never be good in sports.

As articulated earlier in this chapter, this type of mentality could have far more reaching effects beyond the athletic field or court regarding personal expectations, academic excellence, self-efficacy, and mindset, as well as educational aspirations, such as postsecondary education

Participation in athletics, is decreasing at DWHS and it appears this could be influenced by three issues that have already been discussed in this chapter: a decrease in enrollment, socioeconomic status, and transportation. Lower enrollment overall would affect the number of participants and talent pool. As stated in Chapter 3, the overall enrollment is on a downward trajectory, and the downward trajectory is more than likely not unique to DWHS but impacts other rural school districts in Indiana as well.

The other issue that appears to be influencing the decrease in participation and attendance is socioeconomic status and the college attainment rate of parents. To reiterate, almost 50% of the students attending DWHS qualify for free or reduced lunch. Mary believes family income is playing a role in why participation in athletics is decreasing. "We have a high free or reduced population compared to years ago, parents may have less money to pay for the extras typically needed to participate or pay for gas to run back and forth to practices or games." Socioeconomic status is just not limited to athletic participation but can also impact the ability of students and families to attend school sporting events. Anna understands that a family of four attending a football game can get expensive. This is one of the reasons that she has decided to let students in

for free. Hopefully, this will generate more students but also families if the kids can get in free. By the end of the year, Mary reported that student attendance at athletic events did increase by allowing students to attend for free. They plan to continue this practice if it's feasible.

As discussed in previous themes in this chapter transportation can be another barrier to athletic participation. In speaking with Anna, transportation is a concern given the distance that some families live from the school. For some students, the only way to and from school is by school bus because the local community does not have access to public transportation that might be available in suburban or urban areas. Also, DWHS does not have an after-school bus to transport students participating in athletics but is looking into this option.

Conclusion

Decreasing enrollment, socioeconomic status, and low college attainment of parents, as well as access to transportation, could be influencing the decreasing participation rate of high school athletics at DWHS. Additionally, these factors could be limiting students who would like to participate in sports which can foster various academic, personal, and professional skills and abilities which can lend themselves to increasing educational and occupational aspirations. In addition, it would provide an opportunity for the students to extend their time at school by being positively influenced by coaches and other caring adults, as articulated by Anna, school is a constant and safe place, where they experience normalcy and consistency in their lives. However, the losing records of many athletic teams can also have negative ramifications on the mindset of the students, self-efficacy, personal expectations, and level of excellence, which could negatively impact educational aspirations. This is something that will need to be taken into consideration regarding the *High High Hopes* campaign.

In addition to economic restraints, transportation is another concern regarding athletic participation as families can live several miles away from DWHS. Anna acknowledges that transportation is a concern for participation in school athletics and outside leagues and the school minibus might be able to address some of the transportation issues students may face.

The principal is thinking outside the box concerning increasing attendance and may need to think outside the box about engaging the community. The community could also allocate resources to assist students and the school as they have a personal stake in school athletics because it reflects the sociocultural aspects of the local community.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how the high school rural schooling experience informs perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding postsecondary aspirations of ten 11th grade rural students attending a small high school in Indiana about their postsecondary aspirations. They shared details about their experience growing up in a rural community and attending a small high school and their perceptions regarding college and their educational and occupational aspirations. The goal of the study was for the rural students to be seen and heard and for K-12 administrators, higher education administrators, and policymakers to learn from their collective voices regarding their views regarding postsecondary education. Especially garnering insights as to why rural students matriculate to postsecondary education, especially four-year institutions at a lower rate than their suburban and urban peers. Additionally, this study provides insights concerning the influence of socioeconomic status, cultural theories of reproduction such as social and cultural capital, rural community culture of "habitus," culture of the school, influences of school personnel, family, gender and individual mindset, and self-efficacy concerning educational and occupational aspirations were also examined. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of sociocultural theory regarding how children acquire their cultural values, beliefs, and perceptions by interacting with individuals and their environment was explored. The previous chapter provided noteworthy insights into the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of rural youth about postsecondary education and why rural students in Indiana may not cultivate postsecondary educational aspirations and I plan to articulate these insights during the discussion of the findings section. Lastly, this chapter will discuss some of the relevant findings from the data analysis and provide recommendations and implications for practice, policymakers, and future research.

Discussion of Findings

Overall, the student participants perceive postsecondary education as advanced and additional schooling beyond high school, which may provide them with the ability to secure a good-paying or high-paying job, allowing them to afford a nice lifestyle but college is expensive. Given the socioeconomic status of many students, the burden of paying for college will reside with them and they are concerned about the debt they will incur in pursuit of a college degree, therefore, postsecondary education could be a risky proposition. However, several skilled trade occupations offer the ability to find a good-paying job, locally, with minimal to no extra schooling, and minimal to no cost. Additionally, skilled trade occupations are represented in the habitus of the rural community and many students have immediate or extended family, often males, associated with skilled trade occupations. Furthermore, the school provides several CTE classes and a few programs which allow a student to obtain a certification in a skilled trade occupation, such as welding, and be prepared to enter the workforce directly after high school. Most of the male participants in the study (regardless of academic ability) plan to enter the workforce after high school in a skilled trade occupation.

The skilled trade occupations are what rural youth can see and are exposed to consistently within their small and sometimes isolated community. Additionally, skilled trade occupations are being reinforced, by family legacy, the culture of CTE at school, and the habitus of the community, especially for male students. The skilled trade occupations appear to be revered, valued, respected, and familiar. In contrast to skilled trade occupations, postsecondary education is not receiving the same level of exposure in the community, family, and school. Additionally, postsecondary education does not appear to be as revered, important, needed, or valued, in comparison to skilled trade occupations, apprenticeships, and short-term schooling options.

Only, a few of the female participants plan to attend college and had a more favorable perception regarding postsecondary education. Many influences contributed to the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of the student participants' educational and occupational aspirations and if college is being considered. Several of the influences will be discussed in further detail throughout the discussion of findings.

Schooling Experience

The study generated several findings regarding the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of rural Indiana high school students about postsecondary aspirations. One finding was how the student participants defined college. There was consensus among the students that college is "additional or advanced schooling" after high school. Thus, if college means additional schooling, then the student's current schooling experience may impact or influence postsecondary aspirations. If a student is not having a positive schooling experience, then they may not want to extend or aspire to continue an experience that has not been gratifying or rewarding (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Hardre & Hennessey, 2010; Petrin et al., 2014). While many of the student participants at the site school liked attending a small school, which afforded them small class sizes and individualized attention with teachers, they also displayed a certain level of frustration, discouragement, and discontentment regarding their current schooling experience. Some of the students are looking forward to the day when their high school experience is over.

