

ENGAGING RURAL STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA THROUGH
DIGITAL STORIES: SUPPORTS AND BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Access has been an ongoing issue for rural students (Eller, Martinez, Pace, Pavel, Garza & Barnett, 1998; Torres, 2013). In this study, I examined factors that have been proven barriers and supports for rural students. These factors include being first-generation, financial status, geographic isolation, parents' expectations and support, and academic preparation. Rural college students who were part of the TRiO program at The University of Montana shared barriers and supports to access higher education. They talked about their college journeys by telling digital stories, using computer-based tools to create narratives. I examined these stories by listening and comparing their barriers and supports to common themes in access literature. Students' perspectives provide a way to understand barriers to higher education and meet the needs of communities and rural college students (Eller et al, 1998; MDC, 2001). On-campus resources, family support, and self-motivation proved to be important persistence factors for students in this study.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Rural students' journeys to college are unique (Guiffrida, 2008) due to many factors challenges such as geographic isolation, distance to postsecondary institutions, high poverty, and limited employment opportunities in their hometowns (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012). These factors contribute to rural students either not persisting or transferring to a less rigorous institution (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Gibbs, 1998).

When combined, coming from a rural background and from a low-income family complicates the journey to college. For example, rural, low-income students perform lower on SAT and state achievement tests (Sadowski, 2001; Williams, 2003). Lower scores on college entrance exams can limit college options for students. In one study, researchers found that although rural students had high aspirations to attend college, rural students were uncertain on how to achieve their goal of postsecondary attainment (Doyle, Kleinfeld, & Reyes, 2009). Due to the benefits of college degrees such as personal and professional growth, increased earning potential, and financial security (Holland, 2010), a college degree is increasingly relevant for all students including rural, low-income students.

Several researchers studied college completion rates among students of low socioeconomic status (SES) or minority status (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). However, there is not enough information about the rural students' from low-income backgrounds pathway and experience in college (Beasley,

2011). Some rural students face barriers such as economic difficulties, first generation status, and poor academic preparation that affect college persistence (Maltzan, 2006).

A college education provides economic opportunities, increased lifetime earnings, career possibilities, and the ability to have job flexibility (The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008). The college experience offers students an opportunity for personal, academic, and social growth. By attaining a bachelor's degree, doors open for employment and college graduates see an increased earning potential and a better chance of financial security (Holland, 2010). Following WWII, the United States has seen a dramatic increase in higher education enrollment. Increased college participation has driven the value of a degree both socially and economically (Liu, 2011).

As more students look to attend college, they have many different factors to consider in choosing if and where they want to attend colleges. College choice and completion is a complex interwoven process that includes family background and involvement, SES, and school-based factors such as preparation, class offerings, and college and career guidance (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Three critical tasks need to occur for students to attend college: attaining minimal college acceptance requirements, graduating from high school, and applying to a college or university. For low-income students, the completion of these critical tasks prevents many students from beginning college. Schools offer a variety of resources regarding financial aid awareness and college preparation. However, oftentimes students who most need information do not receive the knowledge needed to attend college (Kennedy, Oliverez, & Tierney, 2007).

Substantial differences in college choice occur when a student's SES is considered (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). As supported by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACCSFA), access and the completion gap continues among students from low-income

families compared to their middle- to upper-income peers (2001). For instance, college participation lags 32% between a student coming from a low-income family that makes \$25,000 versus a student from a family that makes \$75,000 annually. This statistic has been stagnant for 3 decades (ACSFA, 2001).

College choice and completion for students of low SES differs for rural and urban students (Beasley, 2011). The experience of low SES urban students cannot be generalized to the challenges of low SES rural students. Rural communities vary greatly from their urban counterparts and any reform should reflect these differences (Bauch, 2001). Current educational policy makers examine rural education from a metrocentric deficit perspective (Corbett, 2014). By ignoring rural education in terms of policy and resources, the rural student become the “other” and dismissed as rednecks, hillbillies, or hicks (Corbett, 2006). Because rural students have unique challenges in transitioning to higher education, more research is needed on the college experience of rural students (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Guiffrida, 2008).

