

Research Article

Interpreting Rural Students' Stories of Access to a Flagship University

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Access has been an ongoing issue for rural students. In this study, I examined factors that have been proven barriers and supports for rural students. Rural college students who were part of the TRiO program at a flagship university shared barriers and supports to access higher education. Students talked about their college journeys by telling digital stories, using computer-based tools to create narratives. On-campus resources, family support, finding a place to belong in college, and self-efficacy proved to be important access and persistence factors for students.

Introduction

Rural students can face significant barriers when applying to, entering, and completing higher education. Some studies have shown that rural students face distinct challenges in completing college (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012, Guiffrida, 2008; Maltzan, 2006). Despite a growing number of rural students starting college, research is lacking on the college experiences of rural students and how their background, pre-college experiences, and rural culture influences college completion (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). More research is needed on the access and success of low-income, rural college students in the United States (Beasley, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to examine the access and barriers that rural students face in a public 4-year university. Digital stories explain these rural students' challenges and supports to higher education from rural communities. Examining the stories of rural students is important to understanding access and barriers for underrepresented students in higher education (Eller, Martinez, Pace, Pavel, Garza & Barnett, 1998). Such an approach can give voice to rural students who experience barriers to education based on their geographic location. By listening to the unique accounts of the journey of rural students, college personnel and decision makers can work to make access more inclusive of all students regardless of race, gender, income level, and culture. Students' perspectives provide understanding about barriers to education through a student-centered and individualized approach (Eller et al., 1998; MDC, 2001).

Many studies on rural research focus on the rural deficit (Maltzan, 2006). Researchers have found rural

deficiencies in attaining a college degree (Hu, 2003) and quality of the rural educational experience (Rosigno & Crowley, 2001). Previous researchers designed research to explain why rural students do not aspire to higher education and why they drop out when enrolled (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Cope, 1972). This research study was designed to discover why rural students do aspire to attend higher education and look at their pathway to college access. Researchers and faculty will benefit from learning about students from their perspective in a study that does not focus on the deficits of rural students. Barriers will be examined but so will supports that helped move students toward successful entry to a flagship university.

Review of Literature

From the 1970s until present day, researchers have conducted studies about rural students' college access and persistence. Researchers have found trends regarding rural students in college. Rural students were more likely to attend a nonselective college (Gibbs, 1998), to transfer to a smaller rural college (Schonert, Elliott, & Bills, 1991), to be overwhelmed by options and size of a public 4-year college (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1972; Cope, 1972), and more likely to be first-generation and low-income (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Research is lacking on whether these unique college attendance patterns affect college completion and if precollege and college experiences differ from non-rural students (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012).

Rural students may have difficulties adapting to a more diverse setting, the increased size of school setting, expanded social and academic opportunities, and accessing student services (Guiffrida, 2008). Qualitative researchers need more information on

rural students' pathways to college (Beasley, 2011) because of the contradictory results regarding the educational success of rural students (Maltzan, 2006). Some studies revealed that rural students are less likely to attend college (Herzog & Pittman, 1996) while other researchers negated this claim (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Research found rural students are less likely to persist and more likely to attend a less selective institution (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Because of the inconsistencies surrounding rural students' pathways to college, researchers need more information about growing up rural and going to college (Yan, 2002).

Rural students struggle to adapt to college and a more urban and diverse setting and rural students spend time adjusting to "city" life as well as other more studied transitions such as time management, organization, adjusting to living on campus with a roommate, and newly given freedom (Maltzan, 2006). Familial support and "college-going" versus "foregoing college" culture impacts rural students' decision to attend a postsecondary institution (Beasley, 2011). Positive relationships with teachers, mentors, and staff help build positive academic identity for rural students' transition (Hodsdon, 2013). In previous research, parental expectations, financial status, expectations and aspirations, college type and location, academic preparation, first-generation status, gender, race, transition, and rural values are themes that emerged from these studies on rural students' pathways to 4-year institutions.

Rural students can feel that success lies outside of their home community (Corbett, 2006). However, rural students may still feel obligated to be near home and family (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). Based on students' desire to be successful and obligation to stay close to their community, rural students may have conflicting aspirations (Corbett, 2006). Rural high school students may desire to leave because of the lack of availability of 4-year colleges in the area. They leave to seek secure economic and educational opportunities, but leaving for postsecondary education might result in no opportunities if they choose to come back to their respective rural communities. Outmigration affects rural communities and young adults in deciding between family obligations and postsecondary aspirations (McLaughlin, Shoff, & Demi, 2014).