Some of the frustration is associated with the limited course offerings at the high school and the administrators acknowledge this limitation and wish they could offer a more variety of classes as well. The limitation of courses is not unique to the site school as other small rural

schools have similar challenges (Hardre & Hennessey, 2010; Showalter et al., 2019). The number and variety of courses a small school can offer can sometimes be constrained by resources and ability (Hardre & Hennessey, 2010; Showalter et al., 2019). The limitation of courses at small schools can also impact the number and variety of college preparatory courses students have access to, as in the case of the site school. The site school only offers a few AP courses, but they do provide several dual-credit courses, which are also considered college preparatory courses. As stated in Chapter 4, dual-credit courses are one of the main mechanisms that college is being promoted at the site school.

Another concern of the student participants is their dissatisfaction with some of the general education classes. None of the student participants regardless of academic ability or gender stated in their essays or focus group discussions that their favorite class was math, science, English, or history, as was the case for several of the students regarding the welding class. Additionally, several of the male student participants do not have the same level of satisfaction regarding general education courses as they do with the CTE classes they have taken. Specifying gender is important and intentional as none of the female student participants stated they were enrolled in welding or talked about taking CTE classes. The male students have also found more applied learning and real-world application in their CTE classes (Cobb, 1989). In all fairness, an objective of CTE courses is to prepare youth for a wide range of skill-based careers (Career and Technical Education, 2021).

The male students also incur a certain level of enjoyment from CTE classes and wish they had similar experiences regarding their general education courses. Some of the students explained they learn better by doing or in an applied manner than by sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture. According to the research, the desire for more applied learning and real-

world application is often associated with students who have a pragmatic viewpoint regarding education and work-bound rural students (Burnell, 2003; Corbett, 2009). According to Corbett (2009), "Apprenticeship-style, hands-on, real-world learning is preferable to academic and classroom-based forms of educational engagement, where it is not pragmatically focused (p. 168). The male student participants who indicated they wanted more hands-on learning and real-world connections align with the research as most if not all the male student participants intend to enter the workforce after high school

There was also consistency among all the student participants regarding general education subject matter and career relevance. The need for more career relevance in the classroom is also represented in the literature (Ardoin, 2017; Cobbs, 1989; Meece et al., 2013). Students want more opportunities to gain experience about occupations and believe creating more intentional connections inside general education classrooms by linking subject matter and possible occupations would be helpful. This could make the classes more relevant and provide a mechanism to explore careers. Having occupational connections in general education classrooms would allow rural students to learn and be exposed to careers outside of what they are exposed to in their small community (Carr & Kefalas; Sampson et al., 2011). In addition, increasing the connections and satisfaction with general education courses could foster more interest in a subject matter that rural youth may want to explore and learn more about, which could promote postsecondary educational aspirations (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Hardre & Hennessey, 2010).

The need for more college and career relevance in general education courses as articulated by the student participants might also be an indication of the limitations of social and cultural capital that students have access to at home regarding occupations and academic

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disciplines to study in college. The students' need correlates with the finding that the low socioeconomic status and low college attainment demographics of the site school have increased the amount of support and resources that the school and school personnel need to provide students in assisting them with college and career readiness.

Another component of the schooling experience that has influenced the educational and occupational aspirations of the student participants pertains to the connections with their teachers. Many of the students indicated a desire to build similar connections with school personnel similar to the connection between the male participants and the welding teacher (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Chambers et al., 2019; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Kryst et al., 2018). Preferably, the students want to be understood and allow school personnel to get to know who they are and what they like and are interested in as it relates to their educational pathway and post-high school plans. Also, the connection and relationship the students desire reiterate what the principal addressed about teachers needing to build relationships with the kids if they want them to be successful.

The principal's ideology concerning building relationships with students was exemplified by the welding teacher because the influence and impact he has had on the male student participants regarding educational and occupational aspirations were profound. While the students enjoy the welding classes, they also find the educational and occupational guidance he provides very helpful. Many of the male student participants enrolled in the welding program are seriously considering welding as a career after high school, and even a few of the honor students. Under the guidance of the welding teacher, they are investigating, trade schools, apprenticeships, and Union associations. This speaks to how impactful and influential teachers can be with students regarding educational and occupational aspirations and this impact might be more

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influential depending on the capacity of the social and cultural capital of families (Byun et al., 2012; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Chambers et al., 2019, Petrin et al., 2014). Furthermore, the impact that teachers can have on students is captured eloquently by Chambers et al. (2019), "Highly effective teachers not only are the percolators of student dreams but also actively convey their hopes and dreams, catalyzing student dreams of further education." If the site school could leverage this type of dynamic in their general education classes it could be influential and impactful regarding classroom learning, schooling experience, and as well as educational and occupational aspirations.

Lastly, it was apparent throughout the study that the student participants care about their schooling experience, how and what they learn, and if possible, improving their schooling experience. They believe improving the schooling experience can be achieved by providing more intentional connections in the classroom. Connections regarding real-world application and more applied learning, college, and career relevance, and with school personnel. They want to be active participants in their learning, in what classes they take, and their educational and occupational aspirations and would like to have collaborative partners within the school.

Self-Efficacy

Another finding that could influence educational and occupational aspirations pertains to personal expectations, self-efficacy, and the mindset of the students. Mindset is a foundational element on which to build upon and if this is not positive and secure, other elements regarding their schooling and aspirations could be negatively impacted. (Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2017). Personal expectations, mindset, and self-efficacy were something that was observed during the study with all the student participants at varying levels. Many of the student participants appeared discouraged and melancholy regarding schooling and in some instances regarding their

educational and occupational aspirations. Their demeanor in their essays and during the focus group session emulated the comment Shrek stated about "loser mentality" and also how the 11th grade class was articulated to me at the beginning of the study about this class being "challenging" performing below their abilities, and having low expectations, and motivation.

Therefore, it was not surprising to hear student participants stating, "they don't think they have a chance at college because they don't feel good enough for college" or "college is good for some people" or "other people but not for them." Another student participant expressed concerns about struggling and not being able to get through college, but others will. If students don't believe in themselves and don't think others believe in them, then one could understand why their expectations, level of excellence, and aspirations might not be as high as they could be (Ardoin, 2017; Goldman, 2019; Wettersten et al., 2005).

While the site school had a lot of positive visual messaging to inspire and encourage students' self-efficacy and mindset, it became apparent throughout the study why the principal implemented another intentional endeavor at the site school to raise personal expectations, levels of excellence, and educational and occupational aspirations of the students. The *High High Hopes* campaign was implemented to counteract some of the circumstances surrounding rural students, such as generational poverty and family dynamics. The principal's intention is for students to "believe that they are not defined by what others say about them or where they come from, but rather go be something greater." The intentional effort provides extra attention for students in raising personal expectations and self-efficacy. Furthermore, Angela Duckworth implores "When we begin to lavish extra attention on people and hold them to higher expectations, we expect them to excel, and that expectation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 26). The principal at the site school is on the right path regarding raising students up and

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allowing them to see their inner greatness, which should raise expectations and their self-efficacy. Rural students need cheerleaders, Dreammakers, and Dreamkeepers, and hope that their current circumstances or what people say do not define them or their future (Chambers et al., 2019; Ley et al., 1996).

