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Research Article

“I Just Kind of Felt like Country Come to Town:” College Student Experiences for Rural Students at one Flagship University

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Dena Kniess

Rural undergraduate students at flagship universities in the United States are typically outnumbered by their urban and suburban peers. Students from rural demographic backgrounds bring different forms of social and cultural capital to higher education with them. This phenomenological study at a flagship university in the Deep South region of the United States examines their experiences through the lens of Constructed Environment Perspectives to assess how rural students evaluate their sense of fit at an institution of higher education. Rural students in this study noted that they began their first year of postsecondary education with a smaller social network than their nonrural peers. When necessary, rural students adapted their social and cultural capital to experience a better sense of fit by connecting with nonrural students in communal settings or by changing symbols of their cultural and social capital. Participants in this study found the residence halls to be a space that was particularly helpful in their adjustment to university life.

Rural people in the United States are a diverse and capable group who experience unique barriers to higher education, such as limited internet connectivity (Brown & Schafft, 2018; Byun et al., 2015; Grant & Roberts, 2022; Moody, 2021). While rural individuals who are not college-educated lead rich and meaningful lives, rural communities need college-educated individuals to function bureaucratically and economically (Cataldi et al., 2018; Giani et al., 2020; Hansford et al., 2021). Historically, a greater share of adults in the United States has completed a bachelor's degree in urban and suburban areas compared to rural areas. However, the bachelor's degree attainment gap is shrinking (Wells et al., 2019). Despite the need, rural youth are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree program, are less likely to enroll in a selective institution, and are less likely to have access to high school courses that result in college credit (Byun et al., 2012; Grant, 2022; Johnson et al., 2021; Wells et al., 2019). Rural students' sense of belonging at higher education institutions could be a reason for this underrepresentation.

Little is known about the rural student experience at selective, flagship, and land grant universities as the quantity and quality of rural education studies grow (Roberts & Grant, 2021; Sowl & Crain, 2021). While a few studies exist that explored several aspects of the rural student experience in higher education, more study is needed to understand better how rural students experience higher education (Goldman, 2019; Heinisch, 2020;

Nelson, 2019; Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018). This study aims to understand how traditional-aged rural students experience a sense of fit at an R1 university. Specifically, this study assesses rural students' sense of fit in relation to social and cultural capital through the lens of Constructed Environment Perspectives (CEP; Strange & Banning, 2015). This study provides further context for the rural student experience at a flagship university that is both a selective and a land grant institution.

Literature Review

Most rural education studies that deal with rural youth in the context of colleges and universities deal with postsecondary aspirations (Howley, 2006; Hu, 2003; Irvin et al., 2016) and access (Byun et al., 2012; Howley et al., 2014; Hudacs, 2020; Koricich et al., 2018; Pierson & Hanson, 2015; Wells et al., 2019). Goldman (2019) found that rural students who attended a flagship university felt underprepared for the rigor of university-level courses. Moreover, these rural students felt burdened by their perceived necessity to have a job and provide emotional support to their families back home. In contrast, they felt their nonrural peers did not have such an obligation. Similarly, Grant and Roberts (2022) found that rural youth were particularly troubled by their lack of access to AP courses, which the participants believed led them to be under-prepared for postsecondary courses. Additionally, quantitative studies have found similar patterns of AP access for rural students across the United States (Byun et al., 2012; Education

Commission of the States, 2017; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Klopfenstein, 2004; Zarate & Pachon, 2006).

Dual enrollment is the second most frequently used method, behind AP, that American high school students use to acquire college credit; about a third of students in the United States take dual enrollment courses for college credit (Shiviji & Wilson, 2019). Dual enrollment has been heralded as the solution to college preparation for students without AP course access (Pretlow & Wathington, 2013). One study of students in the state of Washington found that rural students chose to participate in dual enrollment for academic and financial reasons (Johnson & Brophy, 2006). Indeed, rural students tend to use dual enrollment more frequently than nonrural (Pretlow & Wathington, 2013). Because of geographic constraints, rural students are more likely than nonrural to take dual enrollment courses virtually (Shiviji & Wilson, 2019). In some states, rural schools are less motivated to enroll students in dual enrollment. Rural schools may not be quick to offer dual enrollment because it could infringe on a vital funding mechanism: per-pupil funding. If a student takes dual enrollment courses and the school district does not get credit for the seat time, it incurs a financial loss, which is true in at least one state (Howley et al., 2013). Dual enrollment and early college programming can effectively provide college credit to rural students. However, state policies may hinder low-income students' access to these programs. For example, in Alabama, students must pay tuition for their dual enrollment courses, while in Georgia, the state funds up to 30 hours for secondary students (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.).

As a result of their limited access to advanced courses, rural students reported that they needed more preparation for collegiate coursework and struggled with time management skills (Goldman, 2019; Heinisch, 2020). To bridge the gap in their knowledge of organizing themselves for academic study, rural students in Heinisch's (2020) study leaned on the experience of their nonrural roommates. Therefore, nonrural roommates might be a source of bridging capital that rural students can access to achieve postsecondary success. Interestingly, Nelson (2016) found that nonrural students employ community capital for academic success by contacting friends from high school. Meanwhile, rural students tended not to have access to such individuals. According to Nelson (2016), rural students depend on their rural community capital while enrolled in a college or university by

visiting and staying in contact with peers in the home community. This finding should be no surprise, as Stone (2018) found that rural students draw comfort and motivation from family members. Indeed, parental expectation is the most potent predictor of rural postsecondary success (Byun et al., 2012; Griffin et al., 2011; Israel et al., 2001).