As rural communities continue to face an agricultural crisis where fewer jobs are needed to run farms, rural youth turn to college for a future outside of farming (McGrath, Swisher, Elder, Swisher, & Conger, 2001). Rural students use higher education as a way to break into the knowledge industry. College interest in rural communities has increased, but some rural students face challenges based on lack of correct information or familial guidance and involvement in the college process. Despite rural students’ growing interest in college, this population faces a unique set of challenges when entering college (Guiffrida, 2008). For instance, researchers in the 1970s found that college students from rural locations experienced more stress and attrition than students from urban areas (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Cope, 1972). Decades later, Maltzan found that the differences between the rural setting of home and the more urban and diverse

interactions in the college experience intensify challenges for rural youth in completing college (2006).

This chapter is organized to (a) describe rurality and poverty and how they both play out in the education system; (b) illustrate rurality and poverty in Montana including college students’ under the support of TRIO; and (c) outline the basics of this study (statement of problem; significance of the study; research question; assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study). Chapter 1 introduces these topics so that readers can understand why rurality and Montana are important, why rural college students’ journeys matter, and how this study is organized.

Rurality

Education institutions classify students based on the population of residents. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has developed a new classification for population characteristics (2014). Categories are divided into city, suburban, town, and rural and each category is subdivided into three sections. Rural communities, designated by the U.S. Census Bureau (2007) as having 2,500 or fewer residents, are subdivided into fringe, distant, and remote (see Table 1). All subdivisions of rural areas are considered part of this study.

Table 1	
<i>Rural Territories—Population of < 2,500</i>	
Fringe	5 miles or less from an urbanized areas
Distant	Between 5 and 25 miles from an urbanized area
Remote	Over 25 miles from urbanized areas

In contrast, the U.S. Census Bureau identifies two types of urban areas. An urban area is 1,000 people per mile. Urban areas have a population of 50,000 or more. An urban cluster, fewer

people than an urban area, has a population between 2,500 and 50,000 people. All participants in the study were from communities with fewer than 2,500 residents.

Gjelten's work provided a framework to understand rural communities (1982). Gjelten defined rural communities into five typographies. I used Gjelten's classification in communicating with rural students about their background and community. Students have different educational experiences based on the characteristics of their "home" rural community. The type of rural community can influence students' access and exposure to postsecondary education institutions and opportunities.

1. *Stable Rural Community*: The stable rural community is considered peaceful and productive. There is employment in the region and poverty is not commonplace. Gjelten (1982) considered the "Farm Belt" in the Midwest as a prime example of this type of community.

2. *Depressed Rural Community*: A depressed rural community is a community of high unemployment with few opportunities for growth and opportunity. In these types of communities, young people often leave and there are high levels of outmigration. There is a heightened sense of economic insecurity.

3. *Reborn Rural Community*: The "reborn rural" community consists of residents who have fled the congestion of the city to seek a permanent sense of tranquility in a small town. A "reborn" rural community consists of former stockbrokers, factory workers, artists, or executives who choose the small, quiet nature of the town. They tend to defend traditional customs and institutions.

4. *High Growth Rural Community*: Possibly a "boomtown" in the West where the community benefits from natural energy sources, a high growth rural community has opportunities for employment, growth, and new industry. A revitalized hope exists in the region.

5. *Isolated Rural Community*: The community can have the characteristics above from several different types of rural communities, but isolation is the factor that overrides all others. The distance from other communities affects transportation, commerce, cultural activities, and communication. Physical barriers such as mountains, forests, water, or grassland contribute to the isolating factor.

Understanding rural schools, social capital in rural communities, wealth disparity in rural areas, and outmigration provide background information in understand rural youth's journey to college. Even though one-third of American children live in rural or small towns, policy makers overlook the needs and underfund the education of rural students (Strange, 2011). Excluding rural education from the policy and resources conversations "others" the rural student who becomes dismissed as redneck, hillbillies, or hicks (Corbett, 2006). This type of discrimination shows the complexity of cultural and class politics in the rural place. Rural schools can lack the social force and political clout to provide students with the resources provided by a more urban counterpart or school placed in a wealthier area (Strange, 2011).