Cost of College

Another significant finding regarding student perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding postsecondary education pertains to affordability. Many of the students expressed significant perceptions and beliefs that college is "really expensive" and "it costs a lot of money to go to college" and were also concerned about the level of debt associated with postsecondary education. The concerns of the student participants align with the research regarding affordability (Edmiston et al., 2013; Goldrick-Rab, 2017; McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Calerone, 2006).

The concern regarding affordability and debt associated with going to college was equally distributed among the three groups. However, the interpretation of the cost was somewhat different. The students enrolled in the honors English class perceived the cost of college as an investment for their future. They may need to spend money now but they should make more money in the long run. Again, this finding correlates with the research as those with a more favorable perception regarding postsecondary education view the expense as an investment (Goldrick-Rab, 2017; ICHE, 2020; McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). However, the other two groups did not have as favorable perceptions regarding postsecondary education and believed to a certain extent that college "is a waste of money" and saw more affordable short-term options like union-based apprenticeships or trade schools. The

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concern regarding affordability could be a barrier or a deterrent in preventing rural students from considering postsecondary education and considering other occupational aspirations with less schooling (Cobb, 1989; Corbett, 2009; Crosnoe & Muller, 2014; Korichich et al., 2018).

As stated in Chapter 4, it costs around $20K for an Indiana resident to attend a public four-year university in Indiana. Given the socioeconomic and per capita income of the site school, the concerns of the student participants regarding the cost of college were understandable. The reason the cost of college has increased so exponentially over the years is an ongoing debate between postsecondary institutions and policymakers. However, according to the *Indiana 2022 College Costs Report* published by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (ICHE), Indiana lags in stated appropriations for higher education and is ranked 41st in the nation. Regardless of "the why" regarding rising costs associated with attending four-year postsecondary institutions; the burden of paying for a college degree appears to be falling on students and families to bear and manage.

Additionally, low, and low-middle rural students are more than likely not in the position where their parents have a 529 Savings Plan or college savings account to help subsidize their postsecondary aspirations. The high cost of a college degree can be a significant concern for low and low-middle-income rural students who may need to take on the burden of affording college themselves (Ardoin, 2017; McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Calderon, 2006). The idea of taking on a significant amount of student loan debt was concerning for some of the student participants because they don't know if it will pay off in the end regarding earnings, generating a certain amount of risk for these students (Goldrick-Rab, 2017; McDonough & Calderon, 2006).

However, none of the students referenced financial aid as a way to afford college. Through the assistance of federal, state, and institutional financial aid, college could be

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affordable, especially given the socioeconomic status of the students (Federal Student Aid; 2022). According to ICHE (2020), many students in Indiana who qualify for financial aid usually only pay half of the allotted cost to attend a college or university in Indiana. Additionally, one of the main and impactful Indiana state aid programs is the 21st Century Scholars scholarship which provides up to four years of undergraduate tuition to income-eligible students at participating colleges or universities in Indiana, according to the Learn More Indiana website. However, it was disconcerting to discover that only around 1% of the students at the site school are graduating as a 21st Century scholar, given the considerable number of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, which is one of the main qualifiers for the program in the eighth grade (ICHE, 2020).

The low 21st Century scholars' rate might be reflective that the local liaison was discontinued several years ago. As discussed in Chapter 4, the 21st Century Scholars program went from a direct service model to a coordinated support model, and this has negatively impacted the rural site school because they do not have a designated community partner that has picked up the services once provided under the previous local model and the guidance counselor does not have the bandwidth to take on these extra responsibilities.

Regardless of the changes to the 21st Century Program, financial aid can still be a beneficial lever in making college affordable for rural students. However, applying for financial aid can be an overwhelming and challenging process fraught with unfamiliar terminology, deadlines, and paperwork (Ardoin, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Goldman, 2019; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Given the socioeconomic status and low county college attainment rate of families, the level of knowledge, support, and guidance students can receive from their families could be limited (Ardoin, 2017; McDonough, 1997; Tieken, 2016). Again, this speaks to the

level of social and cultural capital that could be afforded to students in navigating the system and process of applying for financial aid. The lack of knowledge and support about financial aid may also place a greater demand on the guidance counselor, which could be problematic given the limited knowledge base concerning financial aid and being accessible as the guidance counselor wear many hats.

Overall, financial assistance for postsecondary education is available for many students and their families but information regarding various ways to offset college expenses will need to be accessible and targeted, especially enrolling rural youth in the 21st Century Scholars Program in the eighth grade. Also, families will more than likely require some level of guidance and assistance in navigating the process of applying for financial aid (ICHE, 2020; Goldrick-Rab, 2017).

Guidance Counselor

The role of the college and career guidance counselor is another important finding. She has worked at the school for over three decades and lives in the community. She is well acquainted with the sociocultural aspects of the school and families and the habitus of the community. Over time she has observed that the percentage of low-income students has increased, as the number of more well-resourced families has decreased at the school. The increase of low-income students is one of the greatest challenges she perceives in preparing students for college and careers because they tend to have lower personal expectations and levels of excellence. Additionally, low-income students may not have the same level of support at home; thus social and cultural capital can be limited (Brusoski et al., 1992; Byun et al., 2012; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). The concerns of the guidance counselor were warranted as

socioeconomic status, low college attainment rate of parents, and lower social and cultural capital have been linked to lower matriculation rates of rural youth in the literature (Ardoin, 2017; Byun et al., 2017; Crosnoe & Muller, 2014; Khattri et al., 1997; Koricich et al., 2018)

While the overall enrollment of the school continues to decline the neediness of students and families has increased and this is challenging because the guidance counselor wears many hats and time and availability are limited. The limitations of the school guidance counselor correlate with the research regarding the demands and responsibilities placed upon rural guidance counselors (Ardoin, 2017; Griffin et al., 2011; Hann-Morrison, 2011; McDonough & Calderone, 2006).

The socioeconomic and low college attainment demographics and cultural capital limitations of students and families of the site school have increased the emphasis on the guidance counselor as the professional expert regarding college and careers, especially college as she represents one of the few college-educated individuals in the community (Ardoin, 2017; Wimberly & Brickman, 2018). However, her postsecondary expertise is limited as it can be challenging to stay current on all the various information and processes about postsecondary admissions and financial aid. In addition, to the various processes associated with postsecondary education, students have articulated the need for more career development, and time with the guidance counselor to discuss exploring different pathways, however, again the availability of the guidance counselor is limited.