Because students from rural locales have unique journeys and circumstances that can contribute to rural college student persistence, qualitative research can provide information about why and how rural

students attend and complete college (Beasley, 2011; Maltzan, 2006). Social factors such as the interdependency of rural culture, rural school atmosphere, peer influences, and parental expectations influence rural students' journeys to attend college (Beasley, 2011). The interdependency of these social factors can best be understood by qualitative inquiry that describes the complexities of people's lives in a certain context.

Existing studies from research do not tell the full story of rural students and the barriers and challenges they face. Examining the stories of rural students is important to understanding access and barriers for underrepresented students in higher education (Eller et al., 1998). Digital stories provide ways for students to have ownership in the study by telling their own story.

Methodology

In order to examine (a) rural students' access and barriers to a 4-year college and (b) the cultural values (i.e., family background, rural culture, and rural school preparation) that affected college access and completion, the following research questions were posited:

1. How do rural college students situate their experiences as rural citizens in relation to their experiences in college access and success to higher education?
2. What were the barriers to college enrollment to a 4-year flagship university in both their home and college community?
3. What were the supports to college enrollment to a 4-year flagship university in both their home and college community?

I used digital storytelling as a way to reveal and understand participant experiences. Rural students that qualified for TRiO services created digital stories, or 3- to 5-minute videos that used audio, video, and photos in a transition class to college illustrated their pathway to college (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2010). Digital stories are representations of lives, values, and identities (Wexler, Gubrium & Englinton, 2014). Digital stories give research participants a way to describe, not just explain, events in their lives (Wake, 2012). Self-produced stories show how participants construct their identities (Wexler et al., 2014). I collaborated with instructors to integrate digital stories into the goals and purpose of the transition class. This learning strategies class was designed to develop students'

skills and academic strategies to be successful in postsecondary. Included in the class is a session on resiliency and writing strategies. The digital story was an important component of reflecting on the ability to attend and succeed in higher education while processing through written and oral communication.

Digital stories were the primary method of data collection for the study because of their ability to put the power in the hands of the group being studied. Digital stories offered students an opportunity to tell their stories and perspective (Willox, Harper, & Edge, 2012) and creatively respond to barriers and supports that guided them to college (Wexler, Eglinton, & Gurbrium, 2014). By creating digital stories, individuals reflected upon the strengths and concerns of their community and how these factors shaped their journey to college. I analyzed this creative response to better understand rural students' journeys to and in college.

Data Procedures and Analyses

I used grounded theory as a mechanism for analyzing and presenting the data because the study was “grounded” in the words, experiences, and thoughts of the participants (Charmaz, 2006). This analytic approach uses multiple stages to understand the work of the participants. Stages of data analysis included coding, defining interrelationships within the data, creating themes based on patterns in data, and developing a hypothesis based on emergent data from the multi-stage process. By using grounded theory, participants' responses formed the data to

develop a theory. I used a constructivist grounded theory approach, which allowed the research participants, their experiences, and my interpretation to address how realities are made (Charmaz, 2006). Data and analysis were created from shared experiences of participants and researchers. As the researcher, I analyzed the way participants presented and represented their lives and found meaning in certain aspects of their college journey. Through students' demonstrations, insight was gathered on how students negotiated their rural identities based on what factors they included as more or less salient in their college decision. By analyzing their stories using grounded theory, a sharper focus to social issues influencing college attendance was gained.

The Participants and Context

Forty-nine students submitted digital stories. Out of the 49 students, 11 students were considered rural students by the definition used by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014). NCES defines rural as under 2,500 residents and classifies rural into three subsets: fringe (less than 5 miles from urbanized area), distant (5 to 25 miles from urbanized area), and remote (over 25 miles from urbanized area). Urbanized areas are considered by the U.S. Census Bureau (2018) to be areas of 50,000 residents or more. Urban clusters have 2,500 to 50,000 residents. I found similarities between students from remote towns and remote rural residents. I counted three students from small isolated towns and examined a total of 14 digital stories.