Residence Halls and Belonging

One area of research that scholars have not explored explicitly is the effect of residence halls on student success and sense of belonging for rural students. There is, however, a plethora of scholarship in this area for undergraduate students from all geographic backgrounds (Arboleda et al., 2003; Boettcher et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Samura, 2016). It appears that the residence hall can tremendously impact students, especially in their first year (Brown et al., 2019). Residence halls that are part of a living-learning community, where students engage in similar programming throughout the school year, can improve student satisfaction with their residence hall experience and can lead to better learning outcomes for students (Arboleda et al., 2003; Johnson & Romanoff, 1999; Ribera et al., 2017). In fact, residence hall placement in learning communities can narrow achievement gaps between minoritized and non-minoritized students (Boettcher et al., 2019; Ribera et al., 2017; Samura, 2016). Since residence halls are critical in the development of undergraduate students (Arboleda et al., 2003), their academic success (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999; Ribera et al., 2017), and their sense of belonging (Brown et al., 2019), it seems likely that residence halls may also affect rural students we well.

Undergraduate Major

Undergraduate major is one area of the expanding rural student experience literature (Estes et al., 2016; Tieken, 2016). Using an alumni database from the University of Arkansas, Estes and colleagues (2016) found that rural youth who returned to a rural community after graduation were significantly more likely to complete a degree in agriculture and food science compared to any other major. Engineering was the second most chosen career path. They found that only 4.3% of rural youth returned to their rural community within seven years of graduation. This study compliments a finding from Tieken (2016) who found that rural students are encouraged to take on degree programs that are no more than four years and can be easily leveraged into

a job opportunity upon graduation, such as nursing or engineering. An earlier study by Sherman and Sage (2011) similarly found patterns of community-based advice that encouraged rural students to leave their hometown for practical four-year degrees that would not lead them back home.

This review of the literature finds several areas that warrant further exploration. Our study is a response to a need to further understand how rural students socialize in the collegiate environment, and how these experiences differ from those of their nonrural peers.

Theoretical Framework

Four concepts underpin the theoretical framework of this study: cultural capital, social capital, Strange and Banning’s (2015) constructed environmental perspectives (CEP), and Bourdieu’s (1986) social field theory. The center of Figure 1 shows the need-press interaction in CEP between the undergraduate student and the higher education institution. Here, the student assesses their sense of fit between the student’s needs and the institution’s environment, which is represented by the press. Strange and Banning (2015) define the press as the environment as it is perceived by those who exist in the site under consideration. Students need to positively perceive their environment in an institution of higher education to grow, which is the *need* half of the need-

press interaction. Press occurs in what Bourdieu (1986) called the social field. For Bourdieu, the social field is the space in which individuals compete using various forms of capital, such as social, cultural, and economic. In all areas where individuals interact with others who are part of the institution, the press of the institution benefits those who conform to the symbols of cultural and social capital that are dominant in the social field.

Social and cultural capital comprises the need segment on the individual side of CEP. Students come to higher education from the context of their families and home communities. These dispositions are internalized in the student through what Pierre Bourdieu (1986) called *habitus*. Individuals internalize their habitus as social and cultural capital. When individuals come to a new environment that is different than the one they are accustomed to, they will compare their social and cultural capital to that of the individuals around them and the environment that they make up. The social climate and campus culture make up the press on the institution side. The social climate is the collective social capital of the institution, which is made up of the various relationships between faculty, staff, students, and other individuals who live, work, visit, and influence the institution regularly. Campus culture is the perception of an institution in its reflection of the “assumptions, beliefs, and values” that individuals construct to interpret the people and events in the

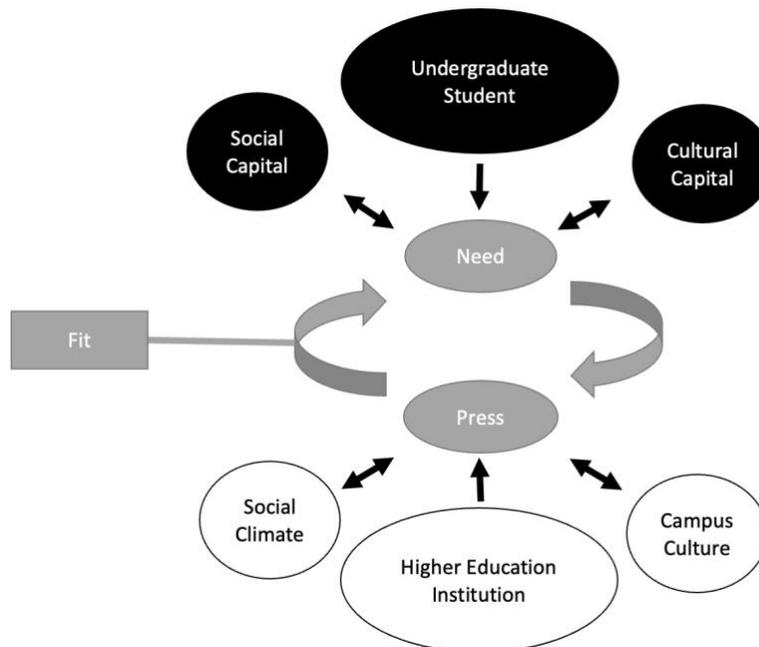


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

setting (Strange & Banning, 2015; p. 126). In this study, we assumed that in the need-press interaction of CEP, individuals would compare their social capital to the social climate of the institution and their cultural capital to the campus culture. This study was analyzed using CEP to understand how traditional-aged rural students made this comparison and how it impacted their sense of fit at an R1 university.