Another component of college and career readiness is for students to visit college campuses. Providing an opportunity for rural students to be exposed to postsecondary institutions in an intentional manner could enhance their perceptions, beliefs, and opinions regarding postsecondary education, especially for many of the students at the site school who have never

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been on a college campus before. Engagement or exposure to postsecondary education aside from dual credit at the site school is sparse. Therefore, providing opportunities for rural students to visit and explore postsecondary institutions would be beneficial. According to the research visiting a college campus could provide rural students, with the perception that postsecondary education is possible and visualize themselves at a particular college, which could inspire and motivate students to do better academically as well as modify their educational and occupational aspirations (Byun et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2022; Tieken, 2016). Additionally, visiting college campuses has been shown to positively influences postsecondary enrollment in low-income rural school districts (Koricich et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2022)

While the guidance counselor realizes the importance of having students visit college campuses in cultivating educational aspirations, regrettably, she does not have the financial resources or time to take students to visit various postsecondary institutions in Indiana. This is unfortunate because while the school encourages students to make college visits, the guidance counselor knows that "it's probably not getting done like it could or should be done and for some families, it might come down to resources as well." Limited resources are once again preventing an impactful engagement opportunity for rural students to be exposed to postsecondary education.

The guidance counselor at the site school is aware of the gap between what is needed regarding college and career readiness support for students and what she can adequately provide. Therefore, having a dedicated college and career coach that could provide more intentional time and frequency regarding educational and occupational planning as well as college visits would be ideal. But this endeavor will take financial resources and the financial resources are not

readily available at the site school, which is unfortunate given the needs of rural students concerning college and career readiness.

Views on Postsecondary Education

One aspect of the study was to determine how "college" or "college degree" is valued or regarded by students, families, communities, and school personnel. Specifically, is postsecondary education a priority, and is there an expectation in families and for school personnel that rural youth obtain a college degree. Overall, the perceptions regarding postsecondary education were mixed among the student participants. The honor's focus group had the most favorable beliefs and opinions regarding college. They perceive college as means to become what you want to be and do in the future. A college degree affords you the ability to secure a good-paying job so you can attain a nice lifestyle. The remaining two groups did not have a favorable perception of postsecondary education. Several of them perceive college as a waste of time and money, not necessary or important. However, what was consistent among the three groups is all the students had conversations with a close family member regarding educational and occupational aspirations, which is a positive sign regarding engagement and possible support and guidance (Agger et al., 2018; Bryan et al., 2009; Li, 2019; Tieken, 2016).

All the students in the honor's focus group had been influenced, encouraged, or expected to attend college by their parents. While the other two focus groups had been influenced differently. Some of their parents have encouraged them, while other parents are leaving the decision up to the students or encouraging them to follow their interest in a skilled trade occupation. The honors group was the outlier of the two groups regarding their favorable perception of postsecondary education and being influenced, encouraged, and expected to attend

college by their family. Though, their perceptions and level of encouragement to attend college were somewhat predictable (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Goldman, 2019; Petrin et al., 2014).

However, what was surprising is that two of the male student participants in the honors group are strongly considering welding as an occupational aspiration. The influence of the welding program and the teacher has shifted their aspirations from college to trade school. Additionally, the influence of the welding teacher has been a powerful influence that has overcome the effect of parental influence and encouragement of college. As stated in Chapter 4 the welding teacher is highly respected and revered by both the students and school administrators. It appears from the findings the influence the welding teacher wields regarding educational and occupational aspirations is very impactful.

Another aspect relating to the views of postsecondary education encompasses the college-going culture of the site school. The college-going culture of the school was articulated under the schooling experience in Chapter 4. It appears from the findings that the site school has a moderate college-going culture. The school offers several dual-credit courses allowing students to earn college credit while in high school, and the courses are also affordable which is important regarding the socioeconomic status of the school. Another element of the college-going culture pertains to the various college visual messaging, academic and scholarship achievement plaques, and displays present. While the visual messaging can be impactful, conversations inside and outside the classroom, in the guidance counselor's office, and with other school personnel regarding educational and occupational aspirations are also important and impactful as well. Hopefully, the actions of school personnel are in alignment with the school's visual messaging. Because the alignment of words and actions could influence the building of trust and creditability with students as well as raise their expectations and self-efficacy regarding educational and

occupational aspirations. However, the scope of this study limits the ability to assess this adequately.

However, there was some indication that what is being visually displayed may not be in alignment based on my observations. Concerning the college-going population, the principal and guidance counselor articulated that "totally capable students, typically students that come from more affluent homes are going to be prepared to go to college" and "students who are academically sound and they have parents at home that are supporting them are still on the traditional trajectory of postsecondary aspirations." These comments appear biased and could also foster discounting students or tracking other students away from postsecondary education, based on socioeconomic status or family dynamics. Also, the remarks correlate with some of the comments that student participants expressed during the study about, "whether they had a chance at college or don't feel good enough for college." It makes one wonder how many other students at the school may feel similarly and are not being encouraged or influenced to consider postsecondary education.

Additionally, another concern regarding the above remarks is the low socioeconomic status of the site school and if the number of low socioeconomic families continues to increase and the level of support families can provide continues to decrease, then the number of students at the site school considering college could decrease. Current strategies or plans of action will need to be considered to address this probable issue in the future.

In regard to college-bound students, it appears the students who want to pursue postsecondary education at the site school will be supported and guided by school personnel. According to the guidance counselor, in the past three years, around 50% of seniors indicated they intended to go to a two-year or four-year postsecondary institution after high school, which

is promising given the socioeconomic status and low college attainment rate of parents. However, 50% pertains to the "intentionality of students" not enrolled, because the site school does not track matriculation data, which can be problematic. While the guidance counselor has bandwidth issues, collecting postsecondary matriculation data would be data elements of student success that should be beneficial for school administrators to track, and the information is readily accessible through the Indiana Commission of Higher Education.

Additionally, the study produced a college-going rate of 40%, but only 20% of the participants had a strong interest in going to college, with 20% considering both college and skilled trade occupation, with most of the students interested in a skilled trade occupation. The lower college-going rate of the study could be attributed to the larger male population, and/or 100% CTE enrollment of the male participants, and/or it could also be contributed to lower expectations and self-efficacy of the 11th grade class.

Gender Differences

As discussed in the schooling experience and views regarding postsecondary sections above, gender was another finding of the study as it relates to educational and occupational aspirations. The 20% who had the strongest interest in going to college were female and the 70% who were considering a skilled trade occupation right after high school were male. The gender differences in the study regarding postsecondary education and skilled trades occupations also correlate with the research. The research articulates the rural male dominance of skilled trade occupations (Beasley, 2011; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson; Marre, 2017; Meece et al., 2013; Molefe et al., 2017). Conversely, rural women have a higher matriculation rate for postsecondary education, especially at four-year universities in Indiana and nationally (Burke et al., 2015; NCES, 2007; Showalter et al., 2019). However, the study had limitations regarding

why most of the female participants had postsecondary aspirations and the male participations had skilled trade aspirations. But what was insightful from the study that aligns with the research pertains to skilled trade occupations that tend to be more male-dominated and appear to provide male rural youth with another viable option other than postsecondary education in securing a good job that will allow them to support themselves and their family someday which entails less additional schooling and it is also more affordable than obtaining a college degree (Agger et al., 2018; Beasley, 2011; Burke et al., 2016; Burnell, 2003; Cobb, 1989; Conroy, 1998; Hallmark & Ardoin, 2021). However, more research in this area is needed regarding this connection.