Table 1
Research Participants

Name	Population	Identities
Wyatt	439	American Indian, financial barriers, non-traditional
Chad	343	First-generation
Hollie	1,916	American Indian, first-generation, financial problems, non-traditional
Jamie	1,064	First-generation, financial barriers, non-traditional
Lawrence	890	American Indian, first-generation, non-traditional
Tanya	2,596	American Indian, non-traditional
Jenny	794	American Indian, financial barriers, first-generation
Lena	1,035	American Indian
Tara	602	American Indian, financial barriers
Shinnell	1,659	American Indian, financial barriers, first-generation
Amanda	745	Financial barriers
Taylor	9,771	Financial barriers
Jewel	5,900	Financial barriers
Adam	9,771	Financial barriers, Veteran, non-traditional

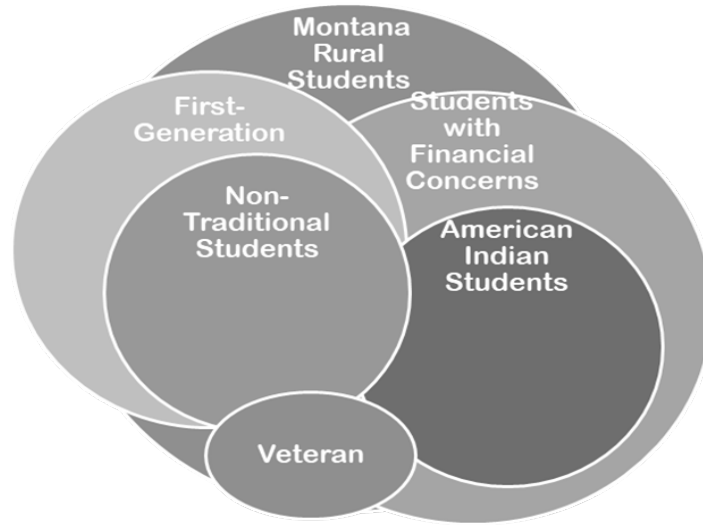


Figure 1: Overlapping identities of the study participants

Fourteen students were included in the study. Table 1 is a list of the students' pseudonyms, where they are from, and population size. As shown in Figure 1 below, all of the students in the study were rural. However, students also had other important components of their identity that influenced barriers and supports to college. Being first-generation, American Indian, non-traditional, and experiencing financial struggles were some of the parts of students' identities that most affected their journeys in college.

Findings

Rural college students had many different components of their identities that affected their college journeys (Renn & Reason, 2013). Studying rural students' journeys might also mean studying veteran students, first-generation students, low-income students, or American Indian students' journey. Students' pathways to college, their financial background, and their race influenced the barriers and support factors that they faced in their journey to college.

In the following section, I included themes that are common in literature on rural students (Beasley, 2011; Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Maltzan, 2006; Schultz, 2004) and also emerged from coding and analyzing the data. These themes include: finances, academic preparation, family support and challenges, on-campus support, pathway to college, and self-motivation. Barriers and supports are reviewed simultaneously because barriers and supports to college enrollment were not always

mutually exclusive. Parental expectations and aspirations, gender, or race had a conflicting and complicated dynamic. For instance, family was often considered both a barrier and a support. I address each of these themes found in the data. Most themes in the study had elements of being both a barrier and a support.

Finances

Finances were a major barrier for 10 out of the 14 students to attending and continuing in college. Students' financial status affected their college journeys in various different ways. First, students described their parents' financial situation as a barrier to attend college. Second, students reported the burden of debt as a continual factor in their college journey. Third, students needed to balance work with school to make college financially possible. Last, students relied on scholarships, financial aid, and money for vocational rehabilitation to make college financially feasible.

In her digital story, Jenny told her financial struggles of attending college,

One of my biggest struggles is money. I don't come from a rich family. My dad would struggle to pay the bills each month. I didn't expect them to help me with money because it was my choice to go to Missoula. I wanted to try to do it all by my own.

Taylor said her "biggest struggle in college [was] money." She was also pessimistic about the prospects after finishing college. Taylor considered the cost of tuition, leaving home and finding housing, as well as

foregoing full-time employment in her decision to attend and continue in college. Taylor said, “I had a really good job in Havre. It paid really well. I like college but I don’t like the idea of future after college. Paying off loans and trying to find a job which may or may not happen.” For both Jenny and Taylor, money problems based off their financial status proved to be a large barrier, challenge, and weight that accompanied a college degree.