Method

This qualitative study of rural student experiences can best be described as a phenomenological analysis. Phenomenological analyses are studies of human experiences of some shared phenomenon (Bevan, 2014). Phenomenology, as a method, is based on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, who rejected the concept of an objective external world; Husserl believed that the world can only be observed through consciousness and the five senses, therefore it cannot be observed objectively (Groenewald, 2004). However, we can learn about phenomena by eliciting the experiences of individuals who experience it. The phenomenon being explored in this study is attendance at one R1 university in the Southeastern US. To understand the central phenomenon, the first author gathered demographic data and conducted phenomenological interviews (Bevan, 2014; Roulston, 2010) with 18 participants.

The data segment presented in this study is a unique analysis of a larger study of rural student experiences at a flagship university. The overarching study sought to understand barriers to entry for rural students in higher education (Grant, 2022), how rural students come to choose an R1 university (Grant & Roberts, 2022) and how rural students come to find a sense of fit at an R1 university (the current work). Because of the high volume of qualitative data, each of these three sections needed to be broken up into three distinctive, but related, studies. The first author recruited and gathered data from 18 students of rural origin who were all attending one university in the Southeastern United States: State University (SU; pseudonym).

This study is driven by two research questions:

1. How do rural students describe their sense of fit at an R1 Doctoral University in the Southeastern United States?
2. What changes do rural students undergo because of the need-press interaction of Constructed Environmental Perspectives?

Research Site

State University (SU; pseudonym) is a selective, land grant, and flagship institution. SU is selective, because it does not admit every potential student who is academically qualified to attend. As a land grant institution, SU received funding from the Land-Grant College Act of 1862 to expand its agricultural education offerings (Loss, 2012). SU claims flagship status as it carries the name of the state in which it was founded, and it was the first public institution founded in the state in which it is located (Myers, 2016). Considering its status as both a land grant and flagship institution, SU is driven by its mission to serve all people in the state in which it is located, particularly rural citizens. Despite serving as both the flagship university of its state and a land grant institution, SU disproportionately serves both urban and suburban students. In the Fall 2014 semester, SU recruited a freshman class that was overwhelmingly suburban (NCES, n.d.a). In fact, in the Fall 2014 semester, the most recent year for which we were able to attain data on students' high school enrollment, the freshman class was 57% suburban, while the entire high school Class of 2014 was only 47% suburban. Only 18% of the freshman class of 2014 attended a rural school, compared to 26% of the entire state's high school Class of 2014. Schools categorized as "Town" were even more underrepresented; only 6% made up the freshman class, while 12% graduated from high school in 2014. SU is also a primarily White undergraduate institution. In the Fall 2019 semester, White students made up 69% of the undergraduate population, followed by 11% Asian, 7% Black, 7% Latinx, 4% two or more races, 1% unknown, and 2% non-resident alien (NCES, n.d.b).

Participants

Participants in this study attended high schools that were categorized by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; n.d.a) as rural. Specifically, students in this study attended high schools that were coded as Rural: Remote, Rural: Distant, Rural: Fringe, or Town: Remote, similar to other studies of rural college students (Byun et al., 2012; Stone, 2018). Though Manly and colleagues (2020) believe that a new coding schema is needed to categorize rural research in the postsecondary realm, Thier and colleagues (2021) found that the NCES definition is the most used definition in rural education research, when a definition is given. To

recruit participants, the first author visited several undergraduate general education classrooms, including introductory English and History courses. Additionally, they used flyers in commonly trafficked areas of campus to advertise the study, though they offered no incentive for participants' participation. A total of 19 participants were recruited, but one was disqualified from the study because they were uncomfortable sharing information about their personal lives, and the interview concluded after 15 minutes. Of the 18 final participants, 13 identified as White (72%), three identified as Latino (17%), and two identified as African American (11%). This sample was very similar to the population of SU, though it is impossible to cross-reference attendance data with geographic origin in any of the current postsecondary databases. During the recruitment process, the first author sought out additional minoritized students our study after gathering our initial sample of 19 by e-mailing the Black Student Union and the multicultural Greek council, but their efforts resulted in no new participants.

A total of nine participants identified as female and nine identified as male. The demographic sheet

chose to identify as anything other than male or female. Participants ranged in ages from 18 to 23. Potential participants were recruited based on their self-identity for a study of "rural students" to improve the study's credibility. Further, the first author created a second layer of checking for rurality by requesting the name of the high school they attended and comparing it with the NCES code assigned to it.