Habitus of Skilled Trade Occupations

In 2022, rural students continue to matriculate at lower rates to four-year postsecondary institutions and continue to have reverence for the traditionally skilled trade occupations that do not require a college degree (Burke et al., 2016; Byun et al., 2015; McDonough et al., 2010). The findings of the study found that there is a high value and reverence for skilled trade occupations and a lesser value and expectation placed upon postsecondary education within the rural community of the site school for the male participants. As stated above five of the seven male participants, regardless of academic ability, family encouragement to attend college, or college attainment level of parent, plan to enter the workforce after high school in a skilled trade occupation, specifically welding. The other two male participants are considering both skilled trade occupations and college but leaning towards skilled trade occupations. The male students will need minimal extra schooling to obtain the necessary certifications which can be obtained by attending a trade school, community college, or participating in an apprenticeship and the cost of the additional school will be more affordable than a college degree (Burnell, 2003; Cobb, 1989; Conroy, 1998; Corbett, 2009).

The study also found that several factors and influences are fostering male rural youth reverence regarding skilled trade occupations. Several of the male participants have grown up exposed to skilled trade occupations, such as welder, mechanic, construction, and electrician at home or on the farm and have received hands-on experience regarding these skilled trade occupations from family members. Additionally, several of the male participants have a family legacy connection associated with skilled trade occupations, such as a grandfather, father, or uncle (Ardoin, 2017; Beasley, 2011; McDonough et al., 2010).

Furthermore, all the male participants, regardless of academic ability, were enrolled in CTE classes at school, specifically welding. Regarding occupational aspirations, many of the CTE courses (welding, manufacturing, and agriculture) correlate with the various skilled trade occupations associated with rural communities in Indiana (Prior, 2014; Rural Indiana Stats, 2021). CTE classes in high school can be an effective pipeline in preparing students for skill-based trade occupations after high school (Career and Technical Education, 2021; Cobb, 1989; Petrin et al., 2014). Furthermore, CTE courses can provide skill sets that will afford these students to either go right into the workforce after high school or attend a trade school, or community college or participate in an apprenticeship, or a union organization, to obtain additional credentials to secure a good-paying skilled trade job.

Moreover, skilled trade occupations are embedded into the culture and habitus of the local rural community as most of the people in the local community are either farmers or have something to do with the trades. Skilled trade occupations are being encouraged, supported, and reinforced by exposure at home, by family legacy, the habitus of the local community, and at school through CTE courses. All these elements allow for the reproduction of skilled trade

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occupations for rural youth. Skilled trade occupations are what rural youth can see and what they are exposed to consistently, it is familiar, and it's a known entity.

The affinity of skilled trade occupations, especially agriculture and skilled trade occupations for rural youth in rural communities is not a new phenomenon. The skilled trade occupations of agriculture and mechanic arts have been a part of the rural landscape before the Morrill Land-Grant Act was passed in 1862 (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018). Another similarity between 1882 and the findings of the study is the reasons associated with the views of postsecondary education. According to Rudolph (1990), "The rural community had a distrust of higher education, relied on experience as the best teacher, and the land was still providing a good standard of living, and college allowed the rural youth to leave the farm and community" (p.258). The findings of the study revealed that many of the male participants perceive postsecondary education as not important, not needed, waste of time and money because they can obtain a "good job" or "similar job" with little to no extra schooling right after high school in a skilled trade occupation. Another similarity is the participant's affinity for hands-on instruction and real-world application.

The similarity in rural views regarding postsecondary education over 140 years is quite significant, which could foster a belief that the affinity of skilled trade occupations in rural communities is culturally entrenched. The findings of the study found that skilled trade occupations are revered, respected, and valued by the student participants, families, school administrators, and community. It appears, specifically for the male participants that skilled trade occupations provide an alternative to securing a "good job" without a college degree. If this is the case, and the cultural reverence regarding skilled trade occupations continues, it might be challenging to convince or encourage rural males to attend college. Also, the affinity and habitus

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of skilled trade occupations provide insights as to why rural youth might be matriculating to four-year universities at lower rates.

However, not everything is "golden" regarding finding a good-paying skilled trade job locally. While many of the male student participants aspire to be welders after high school, they have concerns about the ability to find jobs in their local community. Some of the student participants indicated that they plan to move to where they can find work, while some plan to stay but know they may incur a lengthy commute to work. While several of the student participants have enjoyed growing up in a rural community, those seeking a skilled trade occupation and those planning on going to college, know that finding a good-paying job will more than likely entail leaving their rural community and they do not appear conflicted about the reality of the situation. They do not want to limit their educational or career aspirations by staying in their rural community. Therefore, the "golden cage" metaphor articulated by McDonough et al., (2010) did not exactly align with the findings of the study. Also, the decision to stay or leave their rural community is being faced by all students in the study, not just the students who aspire to attend a four-year university and obtain a bachelor's degree. Which may speak to the economic deprivation of the local rural community (Carriere & Waldorf, 2013).

Lastly, having a high regard for skilled trade occupations is not necessarily undesirable as skilled trade occupations are needed in Indiana. However, should a larger percentage of skilled trade workers come from rural communities? Should higher education and policymakers do more to expose rural youth to careers outside of what they can see, which require a college degree? Additionally, is there a high enough demand for skilled trade occupations locally, regionally, and state-wide? Will the skilled trade occupations of agriculture, manufacturing, welding, etc. requiring just a high school diploma with minimal schooling be sustainable during the lifetime of

rural high school students as it was for their grandfather and father's generations? It appears unlikely, given the charge of Governor Holcomb in 2018 that "Indiana's greatest challenge is that too many Hoosiers lack the education and skills for the jobs that are here today and being created tomorrow, nearly all of which require a postsecondary education."

Additionally, technological advances and shifting economies can foster significant change, and students will need to be prepared and agile (McDonough et al., 2010). Being agile and aware that skilled trade occupations of today may not have the same level of demand ten or twenty years from now is something the male participants were aware of. While many of the male participants are not considering postsecondary education directly after high school, they would consider going in the future to obtain credentials if their skilled trade occupation is no longer in demand. The above questions and concerns are some of the areas for additional research and implications for practice and policymakers.

Implications

The findings of this study offer several useful implications for improving the postsecondary matriculation rates of rural students in Indiana. The recommendations below are associated with findings regarding the study and the site school but believe the recommendations apply to other rural schools in Indiana. The recommendations articulate specific actions that could be implemented to increase postsecondary matriculation rates of rural students in Indiana.

Implications for Practice

If we want to encourage rural students to attend postsecondary institutions to obtain credentials, then a cultural mindset shift regarding postsecondary education will need to be

considered and addressed. Several recommendations are presented in this section for school personnel, education institutions and governmental agencies, and policymakers.