Other students expressed the burden of trying to balance work and school. Low-income and first-generation students often cannot forego employment opportunities while in school (Martinez, Bilges, Shabazz, Miller, & Morote, 2012). Due to financial reasons, some students in the study could not afford to be a full time student. In her digital story, Amanda expressed the struggle of balancing work and school, “Another challenge I’ve had was I started working full time and taking 18 credits at the beginning of the semester. I was taking classes until 4 and then working until 11. I was struggling. I had to cut back.” For financial reasons, many students have to work. In some cases, students had to work so many hours that the work responsibilities cut into time spent on their education. Like Tara said, “I sometimes let working get ahead of my school work which is a big no.”

Students relied on financial support to make college possible. For Jamie, a scholarship for childcare and TRiO’s book loans helped with costs that were not covered by other aid packages. Adam explained in his digital story that vocational rehab made college feasible because the government was paying for his degree since he was injured in the military. Shinnell said that college was possible because of Native American scholarships that she received. All of these students expressed that financial aid or scholarships of some kind were support factors in their college journeys.

Academic Preparation

Although contradictory results emerge from previous studies, some studies show rural students tend to be less academically prepared for postsecondary education (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Students in the study had various experiences with academic preparation going into college. The majority of students who talked about academics highlighted challenges and lack of preparation. For example, Adam tested into high levels of math, but was put into higher levels science courses as a result. Even though he excelled at math, his science courses

were difficult for him. In his words, “College is way harder than high school.”

Yan found number of science courses was one factor that affected rural students’ college experience (2002). In a study of students from rural Pennsylvania, there was a correlation between number of science courses taken in high school and college persistence (Yan, 2002). Students who took courses in chemistry, biology, and physics graduated college at higher levels regardless of socioeconomic status and parental expectations. This study supported the importance of high school rigor in preparing students for college. Amanda’s story echoed the findings in national research. She expressed that her lack of science and math credits made transitioning to college difficult.

I’m from...a very small school. I didn’t have a lot of opportunities that others had from bigger schools. We didn’t have any AP or higher level classes so I was done with math and science credits my sophomore year in high school. I haven’t done math and science for quite a while. Transitioning into college math and BIO 160 was a little difficult for me.

Hollie also blamed her math preparation as a barrier to college success.

I’ve had some things push me back. Because I’m not very good at math and haven’t had math since being a junior in high school, I actually have to take four math classes. When I talked with my advisor, it looks like it’s going to be three, four, or five years [before I graduate].

Leaving “Home” and Finding a Place to Belong in College

The decision to leave the community is complex for rural students. Rural values as found by Jones (1994) included (a) family, (b) sense of community, (c) common sense is more valuable than intellectual ability, (d) mistrust from outsiders, (e) belief in gender role stereotypes, and (f) religious faith. Dees’s study (2006) supported these values for rural students who attended a regional university in Ohio. Some students struggled to balance their rural values with their desire to leave their community. As defined by Berry (2004), the students who desired to leave adopted an assimilation acculturation strategy, or a focus on moving away from one’s home culture, in this case rural life, and adapting to the more dominant culture. This strategy is issue driven and motivated by a degree or financial success (Dees, 2006).

Common in the literature surrounding rural students, some students in the study expressed feelings of geographic isolation and a desire to leave their small hometown or reservation. College was a way to exit the community while gaining more opportunities by receiving a college degree. Lawrence expressed this feeling about the reservation where he was born and lived as a child.

There's absolutely nothing there. As far as job opportunities, there's a casino. A grocery store well half grocery store half restaurant, two gas stations. There's no job opportunities. The closest hospital is 30 miles away. The closest dentist is 30 miles away. There's nothing there.

It's not a place to go and it's not a place to raise a family. I know it sounds like I'm putting down where I come from but if you live there long enough anyone can see that it's not a place for a place to anyone to be. There's absolutely nothing there.

College motivated Taylor because she was able to leave her hometown.

I went to [a rural] high school. It was really small and I don't do well in small towns. So that's why I decided to come to college but that's probably not a good basis for a decision but I was wavering all throughout high school if I wanted to go to college. When I graduated, I decided I didn't want to stay in Havre. I decided to come to Missoula. I like this town a lot.

After being in college, one student seemed more aware of some of the opportunities she missed because her high school was small and she did not get to take AP classes like some of her peers in college. "I'm from a [rural] school. It's a very small school. I didn't have a lot of opportunities that others had from bigger schools."