Data Collection

Each participant was interviewed one time. The 18 one-on-one semi-structured phenomenological interviews took place at SU's student center. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, with an average of about 60 minutes. To pace the interview, the first author used an interview guide. As with all phenomenological interviews, the interview guide was broad, open-ended, and "used with caution and flexibility" (Bevan, 2014, p. 138). In each interview, the first author followed these five prompts: "Tell me about your life at home; how do you think being rural affected your decision to go to college; how did coming from a rural area affect your experience at this university; have you ever felt out-of-place; what will you do after you graduate?" The first author then asked many follow-up questions based on the participants' responses to these prompts, such as "tell me more about that" or "and then what happened?" The first author attempted to continue to probe the participant until they felt they had understood the participant's experience. The interviews were recorded using the iPhone voice recorder application. The first author transcribed the audio of these interviews using Inqscribe for Mac. They then loaded the transcripts to ATLAS.ti for Mac: a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with the word-for-word transcription of interviews with the participants. The bulk of the analysis took place in ATLAS.ti for Mac. After the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti along with demographic information sheets. The transcriptions were then divided into document groups, such as "Parental Education High" to group second-generation college students. Document groups are an additional way to segment data and serve as attribute codes (Saldaña, 2015). These document groups were created as easy ways to compare students' experiences based on their demographic data. After reading through each

Table 1

Participant Race and Major

Pseudonym	Family Income ¹	Family Education ²
Roger Bird	High	Low
Lauren Brown	High	Low
Faith Buford	Middle	High
Magnolia Carter	Low	Low
Abigail Chase	Middle	Middle
Elaine Richardson	High	High
Rachel Daughtery	Low	Middle
Margaery Eubanks	Middle	High
Ben Gates	Middle	Middle
Ernest Godwin	Middle	Low
Michael Lopez	Middle	High
Adeline Moates	Middle	High
Jaime Perez	Middle	Low
Roland Poole	Low	Low
Lawrence Ramsey	Middle	Low
Thomas Rowan	Middle	High
Audre Sutherland	Low	Low
Julia Taylor	High	High

Note. ¹ Income: High = > \$94,999, Middle = \$94,999 to \$25,000. ² Low = < \$25,000.

Family Education: High = at least one parent with degree beyond bachelors, Middle = at least one parent with bachelor's, Low = no parent with bachelor's

transcript at least once, we made holistic inductive codes, which captured the essence of each data segment as we read the transcript. For example, when we read about a student describing something about their college experience that made them feel different than their urban or suburban peers, we coded the transcript with the term “difference.” Establishing document groups and holistic codes allowed us to compare how participants perceived differences between themselves and their peers according to factors like parental education and income. We also created emotion codes, which are used to assess the emotion the participant is experiencing within the interview (Saldaña, 2015). These codes included items such as “out of place” and “unprepared.” As we reviewed these codes and the document groups, we constructed patterns we perceived within the data. We organized these patterns into themes, which are presented in the findings section.

Limitations

As discussed by Manly and colleagues (2020), the coding schema used to determine which youth are considered rural are imperfect at best. One major flaw in the NCES definition is that it describes the geography of the school rather than the student. If a student lived in a remote county with a centrally located high school coded as “City” or “Suburban,” would that student still be considered rural if that is how they identify? These questions are beyond the scope of this study, but they are essential in understanding its parameters. All the participants in this study attended a school coded as a “Rural” or “Town: Remote” school (NCES, n.d.a). Race was a limitation of this study. Of the 18 participants, 13 identified as White, three as Latino, and two as Black. Though the number of minoritized students in this study is low, it is possible that they make up a proportional amount of rural minoritized students at SU. However, they do not make up the proportion of minoritized rural people in the state where SU is located. None of the participants identified with two or more races, as Asian, or as Native American. Neither the two African American nor the three Latino students explicitly discussed their race in the interviews, beyond Magnolia’s description of her town. If we had been able to sample more minoritized students, we believe we would have found more prominent patterns among these students.

Findings

After engaging in three rounds of coding, we segmented data according to three major themes we perceived across the data. To come to these themes, we went through three stages of coding to document situations where rural students felt a sense of fit at SU (or lack thereof). When assessing these data segments, we noticed that symbols of social and cultural capital (accent, clothing, and academic preparation) caused discomfort among participants. To deal with these uncomfortable instances, some participants changed these symbols to find a better sense of fit. We noticed that the residence hall was the most effective space for many of these participants to bridge their symbols of cultural and social capital with their nonrural peers. Therefore, our analysis yielded three themes:

1. Rural students’ cultural and social capital conflict led to discomfort
2. Rural students purposefully adapted their cultural and social capital to conform to the institutional press
3. Residence halls eased the institutional press by creating cultural and social bridging opportunities for rural students

Theme 1: Rural Students’ Cultural and Social Capital Conflict Led to Discomfort

Participants in this study perceived that their cultural and social capital conflicted with SU’s social climate and campus culture. Quite often, the participants in this study perceived these differences when interacting with students from suburban and urban high schools. Throughout the interviews, the participants in this study ruminated on their interactions with individuals who had grown up in distinctly different environments that prepared them for social and academic life at SU. Participant Abigail shared, “Everyone here is from [Metropolis].” It is easy to understand why Abigail felt like everyone was from a nearby urban area, as rural students are significantly underrepresented at SU (57% vs. 18%). Often, participants in this study claimed that they were among only a few to come to SU from their high schools, such as Adeline and Magnolia. Elaine shared her feelings in the first few weeks of being on campus, “Yeah, I would definitely say that I felt [out of place] a couple of times my freshman year because even though I did know people who went here, I still hadn’t made a ton of friends.”