K-12

As stated in the above findings section, the K-12 schooling experience of students could either encourage or deter students from postsecondary aspirations. Therefore, if we want to increase postsecondary matriculation rates of rural students in Indiana, then we need to ensure the K-12 schooling experience is meeting the needs of rural students and if not, then what can be modified to improve or enhance their K-12 experience. As stated in the findings section, students want to be active participants in their schooling experience. I think it would be beneficial for rural school administrators to ascertain the satisfaction level of their high school students regarding their schooling experience through surveys or focus groups. Once the information is gathered and synthesized, form a committee comprised of administrators, teachers, and students to create ideas and initiatives that could be implemented. The diverse committee will provide various stakeholders with a seat at the table and provide an opportunity for various groups within the school to work collaboratively together to improve and enhance the schooling experience for all students.

The findings of the study also articulated that students would like more applied learning and career relevance in their general education classes. The applied learning mode and real-world application are something that students taking CTE courses are exposed to and find beneficial regarding their schooling experience as well as career relevance. I think it would be advantageous for general education teachers to collaborate with the CTE teachers regarding the utilization of more applied concepts. Increasing and enhancing the learning process of general

education would be ideal as general education courses can be associated with college readiness and a possible pipeline to encourage postsecondary educational aspirations.

Postsecondary and K-12 Engagement

The findings of the study concerning resources, college, and career readiness challenges, and the perceptions regarding postsecondary education, provide a great engagement opportunity in Indiana for two significant educational entities to collaborate and leverage their strengths and resources intentionally and strategically. The collaboration could provide a unified dynamic to ensure that rural students have the same access, opportunities, exposure, and educational aspirations as their nonrural peers, thus increasing postsecondary matriculation rates of rural students in Indiana. Postsecondary and K-12 educators and administrators need to collaborate more intentionally and integrated to support rural students rather than operate in distinct silos and isolation (Beaulieu et al., 2003; Caldwell & Trainer, 1991; Jischke, 2004; McDonough & Calerone, 2006).

The mutual engagement needs to be collaborative and participatory where ideas and information flow in both directions and each entity is equally valued and respected (Jischke, 2004). A collaborative educational partnership between rural school districts and postsecondary institutions regarding college and career readiness could provide pronounced linkages between the two educational entities in Indiana by creating a more seamless transition for rural students matriculating to postsecondary education. In addition to the beneficial outcomes for students, there could be beneficial outcomes for teachers and guidance counselors with a more intentional partnership.

Teachers

As discussed in the above K-12 schooling experience, students want more applied learning and career relevance in general education classrooms. Rural students need to know and explore occupations other than what they are exposed to within their families and their small local community. Providing intentional subject matter linkages could foster connections regarding what they are learning inside the classroom to possible occupations and the advanced education that is required for those professions. However, educating rural youth in Indiana should not just fall on the shoulders of K-12 teachers or small schools because no one teacher or school holds the key to ensuring learning for all. Therefore, collaborations with postsecondary entities could assist with applied learning and career relevance in the classroom. A few entities that could provide resources within the county, regionally, and statewide are the following: Purdue County Extension Office, Purdue University Center for Regional Development, and Indiana University Center for Rural Engagement, these entities could provide people as well as educational materials that can augment what the teachers are currently doing in the classroom.

However, partnering with a local entity, which is already embedded into the county and familiar with the habitus of the local community and school, as well as local challenges, might be more convenient and accessible and therefore rural school districts in Indiana might prefer to partner with their Purdue County Extension office and collaborate with various extension educators (4-H Youth Development, Health and Human Sciences, and Agricultural and Natural Resources). Extension educators are an "extension" of Purdue's main campus and are tasked with helping to develop and empower young people to reach their full potential (Purdue University 4-H Youth Development, 2019). Teachers and county extension educators can collaborate to identify subject matter where an extension educator can come to the school and

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instruct a lab or hands-on activities for the students. Having county educators in the school would also provide a land-grant postsecondary presence and provide an opportunity for university extension personnel to interact with rural students inside the classroom. This type of engagement and exposure, especially if done consistently, could enhance student perceptions of postsecondary education and encourage educational and occupational aspirations.

Guidance Counselor

Teachers are not the only individuals in rural schools who have many demands placed upon them, guidance counselors in rural schools wear many hats and often have responsibilities outside of the guidance office. Rural guidance counselors need postsecondary partners to assist them in meeting the college and career readiness needs of students, especially in providing information regarding postsecondary systems, processes, college affordability, and coordinating college campus visits.

College Value and Affordability

The perceived value and cost of postsecondary education can be a barrier concerning educational aspirations if rural students and their families believe college is not affordable. In addition, the value of postsecondary education both in terms of financial (return on investment) and reverence could be improved and enhanced. It's time to listen to and understand the culture of rural communities, their way of living, and their concerns and perceptions regarding higher education, especially four-year universities. To accomplish this, postsecondary education needs to be more responsive, engaged, and climb down from their ivory tower and meet the rural people where they are. Academia has resources and expertise, and they need to leverage them locally (Jischke, 2004). Increasing awareness regarding the value, affordability, and providing

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engagement opportunities that will provide more exposure and interaction between rural students and postsecondary institutions could enhance educational and occupational aspirations for rural students in Indiana.

Additionally, college affordability needs to be an integral component of rural schools' college and career readiness plans for students. College affordability should not be just talked about one time of the year, it needs to be an ongoing and consistent conversation for high school students and their families. Information about affording a college education, such as brochures and handouts should be provided to students and made available for families to become more knowledgeable as well as where to go for additional information. Also, having printed brochures and information to provide students and families may foster intentional conversations about educational aspirations and affordability.

In addition to conversations, college affordability needs to have a visual presence with printed materials displayed throughout the school, not just in the guidance office. Brochures and printed information can be obtained or generated by contacting or visiting the websites of the Indiana Commission for Higher Education, Learn More Indiana, Federal Student Aid, College Board, and INvestEd. Given the student concerns regarding the cost of postsecondary education, affordability needs to be a central component of cultivating postsecondary educational aspirations.

Affordability is also a terrific opportunity for guidance counselors and postsecondary institutions, specifically, financial aid offices to partner together. Financial aid representatives can provide literature and marketing materials as discussed above as well as talk with students and families regarding the several ways to afford a college degree. Also, a significant component of affordability is applying for financial aid and financial aid counselors could provide

information and assistance to students and families in navigating the various processes. Additionally, financial representatives could host FAFSA completion sessions at the school, which might encourage families to file the FAFSA.

College Campus Visits

Another engagement opportunity that rural guidance counselors need assistance with is providing college campus visits. Lack of financial resources, as well as time, could deter rural schools from engaging in this valuable college and career readiness endeavor. There is an opportunity to collaborate with postsecondary institutions regarding resources and assistance. With the lower postsecondary matriculation rates of rural students at four-year institutions; postsecondary institutions in Indiana especially, four-year universities have a vested interest in increasing the number of rural students on college campuses. Postsecondary institutions could assist in providing financial resources for transportation and the coordination of custom campus visit experiences based on the needs of the rural school district.