However not all students felt that they needed to escape small town life. Jamie expressed that her hometown was a great place to raise a family. She hoped to move back after she received her degree. Hollie also echoed that there were job opportunities for her when she got a college degree. However, she also expressed that it would be hard to go back to her reservation because "the politics is difficult to deal with, extensive damages to the lands, drug use, it's really hard to go back."

Lena, adjusted to college by surrounding herself with a community from her small town and reservation. Her community from home helped her to adjust to college as well as expand her college network.

We were all friends in high school. We all graduated in the top 10. It is great to have this support system. We all know each other. Sitting on the couch together, it's like "I have to do this and this." And "No, you can't play that game." They know everything about Missoula. I know their friends that they've made and it's like a family.

Lena eventually wanted to move back to be an active part of the community. She did express that many in her hometown were "stuck." "The best part is coming back [from college] and saying hey I am in college. I am doing something with my life. I'm not stuck in this same loop in [my home community]."

Family Support and Challenges

Family support had several different meanings to students. Students felt that their family was their biggest ally in completing their degree but students also wanted to complete their degree to give back to their family (Guillory & Wolverson, 2008). For example, students wanted to support family members by attaining a college degree and finding well-paying employment; students wanted family to be proud of their accomplishments; and students wanted to complete a degree to create a better life for their family. Lawrence wanted to give back to his family for supporting him while he was in college. In his digital story, Lawrence shared, "I need to make a better life for my family."

Nine of 14 students said family was their biggest support in coming to and continuing with college. Aligned with the national research, students expressed wanting to take care of their family as a motivator. Lawrence shared,

Family members that have motivated me to go to college, number 1 is my wife, and second two people are my daughters, and the third person would be my mother. My mother went to college before and got overwhelmed. She took too much time off. I guaranteed my wife and daughters that if I was to go to school the only way I would come to college is to finish. That's my plans.

Students valued the support of husbands, uncles, aunts, grandparents, parents, and in-laws as crucial support factors in their college journeys. Students also shared that they could not finish college without the support of their family. Jamie expressed these sentiments,

When my son was sick and couldn't go to school, my mother-in law took off four days of work to take my son. My parents have come to town on weekends before a big test so I can study. When I need to study at night, my husband will watch the kids. He will work a 10-hour day and come home and tell me go study. I don't know what I would do without that.

Out of the 14 digital stories, six students expressed difficulties with family back home. Some of these issues included a devastating death in the family, missing family that was far away, unstable family situation, and trying to cope with the schedule of children, wife, or other family problems. Hollie stated that family deaths were a hard part of being in college.

It was really difficult dealing with that backlash and people not understanding how important family is but that kind of comes with the territory of being native. You have so many connections in your life that means you lose a lot of people in your life. I've lost a lot of people in my life: my grandmothers, my little brothers, my uncles, my grandparents, you lose a lot of people. It's hard to deal with. And it's really important, really important to be part of that community for us. . . . I hadn't seen my uncle in a few years and that was really tough because I didn't get to hear those wise words from him. He passed on his wisdom to us every time he saw us and I keep on feeling like I missed out moving here. When I moved here I missed out but I also felt like a gained a lot of opportunities that I never would have had if I stayed.

Although many students in the study shared that they would never be able to finish college without the support of their family, they also confided that family problems, deaths, or health problems were major barriers for them to succeed in college. Hollie stated that her family was her biggest support but she also experienced sadness and distress about family loss.

I have also had personal issues. My uncle who is also the leader, our chief, he passed away. I grew up with him. Every song that I know, our native songs, he taught me. It was devastating. When we lose our elders, it's not like someone we know passed away. It's one of the differences I've noticed being here and the difference between natives and non-natives is that we take uncles, aunts, cousins, and community more seriously and it's just something that I don't think a lot of people really understand. A couple

of years ago my cousin died and he's like a brother to me. My job at the time, they were like he's a cousin he's not immediate family so you can't get off work.

Tara's story also supported the national research about family being both a barrier and support. She knew she could not succeed in college if it was not for their help. Tara also recognized that her brother's health problems and taking care of her aunt's children caused her to miss time at school. Tara's story showed the difficulties of balancing responsibilities of family and school. While Tara considered her family a support, she also recognized that she missed school because of family responsibilities.