Students from rural areas in this study noted cultural differences in how others speak, the food others consume, and the clothes others wear. The participants recognized these symbols of cultural capital as things that separated them from their peers, who were the same age as they were and from the same state as they were. For example, after spending a year at a local college, Lawrence transferred to SU, “I know one thing that kind of strikes me still is, and I know it sounds really cliché, but accents... It's a different sounding way of talking up here.” Both Rachel and Lawrence noted that their peers who have lived in the same state as they had all their life had what they perceived to be a neutral accent, while Rachel and Lawrence noted that they have a deeper Southern drawl. When she arrived, Rachel immediately noticed the difference in her accent: “[My accent] was very apparent, and I honestly think being in that honors environment made it more apparent.” Bourdieu (1986) noted that accent allows individuals to draw boundaries between others. Rachel elaborated that the thick Southern accent is dominant and respected in small communities. In an academic environment, where speaking precisely and grammatically correctly are valued, an accent may carry the unfair perception that the individual is not formally educated, as Rachel perceived. It was particularly striking for Ernest, who stated that he was the only student he knew of who had an accent like his.

Similarly, Audrey grew up in a community where individuals did not use curse words or talk about “crude” subjects like sex. When she started meeting others, she felt that she did not belong: [I felt] affronted a bit. It wasn't a feeling of personal insult, but I didn't really like [cursing]. I definitely didn't feel like I fit in with most people here the first year or two. Gradually, that just started to become something I thought less and less about. I wasn't judgmental... For all the talk of people trying not to offend others... there was a lot of stuff they were doing that offended someone like me coming from a conservative background.

Though Audrey was not acting upon it, it can be surmised that she was being judgmental about the actions of her peers. Audrey understood the world through the lens of the social expectations she learned in her hometown, just like the other participants mentioned in this study. Like accent, the use of language is an indicator of cultural capital.

Symbols of social capital were not as obvious to observe as symbols of cultural capital. Social capital

has many definitions, all of which converge into the idea that social networks have a value that privilege those with access (Bourdieu, 1986; Bye et al., 2020; Fearon et al., 2018; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). In this analysis, we include academic preparation as an aspect of social capital because academic preparation tends to be negatively correlated with rural secondary schools (Grant, 2022; Byun et al., 2012, 2015) though rural students in higher education are often taking the most rigorous coursework that is provided for them, it is not as rigorous as the coursework their nonrural peers complete. Within the network of their hometowns, the participants of this study were unaware that the curriculum they were offered in their high school was not as rigorous as that of their urban and suburban peers. Participants in this study reported that they were surprised to feel average in their college courses. Faith shared her experience in an International Affairs class:

I remember we were having a discussion about Israel and Palestine... I had never studied that in a classroom setting... I just remember everyone else was having a very informed discussion.

[They] just knew about it... They had been well read [and] well studied.

In Faith's school, rarely reading the textbook and looking over teacher-produced study guides were necessary to be an excellent student. The rigor at SU was much higher than she was expecting. Participant Ernest shared his experience taking courses at SU after spending two years at a small college and earning an associate degree, “[SU] is a school [filled] with very intelligent people. You are immediately placed into a room with a bunch of people who have a lot of opinions... it's at times overwhelming, but... surprising in a good way.” Taking classes at SU pushed Ernest beyond his comfort zone. He was confronted with ideas he had never considered or even heard of before. Ernest noted that his courses at SU were much more rigorous than at his previous institution, which was a local community college. He anticipated a gap but underestimated how different life would be at SU and what his courses would be like:

I knew that it would be different, but I had no idea what I was in store for until I got here. It was even ironic to hear so many people talk about what kind of Southern school this was. I just kind of felt like country come to town.

Ernest was surprised that his classmates considered SU to be a southern school. Ernest perceived that his peers did not talk like him, dress like him, or hold the same opinions as he did. For Ernest, SU was a

completely different world from which he came. He viewed a “Northern” school as one with liberal opinions; he did not expect the institution bearing the name of his state to contain so many individuals who espoused progressive ideas. Combined, these symbols of cultural and social capital made Ernest feel like he had no fit at SU. To find a better sense of fit, Ernest and other participants felt the urge to change one or more of these symbols. These changes are documented in theme 2, which follows this section.

Theme 2: Participants Purposefully Adapted Their Cultural and Social Capital Symbols to Conform to the Institutional Press

In many instances, participants in this study adapted their symbols of cultural and social capital to conform with the institutional press of SU as viewed through the lens of CEP. When confronted with symbols of cultural and social capital that conflicted with their own, some participants adapted their symbols to feel a better sense of fit. Examples of these changes occurred with both cultural and social capital. Clothing was one area where participants in this study changed their symbols of cultural capital. Specifically, Ernest and Abigail responded to the press of SU by changing some aspects of how they dressed. For example, when Ernest was not completing his homeschool curriculum, he worked in his father’s woodshop. After enrolling in SU, he continued to work part-time doing skilled blue-collar labor. Ernest wore his work clothes to class, which he felt erected a barrier between him and his classmates. He changed his look after his first semester:

I did not feel that I belonged. [Now], I normally wear shorts when I can, because before I moved here, I never owned a pair of shorts or sandals; it was boots and jeans every day of my life. It was a necessity doing carpentry, but also was a cultural thing. And so, walking around in September in boots and jeans here [at SU], it makes you stick out a little bit, I guess. I basically felt out of place.

According to Ernest, people in his rural community dress to work in their free time. Ernest’s attitude towards work is why he points out that “it was... a cultural thing.” For Ernest, wearing shorts and sandals means leisure, and he noted that free time should be spent working rather than engaging in leisure activities. Here, clothing acts as a symbol of cultural capital. How one spends their leisure time is an indicator of class, and dress is one way to

distinguish from the lower class (Crane, 2000; Lee et al., 2014). Wearing clothing that functions differently than one’s peers indicates a group boundary.