Social capital affects students' opportunities to attend college. Students with more social capital may find their pathway to college more easily than students without. Rural schools reflect the social stratification more than their urban counterparts (Seal & Harmon, 1995). Rural communities have a distinct difference between those "with" and those "without" (Cuervo, 2012). Small towns frequently have a close knit and rigid hierarchical structure (Mactavish & Salaman, 2006). Social stigma categorizes rural poor families. Even though rural students may be "closer" to the social capital in a small town, they have to be able to reach the social capital in a highly stratified society. Rural students may have unique conditions for building social capital because of their proximity and knowledge of resources in the community. However, rural

students are further from these resources because of the intensified societal stratification and lack of mobility within the community (Bauch, 2001).

When combining population decrease, the rise of unemployment, and exodus to more “lucrative” areas, an increase of rural youth want to leave their home towns to find success elsewhere (Corbett, 2007). In rural communities, residents’ abilities to leave mark success and require youth to engage in academic and economic spaces outside of the locale (Corbett, 2009). While some rural youth hesitate to leave family, cultures, and traditions, they move because they are motivated by a college degree and financial success (Dees, 2006). The lure of “success” often coupled with a college degree motivates students to leave rural areas.

Rural Students in College

Almost 9 million students in the United States attend school in a rural area (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Increasing numbers of rural students attend postsecondary institutions, but research is lacking on the persistence of rural youth attending college (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). Rural students can face challenges such as poverty, geographic isolation, limited access to colleges and universities, and fewer employment opportunities nearby (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). These factors contribute to form a unique set of challenges for rural students entering college (Guiffrida, 2008).

Parental support and education level prove to be the most influential factors in rural students’ decision to attend college (King, 2012). Parents in rural areas have lower educational expectations of their children (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Additionally, parents in rural areas are less likely to have gone to college than their urban or suburban peers (Provasnik et al., 2007). Because 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). Even when comparing sociodemographic factors, students with parents who expect children to go to college have higher academic aspirations. Parental involvement and support play an important role in the rural students' journey to college.

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).

Prior research shows that rural students have unique challenges in transitioning to college, but no conclusive evidence supports rural disadvantages in college completion (Guiffrida, 2008; Schonert, Elliot, & Bills, 1991). Unique challenges for rural students include higher levels of stress (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976), more difficulty adapting to the college setting than urban or suburban peers (Maltzan, 2006), and greater likelihood of being a first-generation student coming from a low SES family (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). However, the likelihood of attaining a college degree for those from a rural community is not decreased (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Schonert et al., 1991). Despite difficulties in transitioning, research has

not proven that rural students are less likely to complete a degree compared to their suburban or urban peers.

Qualitative analysis of the relationship between rural culture and rural students' college-going behavior reveals important information that aids in understanding college access and completion. Previous qualitative studies describe the college journey of students from West Virginia (Beasley, 2011), Ohio (Maltzan, 2006), and Colorado (Hodsdon, 2012). Rural students have distinctive college-going pathways and in-depth, sociocultural case study can provide supports to help rural students enroll and complete college (Beasley, 2011).

College Students in Poverty

Socioeconomic status plays an important role in the college choice and process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Family income also contributes to college persistence of students (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Students in higher income brackets are far more likely than students from low-income households to earn a college degree (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). One reason for the lower numbers in completion for students from low-income families is the misinformation about college costs and financial aid (King, 2012). Low-income families are more likely to overestimate the cost of college attendance. When students know the correct information about the cost of college and financial aid information, low-income students are more likely to graduate from college (Chenowith & Galiher, 2004; King, 2012).

Flagship Universities

Flagship universities are generally the oldest, largest, and most prestigious universities in the state (Haycock, Lynch, & Engle, 2010). Although some agencies such as the Education Trust define flagships as the one oldest and largest university in the state (Haycock et al., 2010), others consider the history of many states that developed two institutions; a land-grant and a more

classical education institution, that both are flagship institutions. Flagships, either the one or two institutions in the state, serve as the centers of research and graduate education. Public universities' missions are to provide access to social and economic mobility for students of the state (Burd, 2010).

Public flagship universities may be drifting away from their mission to serve the state. With decreasing appropriations from the state and increased competition for students, flagship universities balance their mission to serve students with stressful financial circumstances (Harris, 2009). Recent researchers critiqued public universities for decreasing representation of low-income students and spending more aid to recruit students from wealthier families (Haycock et al., 2010). Public flagship administrators and boards currently balance serving the need of the state and looking out for their own welfare (Tobin, 2009).