My brother had a benign tumor in his face and it required major surgery and I missed a lot of school for that. I had to make sure he was ok and take care of the household. Helping my mom with my aunty's three kids. My aunty struggles with drug addiction and for years we have been back and forth for the kids. Now we have them until they are 18. For that, I am very thankful. They are my world. Everything I do is for them.

Everyone has different challenges. My biggest challenge has probably been family but at the same time they are the biggest support, my backbone, my everything. I wouldn't be where I am without them.

Self-Efficacy

Originally defined by Bandura (1977), self-efficacy refers to the belief in one's ability to complete a course of action. Self-efficacy is a variable in student learning because it affects both students' motivation and achievement. In the transition class, instructors covered topics such as resiliency, grit, and perseverance to increase students' sense of self-efficacy. Students in the class and in the study learned about study skills, how to find resources on campus, adaptation techniques, and the importance of self-efficacy to being successful in college. In this study, students talked about the importance of resiliency and how they could fight through struggles to receive a degree.

Chad shared in his digital story that school had always been a struggle and there were educators in his life that had doubted his ability to succeed in school.

Some of the challenges I've had, I've never made a 3.0 in high school or college. I did really

bad in high school and I always had teachers tell me I couldn't succeed because I was so behind in classes. I did 5th grade math in 8th grade. I didn't even do 6th, 7th, or 8th grade math. I went straight from 5th to high school math. It sucked. It was really hard. My math teacher there was really good. She was the only one who told me I could do it. The others told me I wouldn't succeed. I have always been behind in my classes.

Although Chad struggled with school all his life, he also believed he could succeed in college. "Even though people put me down in high school, I still keep on going because I know that I can do it. Be the good guy and keep on going. Hard work pays off." Lawrence also expressed confidence in his ability to continue despite academic barriers. Lawrence said, "I guaranteed my wife and daughters that if I was to go to school the only way I would come to college is to finish. That's my plans."

Eight of 14 students in this study were considered non-traditional or adult learners because they took time off before coming to college, had dependents, or did not have a traditional high school diploma. Adult learners or non-traditional students exhibit high levels of self-motivation (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Students in this study exhibited traits of high motivation, supporting the national research. In their digital stories, multiple students stated, "I love learning" or "I love school." Jamie made the comment that "I knew if I wasn't going back to college by 30, I wouldn't do it. It was a big commitment. I could have worked that job [pharmacy technician] forever but I wanted more." Because Jamie believed in her ability to attain a degree, she left a job and her home community that she loved.

Being aware that college will not always be easy can help students work through challenges to meet their goal. Students with confidence to overcome barriers are more apt to meet educational ambitions (Corbière, Mercier, & Lesage, 2004). Confidence to manage trying situations develops resiliency and resiliency increases the likelihood of academic success (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001). Students are more likely to persist if they have self-confidence rise to above struggles such as lack of preparation, family issues, health concerns, or financial problems (Thompson et al., 2013).

On-Campus Support

While students' need for family supports may be critical, students expressed the helpfulness of faculty

and administrators' guidance and direction. Although students may feel isolated and alone away at college, having a place to turn for answers, comfort, and "family" on campus provides students with the support needed for students to commit to finish college. Students shared the importance of on-campus community support as a persistence factor.

Every student in the study valued TRiO as a crucial support for financially and academically succeeding in higher education. As supported by research on American Indian students, on-campus support is an essential persistence factor (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Many students stated TRiO as their most important support factor. Specifically, students referenced TRiO's services such as book loans, availability of scholarships, guidance from advisors, and the learning strategies class.

Rural students in this study spoke of the support of community members in their hometowns. In high school and after, students referred to the advice and guidance from teachers, bosses, and family members. In college, these same students wanted guidance from their college community. Students in the study mentioned the support of faculty, advisors, and centers like TRiO or the Native American Center. Rural students in this study needed to feel at home at college in order to succeed. On-campus support helped students find community on campus.

The majority of the students in this study valued the transition class for TRiO students, as a key persistence factor or support in their college journey. Students in this study supported the national research on the benefit of these seminars. Tara said,

I'm thankful for this TRiO class because it's opened a lot of doors. I have been able to ask for help, get help. It was a whole world I didn't know about. I wish I had taken this class earlier. Adam agreed, "It's been the greatest thing I've done besides signing up for classes. I took physics the first semester and I would have done way better if I had been in the TRiO class."