Abigail also dressed distinctively when she arrived at SU. In high school, she did everything she could to feel that she belonged; this feeling was most apparent in her church. Abigail began feeling distant from religion at an early age but dedicated herself to church activities. She went out of her way to find a sense of fit in her religious community. She said, “I’m not religious, but I desperately wanted to be so that I could just kind of blend in.” She began tweeting bible verses in middle school because she saw her peers doing likewise. She wore clothing to reflect her belonging in the community, “The things that I wore, I wouldn’t wear them again. It was definitely very ‘church-y,’ because fashion back home is like - very Southern.”

After moving to SU and joining a sorority, she changed her fashion choices and leisure activities. Specifically, Abigail mentions wearing a choker daily, which would have appeared provocative in her home community. To find a better sense of fit in her sorority, she adapted what she wore to look more like her sorority sisters. She also changed how she acted when confronted with taboo things in her home community. When Abigail was in high school, she described herself as a “good girl” and said she judged others for having sex and drinking alcohol on the weekends. While living in her hometown, she internalized many prominent beliefs in her rural hometown that abided by evangelical Christian morality. She adjusted her social and cultural capital as she experienced the “press” of SU’s social climate and campus culture. She changed her cultural capital by changing how she dressed and her social capital by no longer shaming girls for their sexual activities and drinking regularly. Abigail did not lose her religion, but she did lose some of the symbols of the Christianity of her home church.

Participants in this study also changed symbols of their social capital to find a better sense of fit at SU. In two examples from the dataset, participants changed their career plans. In the first case, Rachel changed her post-graduate plans because comparing herself to her peers affected her confidence. Rachel is a pre-medical honors student who was valedictorian of her high school class in what she describes as a “very” rural community:

I kind of decided that I wanted to do a gap year [after finishing my undergraduate degree in] my second year here. And I think that’s a lot from feeling like I wasn’t measuring up to my

classmates... And just felt like I wouldn't have gotten into medical school... Now I 100% feel that I would have gotten into med school if I had applied this cycle.

When Rachel compared herself to her peers in her hometown, she was the best. For the first time in her life, she was no longer the best regarding grades. This cognitive dissonance led Rachel to set her goals lower to avoid failure. Rachel changed her standing amongst her cohort of pre-medical students from being “one of them” to be a step behind them. She perceived that her decision to not apply to medical school in her final year at SU set her a year behind her peers, accumulating extra student loan debt, and delaying the beginning of her career. Thankfully, Rachel only lost a year, but the press of the social climate led her to underestimate herself and her abilities.

Similarly, Faith changed her major from International Affairs to Journalism. In the previous theme, we described her feeling of inadequacy in class with her peers. When reflecting on her first year at SU, she said, “the gap between where I was [at SU] and where I had been in high school, at least the way I perceived it, seemed pretty substantial.” Ultimately, this perception of a gap between Faith and her classmates led her to generate interest in journalism. “Writing has always been a strong suit, and the idea of being able to submit something and not think about it again appealed to me...[if the writing is bad] I can just delete it and never think about it again.” Faith surmised that she was better off being in a field where she was judged by her writing rather than in an in-person comparison between her and her classmates. Faith is not entirely settled on becoming a journalist as a profession, but she believes that the connections she made in courses where the professors judged her based on her writing will set her up for future success. Like Rachel, she felt she did not compare well with her peers in her chosen field because of her academic preparation. Faith felt she could outwork other students outside of the classroom by writing, which she felt naturally talented.

Evaluating the changes the participants made to find a better sense of fit at SU is difficult because it is impossible for us, as researchers, to separate our biases from the analysis. Ernest changed how he dressed to be more physically comfortable during the humid Southern summer and more emotionally comfortable by looking like his peers. On the one hand, it is objectively good that Ernest is more comfortable in his environment. On the other, a sense

of Ernest's identity changed when he chose to change how he dressed. He even said “it's a cultural thing” to wear jeans and work boots in his free time.

Meanwhile, it seems that Abigail has a very malleable sense of self. She admits that her goals with her fashion choices are to align with those around her. Because her goal has always been conformity, she made the change quickly and, according to her, painlessly. She reflected that she thinks she is now a less judgmental person as she sees how people can change based on their environment. The most important finding from this theme is that the press of SU motivated these students to change the cultural symbols rooted in their identity as rural people, for better or worse. Change is a necessary aspect of education, and it is interesting to see how the participants in this study externalized change through various symbols of cultural and social capital.

Theme 3: Residence Halls Eased the Press by Creating Cultural Bridging Opportunities for Rural Students

In the previous two themes, we showed that the press of SU led the participants in this study to feel discomfort and how this discomfort led to changes in cultural and social capital symbols. These changes were made so that the participants' cultural and social capital symbols could be better aligned with SU's campus culture and social climate. We also found that the residence halls at SU provided a unique environment for participants to change their symbols of capital or become more comfortable with the differences the participants observed in themselves compared to their peers. One example comes from Faith, who had difficulty finding a sense of fit on campus.