The postsecondary institution hosting the visit could customize a tour that will allow rural students to interact with various academic disciplines on campus to learn more about majors and careers. In addition, rural students could tour labs, centers, and other areas regarding innovation and technology, and take part in a hands-on activity. This will allow students to engage with postsecondary institutions in an applied manner. In addition to interacting with various academic components, the students can go on a formal campus tour led by an Admissions representative who could also address questions about college readiness, and admission requirements and suggest courses to take in high school. Visiting a college campus can be a transformative

experience for rural students similar to taking a trip outside of Indiana or a study abroad trip because it is allowing rural students to go and see beyond the walls of their little community.

College and Career Coach

Lastly, having a dedicated college and career coach who could be more readily available to provide a more intentional approach to meeting the needs of the students regarding career development and educational aspirations would be beneficial for many rural guidance offices. However, financial resources are often limited in rural schools for this type of position. Collaborating with the county extension office regarding educators that could provide college and career programming is a suggestion. Another recommendation is for rural schools to fill the role externally by having a professional volunteer their time. This volunteer could be affiliated with a postsecondary institution, such as the IU Bloomington College Advising Corps program in affiliation with AmeriCorps, or another postsecondary institution with a school counseling program. Another entity worth contacting is rootEd Alliance, which was launched to address post-high school challenges for students in rural America, by placing college and career advisors in rural high schools. While this philanthropy alliance is not in Indiana yet, they are wanting to expand its reach. Another suggestion would be to apply for a grant through the Lilly Foundation in Indianapolis. Again, I think pursuing the ability to have a dedicated full or part-time college and career coach is an excellent idea and should not be disregarded because of financial resources but rather think of out-of-the-box creative ways in which collaborations or partnerships could fill this role.

Implications for Policymakers

Governor Holcomb stated in 2018 that "Indiana's greatest challenge is that too many Hoosiers lack the education and skills for the jobs that are here today and being created tomorrow – nearly all of which require postsecondary education." Policymakers need to focus on the rural communities, small schools, and students who are associated with them as they represent a significant population in Indiana. Ideally, policymakers need to leave the statehouse and the confides of Indianapolis and learn from the habitus of rural communities, and the sociocultural constructs of schools, students, and families. As articulated in the findings, rural communities have an affinity for occupations associated with the skilled trades which don't require a college degree. Meeting rural communities and small schools where they are will allow policymakers to talk with rural community leaders, visit the schools and talk with administrators, teachers, students, and families regarding their perceptions and views regarding postsecondary education and what is needed to increase postsecondary matriculation rates of rural students.

Additionally, rural college access is typically not a substantive policy issue (McDonough et al., 2010). However, given the number of rural counties and the number of rural school-age children in Indiana, rural college access should be a more substantive policy issue. While the study provided an opportunity for the voices of ten rural high school students in Indiana to be captured and articulated for K-12 administrators, higher education administrators, and policymakers, there are thousands of rural students in Indiana. Rural students have more to say and perhaps the best advocate for them is their voices and their stories because they are the recipients of educational policies in Indiana. They can provide feedback to policymakers regarding policies and programs and if they are achieving their intended outcomes. In addition, they can articulate what they need and want regarding cultivating educational and occupational

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aspirations. However, they need a seat at the table, and they need opportunities to engage with policymakers directly.

One need that was expressed by the student participants is the need for having a dedicated person to interact with regarding career development. They want and need a partner regarding their interests, goals, and plans regarding careers not just a career development website. Providing additional financial resources to rural schools to hire a dedicated college and career coach would be helpful.

In regard to affordability, specifically, state financial aid, the changes of the 21st Century Scholars program from a direct service model to a coordinated support model have negatively impacted the rural site school because they do not have a designated community partner that has picked up the services once provided under the previous local model. This change has more than likely impacted other rural school districts in Indiana as well given the remoteness and sparse availability of local community partners in rural communities. Given the socioeconomic status of many rural school districts having assistance and resources to enroll and provide information and support for 21st Century Scholars and their families and to increase the number of 21st Century Scholars graduating from rural high schools would be beneficial. Additional resources are needed for rural schools to reclaim the level of support they once had with a local 21st Century Scholars liaison.

Implications for Research

Rural college access is a complex problem with several components that interconnect and are similar to peeling back an onion, one layer at a time. The rural case study just scratched the surface of what we can be learned from rural students, small schools, and the local community.

More rural college access research is needed in Indiana, the Midwest, and across the country as rural college access research is under-researched.

The findings of the study did provide some insight as to the beliefs, opinions, thoughts, and values regarding postsecondary education and why rural students may not be considering postsecondary education as an educational aspiration. However, more research is needed regarding the formation of their values, beliefs, and mindset regarding postsecondary education. Are these beliefs formed as early as elementary school or middle school? Knowing this information could provide more intentional postsecondary engagement opportunities.

The honor's focus group in the study had the most favorable perception regarding college, but why? Was their favorable perception because of their perceived academic ability, expectations of family, educators, or all three? Additional research regarding perceived academic ability, encouragement, and expectations regarding educational and occupational aspirations of rural students is needed. Another significant area to research is the sociocultural beliefs and values of skilled trade occupations for rural communities and how higher education could be a better partner in providing rural students with more credentials that will provide rural students with more occupational opportunities and options long term.

While this study was informative, the study only included one rural high school in Indiana and there are many rural schools across Indiana and the nation. While rural communities and schools can have similar attributes and metrics, each rural community and small school can also have different attributes, demographics, economic conditions, and cultures. Also, the sociocultural aspects of rural communities and schools need to be considered and addressed because of the influence they can have on the community and school. The number of variances within communities and schools can produce different findings and implications. Additionally,

the study only included ten voices, with a higher proportion of male students, while insightful, the higher number of male participants could have skewed the results. There are thousands of rural students in Indiana and millions across the nation that we need to hear and learn from if we want to improve rural college access. Also having studies that include an equal proportion of females and males would be optimal given the difference in educational and occupational aspirations and matriculation rates for postsecondary education.

Given the influence and significance that gender can have on the educational and occupational aspirations of rural students, especially regarding the affinity of CTE classes and skilled trade occupations of male students, further studies need to examine the influence of this dynamic and how it might be contributing to lower college matriculation rates of male rural students. While skilled trade occupations have supported rural communities for generations, is it sustainable for the next generation? Also, research regarding successful K-12 and higher education partnerships that are increasing postsecondary access and success for rural students needs to be examined to articulate best practices and scaling opportunities.