Students said that TRiO staff helped them with everything from book loans to scheduling conflicts. Lawrence stated, "TRiO has been the biggest help. A lot more than any other classes. I appreciate the fact that I can come to TRiO. I appreciate that I am in college now because I did take 10 years off school." Tara expressed similar emotions about TRiO as a support network.

I am extremely shy and I don't know how to ask for help. I'm thankful for this TRiO class because it's opened a lot of doors. I have been

able to ask for help, get help. It was a whole world I didn't know about. I wish I had taken this class earlier because I think this outcome would have been different than where I am now. Nevertheless, I'm pushing forward.

Other students shared other support networks on campus such as the Native American Center, academic help called Study Jams, and professors' office hours. However, students expressed these as a list of supports like Tanya. "Most of the supports are TRiO, Study Jam; the staff at the Native American Center are awesome. I'm on a Native American Scholarship as well." TRiO was the most frequently mentioned support system.

Pathway to College

Three students participated in either GEAR UP or Upward Bound, pathway or pipeline programs that assist students in transitioning from middle to high school and from high school to college. GEAR UP provides resources such as college visits, financial education to families, and guidance on FAFSA, financial aid, and scholarships. Upward Bound provides resources to low-income and first-generation students about higher education. Upward Bound provides academic instruction to students who are underrepresented in postsecondary institutions.

All three students who participated in GEAR UP and Upward Bound recognized the importance of these programs in their college. One student stated that the only reason she is in college is because of GEAR UP and the scholarship she received from them. Hollie knew that she wanted to attend the university because she spent her summers at the institution through Upward Bound. Even though Lena's mom knew about the college process from working at a tribal college, Lena recognized the support and guidance that GEAR UP provided for her and so many other students. All three students who participated in these pathway programs said that these programs were supports in accessing college.

Students in the study who did not have pathway programs described challenges with financial aid, scholarships, applying to college, and academic preparation, areas where programs like GEAR UP and Upward Bound provide information. Shinnell did not know the steps needed to apply to college. "In the application process, I had a lot of questions and my parents had never been well only like one semester of college. I didn't know what I was doing and I thought someone can help me with this." Chad struggled

academically and had teachers tell him that he would never make it through college. Jewel struggled to find scholarships and navigate financial problems before attending college.

Students shared difficulties in transitioning from high school to college. Several students expressed that college was academically difficult and more challenging than high school. Non-traditional students in the study struggled to forego full-time employment and find affordable childcare. Students had a variety of obstacles to overcome in transitioning to college. Students, like Amanda, struggled to meet people and adjust from such a small school where she knew everyone. Jewel expressed "feeling lost" and "actually getting lost sometimes." Pathways can help underrepresented students with academic preparation and transitioning to college successfully (Venezia & Kirst, 2005).

Conclusion

Despite barriers varying in the study, there were common supports that helped all rural students in the study. Students' barriers varied based on financial status, academic preparation, or not having family familiar with the college process. Common barriers cited in the study were lack of academic preparation, family problems, challenges lack of information from being a first-generation student, and financial problems. Family support was a common support factor for many students. Students also mentioned various different on-campus supports such as advisors, the Native American Center, and organized study sessions. Most commonly cited, on-campus support in the form of TRiO, helped students succeed in college. Every student in the study valued the support they received from the learning strategies class or the TRiO program.

Discussion

Because students came from diverse backgrounds, students in the study encountered different barriers based on their journey to college. For example, non-traditional students experienced difficulties foregoing full-time employment and finding affordable childcare. Some of the more traditional students, for instance, Jewel, struggled to find her way around campus and find community. Students' barriers varied based on finances, academic preparation, or not having family familiar with the college process. Common barriers cited in the study

were lack of academic preparation, family problems, challenges lack of information from being a first-generation student, and financial problems.

Despite differences between students' stories, common supports positively affected students in this study. First, rural students, especially students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education such as minority, first-generation, and students from low-income families, shared the importance of on-campus support as a support factor. On-campus support included services such as relevant guidance from advisors, transition classes to help adapt to the college setting, information about financial aid and scholarships, and programs such as book or laptop loans. Every student in the study valued the support they received from the transition class or the TRiO program. Students specifically mentioned TRiO's academic advising, transition class, academic tutoring, book loans, and financial information as essential support factors in their college journey. In a political climate of cutting resources, policy makers and educators need to recognize the value of on-campus support, like TRiO, in helping underrepresented students to complete college.