Faith felt that the social climate established by suburban students erected barriers to selective student groups at SU. In her first semester, Faith claimed that she attended around 50 interest meetings for clubs at SU. She chose 10 of those 50 groups she found interesting. She needed to go through an application and interview process for all these clubs. Faith wanted to be a civil rights lawyer and work for the Southern Poverty Law Center, so she felt that organizations like student government, mock trial, and moot court would be good places for someone with her career aspirations to go. Of these 10 groups, she was accepted to none and was told by the student leadership of Model UN that “you did fine; it was just a year where we know a lot of people.” Faith said

that the student leader referred to incoming first-year students who attended the same high school as the leaders. Faith had never interacted with any of these individuals because Model UN was not an organization in her high school. Here, the social capital that Faith brought to SU prevented her from gaining a competitive spot in a campus organization for which members of the group admitted she was qualified to join. After not being selected for several student organizations in her first year, Faith made most of her social connections in the residence hall. Faith may have had fewer opportunities to interact with peers without the residence hall. She took a position at the student newspaper at the suggestion of a hallmate, where she eventually served on the editorial board. The residence hall served as a means to ease the press of the social climate on campus, which resulted in Faith discovering a sense of fit at SU.

Julia shared a similar sentiment and noted that the meal plan gave her more opportunities to make friends in her first year on campus, "I really liked the social aspect of being in the dorms. And everyone wanted to make friends, so it was really easy." Students in residence halls in their first year who were on a meal plan had more social opportunities than those who did not, like Lawrence and Ernest as they transferred to SU from a two-year college. More social opportunities translated into a higher sense of fit. Participants Lauren, Rachel, and Margaery noted that their social networks expanded because they were roommates with students from suburban areas. Each participant noted an extended group of friends with social connections all over campus. Rachel benefitted from being around students who had completed advanced science curriculum, as many of her friends were also planning to attend medical school:

Two of my closest friends lived in the same dorm as me. They were right next to me in chemistry class. We were spending so much time together; we go to [Chemistry class and] recogniz[ed] each other and kind of just fell in.

Before living near each other and attending the same classes, Rachel and her peers from suburban areas had little reason to interact. Because of their proximity, they had additional opportunities to interact. Rachel reflected that being around the same people translated to higher grades, as her friends were able to make up for what she believed were her curricular deficiencies. Though Rachel reported that the curricular offerings in her high school held her back academically when she arrived at SU, the

additional social capital she gained with students in her residence hall led to a better sense of fit within her academic program.

Lauren experienced the greatest shift in her social network, however. In her first year, she met five women from a suburban area, and she describes them as her best friends:

My main girlfriends... have a ton of friends from high school that go here too. And like I have a big extended friend group from them too. So, we hang out with all of them...we'll watch the [NFL] games together on Sunday. We'll just hang out on the weekends.

As a direct result of being friends with her roommates from a suburban area, Lauren has become part of the more extensive social network. She describes herself as part of "a big extended friend group," to which she gained admittance because of her relationship with her roommates.

This extension of Lauren's social network is an example of bridging capital, as Putnam (2000) described. Putnam (2000) uses the terms "bridging and bonding" to describe the different utilities of social capital. Bonding social capital exists between groups and individuals that are very similar. Ethnically homogeneous neighborhood associations in suburban areas are excellent examples of this form of social capital. Bridging social capital connects individuals that are diverse but share a common interest. The residence hall serves to bridge social capital between rural and nonrural students.

Living in the residence hall also afforded participants more opportunities to engage in campus activities. Ben and Adeline shared that they attended more events and interacted with more of their peers on campus because they lived in the residence hall. Adeline stated:

From my hall I met a lot of cool people...Going to a lot of different functions that year, too, that gave me the opportunity to meet other people as well, because I was always going to something.

Meeting people in the residence hall expanded Adeline's social network and encouraged her to interact with students at activities beyond where she lived. The residence hall appeared to provide Adeline with the momentum necessary to expand her social network even more, which resulted in a greater sense of fit.

Through coincidence, Ben's roommate had friends at a nearby regional university that were suitemates with two of Ben's friends from high school. There were also fellow students in his residence hall that worked with him at a summer

camp for several years. Ben lived at the intersection of several communities in his residence hall and felt very comfortable on the SU campus as a result. This comfort comes despite Ben's discomfort with increased foot traffic on campus and his need to rely on public transportation, "There weren't any buses or public transportation in [Kelly County; pseudonym], so I... was like oh, I'll just walk." In this example, we see that the social capital Ben brought to SU superseded any discomfort he felt with the physical environment of SU.

SU's requirement that students live on campus during their first-year aids rural students in their transition to college and expands their social network. Students from suburban areas come to SU with many peers, while rural students in this study did not, except in rare circumstances or coincidences in Ben's case. Participants Lauren, Rachel, and Margaery could access these social networks because of their placement in the residence hall. Though there are positive effects, the shared living space convinced Lawrence not to attend his first year. As a result, he reported having a harder time finding his fit at SU. Since participants spend most of their time in residence halls, it makes sense that they would have an easier time adjusting to SU's social climate and campus culture, ultimately finding a better sense of fit at SU.

Discussion

Our study revealed how symbols of cultural and social capital affect rural students' sense of fit at a flagship university. As with all qualitative inquiries, we sought transferability over generalizability (Brennan, 1992; Tierney & Clemens, 2011); we do not believe that the results of this study will be directly applicable to every flagship university in the United States, but we do believe that studies of other flagship universities would yield comparable findings. Moreover, we believe similar studies conducted in the United States would find complementary findings related to the geographic origin of rural students. In this study, differences in geography impacted students regardless of other sociological factors, like gender and socioeconomic status. Rural geography was an equalizer, which impacted the participants' experiences in this study. Of course, we are strong proponents of viewing identity from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989). Geographic locale will likely affect individuals of varying identities differently. Qualitative methods, therefore, are an excellent way

to understand how geographic locale interacts with many identities (Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Means et al., 2016; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004).