Conclusion

In 1862 a significant policy was passed by Congress which allowed a "young person growing up in rural Indiana to have the same right and access to a college education as a young person of an affluent professional in a large urban city (Jischke, 2004). However, in 2022 rural students in Indiana still matriculate at lower rates than their suburban and urban peers and this study provided some insight as to why that is occurring. The lower rural college enrollment in 1882 cited concerns regarding the value and confidence in higher education, and that hands-on experience is the best teacher are just as applicable today (Randolph, 1990). Furthermore,

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agriculture and skilled trade occupations are still embedded into the sociocultural and habitus construct of rural communities, families, and schools.

The entrenched cultural reverence of skilled trade occupations is well-regarded, respected, admired, and valued in rural communities. In contrast, postsecondary education does garner the same level of reverence, especially given the affordability concerns. The skilled trade occupations, especially for male rural students are a significant competing entity for postsecondary education aspirations. If high school students believe they can earn good money and have reasonable job security without having to extend their schooling or pay a lot of money for a college degree, it could be challenging to increase rural postsecondary matriculation rates, especially for male students. However, will skilled trade occupations be sustainable in Indiana at the current level, and will these jobs be as relevant for future generations? Should we be preparing all students regardless of educational and occupational aspirations to be lifelong learners as additional knowledge, skills, and credentials may need to be obtained to stay relevant? These are some of the questions and concerns that need to be addressed and investigated further.

Another concern that will need to be addressed is the perceived value of postsecondary education both in terms of reverence and return on investment for rural students, families, schools, and communities. Changing the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding postsecondary education will entail a cultural shift, as the habitus and sociocultural aspects of not attending college appear to be entrenched. I agree with the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (2018), that "We are caught in a paradox between a lack of confidence in higher education and a growing need for it." Postsecondary institutions and ICHE need to partner together to build confidence and demonstrate the value and affordability of higher education in

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rural communities if we want to increase the number of rural students in Indiana who matriculate to postsecondary education, especially at four-year institutions.

To effectively build confidence and shift the cultural mindset regarding postsecondary education, will more than likely entail personally visiting various rural communities in Indiana to listen to educators, students, and families as a way of understanding the habitus of rural communities, their way of living, and their concerns and perceptions regarding higher education, especially four-year universities. Additionally, this engagement should be mutual, a "two-way bridge" that is authentic, inclusive, and participatory, allowing each entity to learn from each other and contribute respectively (Jischke, 2004). This should foster the ability for diverse ideas, voices, concerns, and information to be heard and acted upon.

Another component of the Morrill Land-Grant Act concerned access. Postsecondary institutions, especially land-grant colleges need to be more responsive, engaged, and climb down from their ivory tower and meet the rural people where they are. Academia, especially land-grant colleges have resources and expertise within their campuses as well as out in the local rural communities through extension and they need to leverage these networks more effectively and efficiently to ensure that all rural youth have access to the education they need to obtain their American Dream (Jischke, 2004).

Regarding college access, the low-socioeconomic status of the site school is one of their biggest challenges regarding college and career readiness and this caveat is, not unique to the rural site school. Socioeconomic status at the site school influenced personal expectations and levels of excellence, family support, and resources, social and cultural capital, self-efficacy, attendance and participation in extracurriculars, and the ability to visit college campuses. Additionally, the lack of support and resources at home has also increased the level of support,

assistance, and resources they need at school. However, rural schools are often constrained by resources both financial and human, which is not unique for small schools. Given the lack of resources and the challenges concerning college and career readiness, rural schools and communities will need to collaborate with local, regional, and stated entities and they will need to be open to outsiders providing assistance and resources.

It takes a village of collaborators to develop the college aspirations of rural students and increase the number of rural students attending postsecondary institutions in Indiana, especially low-income students (Chambers et al., 2019). These efforts will take resources both financial and human as well as collaborations and engagement with postsecondary institutions, agencies, policymakers, and the private sector. Everyone will need to work collaboratively together in a sustainable manner because shifting cultural perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes will take time.

Ideally, rural students should have the same level of college access and opportunities as their non-rural peers in improving their future career opportunities, lifetime earnings, life expectancy, and the pursuit of happiness. To level the playing field will take collaborations of rural Dreammakers and Dreamkeepers inside and outside the classroom, so rural students can see what is possible outside of their small, isolated community and believe in their inner greatness. They need hope so that they can be and do anything they set their mind to and aspire to greater things. Hope begins with listening to their voices regarding their schooling experience and perceptions regarding postsecondary education so K-12 administrators, higher education administrators, policymakers, and the private sector can incorporate their voices into their collaborative work to address the perceptions and barriers to making college access more inclusive for all rural students in Indiana.

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APPENDIX A. STUDENT PARTICIPANT PERSONAL ESSAY

As an added feature of my research on rural high school students and college, it would add great value to have you put some of your thoughts on paper. It does not need to be long or complicated: just an expression of some of your thoughts and perceptions about growing up in a rural community. Please write an essay that tells me what it's like for you to be a high school student in a rural community. Feel free to tell me about your favorite memories from school or extracurricular activities, your family and friends, your feeling about the good/challenging parts about living in your hometown. I want to get a sense of who you are and what it's like to be attending a small high school. There is no page limit so write as much as you want! Ideally, you'll write at least two pages double-spaced.

APPENDIX B. HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL AND SCHOOL COUNSELOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) Tell me about what you perceive as some of the challenges this high school has in preparing students for college and careers.

2) Describe the types of opportunities that are available to help students prepare for college and careers?

3) When you think about the culture of the community and the families you serve, how might that influence your approach to college and career readiness for the students you serve?

4) When you think about your school culture, tell me how you perceive it promoting the pursuit of a college education.

5) Tell me some ways you think K-12 and higher education can work collaboratively to enhance the college and career readiness of rural students in Indiana?

6) Knowledge is the key to change. State legislators and other constituencies have considerable influence on funding and policies that affect rural communities and schools. In your opinion, what is one factor you would like those policymakers to know when they ask why rural students matriculate to four-year institutions at a lower rate than other demographic areas? And what needs to change to improve the current situation?

APPENDIX C. STUDENT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) When you think about a college education, tell me what that means to you.

2) Since you're nearing a college/career decision soon, how do your parents/guardians talk to you about going to college?

3) When you think about going to college, discuss some of your opinions or beliefs about choosing to pursue a college education or not pursue a college education.

4) Again, when you think about going to college have there been any specific experiences, exposure, or people that have influenced your opinions, or beliefs about going to college. Tell me about them.

5) When you think about your educational and occupational aspirations after high school, have there been any specific experiences, exposures, or people in your life that have influenced your choices? Tell me about them.

6) Tell me how you feel about leaving your rural community to pursue your future educational and occupational plans.

7) When you think about the conversation we're having about your opinions and beliefs about college, what is one thing you would like each of those individuals to know about your perceptions of college: (1) teachers; (2) school administration; (3) parents/guardians; and (4) state legislators.

8) What are your post-high school plans?

9) Do you think you will ever go to a 2 year or 4 year college?

10) How much income do you think you need to make to live comfortably and/or raise a family?