Second, rural students rely on family support to assist them in their journey to college. Previous studies have referenced the importance of parental expectations and support (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Schultz, 2004; Yan, 2002). Research has proven that students are more apt to apply and attend college when family supports their decision, parental support and expectations for college improve chances of college access and completion for rural youth (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). In addition, students felt that their family was their biggest ally in completing their degree but students also wanted to complete their degree to give back to their family (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Rural students in this study repeatedly highlighted the importance of family in accessing college. Family included aunts, uncles, grandparents, in-laws, and children. This study supported previous studies of American Indian students, stating that family was one of the most important support factors (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

Third, students in this study had been taught resiliency and exhibited characteristics of self-motivation. Students were self-motivated, or had confidence that they could overcome barriers to complete college. Self-determination theory is a motivation theory that looks at how students' motivations affect their learning experience and

achievement (Griffin, 2006). This confidence to manage difficult situations develops resiliency that leads to an increased likelihood of academic success (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001). Students in this study were taught about the power of resiliency and exhibited confidence, which has been proven to be a persistence factor (Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, Nitzarim, 2013).

There were several limitations in this study. There was a narrow scope for this study based on studying the experience of rural students from one 4-year institution in the West. Additionally, rural students created digital stories through a class-based experience. Other rural students may have qualified for the study but all digital stories came from a class where the instructor agreed to use digital stories as part of the course of study. Students in this class had support through the transition class and TRiO. Students without this type of support may have had different experiences transitioning to college. There are implications from this study that can benefit a larger audience, but based on the selection of participants and data, generalizing data for a larger rural population is limited. The study was limited to the region and does not have a national or international scope.

Because students in this study were rural but often also considered first-generation, non-traditional students, minority students, and low SES, finding the impact of being from a rural community was difficult. Students have various inputs that affect their college going experience (Astin, 1993). Factors beyond their rurality influence their identity and journey to college. As college-going populations continue to diversify, research and practice needs to address a larger spectrum of students (Renn & Reason, 2013). Isolating rural, urban, minority, the LGBTQ community, women, or men as identifying factors is complicated in our current research environment. Students have many inputs that affect their experience attending college. Future researchers have to negotiate students' complex identities in determining how to measure and define their studies.

Implications

Students in this study were largely affected by their participation in TRiO. Because of their association with TRiO, students had tutoring services, book and technology loans, taught about resiliency, and were introduced to resources on campus. Future research needs to be done on rural,

low-income students who have not been introduced to these resources. This same study could be replicated in a community or tribal college setting. Students in a community or tribal college may have different challenges and support structures than students who choose to attend a flagship university. Future researchers would have an interesting study conducting digital stories in a 2-year college setting.

The link between students' experience in high school and their transition in college also needs further study. Rural students could benefit from having more information about how to access resources, financial aid, and how to find community on campus. Perspectives from rural students, teachers, administrators, and higher education professionals could help in creating smoother transitions and better-prepared students. Rural students could benefit from higher education professionals' collaboration and communication with K-12 professionals to offer students a clearer pathway to college. Administrators in preschool organizations, state agencies, federal agencies, public and private K-12 systems, community colleges, and traditional 4-year colleges all matter in the pathway to P-16. Helping students negotiate the complex systems from high school to college is important for students to receive needed information about how college works, financial aid, resources on campus,

and how to find community on campus. By communicating and collaborating, stakeholders and practitioners can work together to advocate for students' needs (Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003).

University administrators and student affairs professionals need to increase support to families. With the increase of adult learners and non-traditional students and minority populations (Hussar & Bailey, 2009), family support is a common theme for students in this study. For example, offering childcare for student parents for little or no cost allows students with families to participate in postsecondary education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Other family supports include ways for families to participate in the college journey (HeavyRunner & Decelles, 2002). Examples include ways for entire families to participate in events on campus, attend college athletic events, welcoming dinners, or potlucks. Family support may include parents but needs to be more inclusive of other support networks. Recommendations include working with families to familiarize formal/informal resources, flexibility in working with students who may have community or family issues, embedding the community into programs so that the community is integrated into the college setting, and affirming cultural, racial, and linguistic traditions (HeavyRunner & Decelles, 2002).

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