In this study, we assessed our participants' experiences using the lens of CFP (Strange & Banning, 2015). Our analysis found a two-step process of adjusting to the environmental press to find a better sense of fit at SU. For example, Faith was uncomfortable with the "church-y...very-Southern" clothes she wore in high school once she came to SU. Like many of her peers, she took the opportunity to refresh her clothing style in college (McDermott & Pettijohn II, 2011). Unlike her peers, Faith tied these changes to a cultural shift from her rural environment. When she was in her rural community, conservative dress and behavior were consistent with its environmental press. At SU, the environmental press was the opposite, which she described as "provocative."

Similarly, Ernest changed the way he dressed to better find a sense of fit. He described his work clothes as "a cultural thing," which he changed shortly after coming to SU. This finding appears to be a unique contribution to the rural education literature, as we could find no other study that found rural students changing their symbols of cultural capital via fashion choices in what is currently known.

We do not claim that undergraduate students from other geographic locales do not experience a period of change because of coming to a college campus. Indeed, CEP provides a framework to consider how all undergraduate students would come to find a sense of fit at an institution (Garcia, 2020; Nicolazzo, 2016). However, the changes we note in this study are related to the participants' rural origin. Rachel, for example, received the most rigorous curriculum that her high school offered and was valedictorian, but she was still far behind her peers academically. Additionally, as we explored in the third theme, Rachel's experience showed how residence halls could be an effective way for student affairs staff at large universities to create bridging opportunities for rural students. This finding, and its corollary, are uniquely applicable to rural students, as rural schools are much less likely to provide students with a college-level curriculum, especially compared to their nonrural peers (Byun et al., 2012; Wells et al., 2019).

Our study found that an informal social order emerged amongst suburban students at SU. Because SU is a flagship institution in a state with a lottery-funded merit-based scholarship program, in-state

students are particularly motivated to attend SU (Brady & Pijanowski, 2007; Menifield, 2012; Rubenstein & Scafidi, 2002). As a result, at least one participant in this study had fewer opportunities than suburban students; Faith told a story in which a student organization rejected her admission because of other applicants who had preferential social capital based on their high school. While we only found this story once in the dataset, we believe it also applies to other campus spaces, like Greek Life.

Implications for Practice

We present this study with some implications for practice in the higher education environment. The first theme of this study states that rural students experienced discomfort because their symbols of social and cultural capital differed from that of their nonrural peers. Both higher education administrators and student affairs staff should engage in the creation of rural student organizations on campus throughout the US. These organizations can create opportunities for bridging capital (Putnam, 2000) where students can build upon the strengths of their rural upbringing rather than abandoning them altogether, as we saw with Abigail. Moreover, by allowing membership by students in all phases of their academic career, including first-year through undergraduate graduation and potentially graduate students, rural students can learn from others who have similar experiences. So, a student like Faith might have created a connection to Model UN that she would not otherwise have. Likewise, Rachel might have avoided adding an additional year to her undergraduate experience to better prepare for medical school, as she may have realized that it is normal to feel less prepared than those at the top of their class.

Housing administrators should continue to push for more living-learning communities that lead to bridging capital for rural students. As we showed in this study, rural students learned from their nonrural peers about opportunities that made their college experience more satisfying and improved their perceptions of career success. For example, Julia easily made friends with peers from nonrural areas by being closer to them in the residence halls. Rachel felt that though she was behind her nonrural peers academically, she could learn more from being around them in informal learning spaces. Finally, Lauren described feeling a sense of fit from joining a friend group that had been formed since her peers

were in high school. Mandating an on-campus living requirement can be a barrier for some students, especially those who cannot afford the housing costs or those intimidated by the decision to live with strangers, as we saw with Lawrence. However, the benefits of expanding interactions of rural and nonrural peers appear to outweigh the detriments. Therefore, we encourage entrepreneurial student affairs administrators to consider unique incentives for traditional-aged rural students to live on-campus in their first year through housing scholarships, unique living-learning credentialing, or promoting partnerships with on-campus student organizations.

Conclusion

There are many avenues for future research in this area. For example, this study could be easily replicated at flagship universities in other regions of the United States. Rural students' sense of fit at institutions of higher education at universities on the West Coast or Northeast would be particularly interesting, as those areas have been noted as "research deserts" in rural education (Thier et al., 2021). It would also be interesting to see how rural students find a sense of fit at regional universities and community colleges, where many rural students attend. We should emphasize that this study used traditional-aged students (18 to 23) as the unit of analysis. There are many rural non-traditional students in higher education institutions, including flagship and land grant universities. Much more research is needed into how rural nontraditional students find a sense of fit as undergraduates at a flagship university. In addition to being from a geographically diverse space, students of nontraditional age are also at a different life stage than their peers and are likely to feel a much different sense of fit than their peers. Indeed, whom these individuals see as peers would aid in further supporting these students. These identities, coupled with others, such as students with veteran status, students who were born in a different country, and students who are neurodivergent, are all worthy of further examination into how geography and identity interact in higher education institutions. Research in these areas will be helpful both to increase the amount of rural education research and assist student affairs staff with programming and creating policies that promote rural student inclusion in higher education.

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