Even though more students plan to attend college, college going behavior, particularly for low-income and minority students, does not meet the high college aspirations (Haycock et al., 2010). To compensate for declining state investments, universities seek full-paying and out-of-state students. Haycock et al. (2010) reported that most flagship institutions spend their energy and resources on recruiting and providing access to high achieving affluent students. Collectively, public universities have decreased the number of low-income students receiving Pell grants and public universities have become less representative of the high school graduates in their states (Turner & Pusser, 2004).

Montana

According to *Why Rural Matters*, Montana is labeled “crucial” to the rural education conversation due to the state’s percentage of rural youth (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Montana has more rural public schools than any other state in the nation. Over 75% of the

schools in Montana are rural (Johnson et al., 2014). Rurality continues to affect students as they matriculate to college. In addition to challenges such as economic difficulties, first generation status, and poor academic preparation that rural students may face, Montanans have additional barriers living in one of the most geographically isolated states in the nation (Maltzan, 2006). Driving over 100 miles to the nearest postsecondary institution is a reality for rural students in Montana seeking higher education.

Rurality in Montana

As the state with the fourth largest area and the third smallest population, in Montana, rurality is unavoidable (Eckert & Petrone, 2013). Over 50% of Montanans and 67% of children live in a rural area, as defined above, fewer than 2,500 residents (O'Hare, 2009; Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), 2006]. With only 6 residents per square mile, economic and spatial challenges pervade the state (Pruitt, 2010). These challenges include inequities in terms of well-being (poverty rate, income, and education level), social and health services, as well as the state of rural Montana schools.

Spatial challenges exist due to the physical vastness of the state. Some small communities lack support services such as health care and educational programs, jobs with a living wage, and a stable middle-class population that provides a network of job opportunities (Pruitt, 2010). Montana's schools are among the most rural in the nation (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Due to isolated locales, Montana rural schools struggle with recruitment and retention of teachers. In this type of community, breaking a cycle of poverty can be difficult because residents can feel trapped in place without educational or economic opportunities (Pruitt, 2010).

In Montana, disparities exist based on county of residency. As local property taxes fund a majority of the health and human services, rural counties with fewer residents have a smaller tax

base to fund necessities. Lack of centralized services mean that rural counties with sparse development and low employment have a smaller tax base to support its residents (Pruitt, 2010). As explained by Pruitt, even though Montana's Constitution boasts an equal protection and dignity clause, this type of resource discrimination between rural and more urban counties manifests in inequity for residents. In particular, this funding model denies children of equal health, opportunities, and schooling needs.

Rurality in Higher Education Institutions in Montana

In terms of higher education institutions, classifying Montana postsecondary options defines the rurality of the state. Out of Montana's 2-year schools, 50%, or 7 out of 14, are located in rural districts, less than 2,500 head count (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Salish Kootenai College (SKC), a tribal college in Polson, MT, is the only 4-year institution considered rural using IPEDS data. SKC (Rural Distant) is located over 35 miles away from either Kalispell or Missoula. The seven rural 2-year institutions are

- Stone Child College (Rural remote, Tribal)
- Aaniiih Nakoda College (Rural remote, Tribal)
- Montana Bible College (Rural fringe)
- Blackfeet Community College (Rural fringe, Tribal)
- Chief Dull Knife College (Rural remote, Tribal)
- Little Big Horn College (Rural remote, Tribal)
- Flathead Valley Community College (Rural fringe)

Out of 32 designated tribal colleges and universities (TCUS) in the United States, Montana has 7 designated TCUS in the state. Complex challenges such as poverty and lack of economic opportunity face students in rural tribal communities. For instance, tribal colleges

serve the “smallest and poorest minority group in the United States” (Stein, 1999, p. 259). Students entering TCU have average family incomes of \$13,998, 27% below the poverty threshold (AIHEC, 2007). TCUs contribute to both the educational attainment and economic development in tribal regions. These institutions are instrumental in providing access to higher education and offering students support while preserving native traditions and culture.

Out of 4-year institutions, the majority (8 out of 10) of Montana’s institutions are located in the town environments of Billings, Bozeman, Butte, Great Falls, Helena, and Missoula. The University of Montana and The University of Great Falls, urban universities in Montana, are located in the classification category of “small cities” because they have less than 100,000 residents. However, even Montana’s larger cities, Helena and Bozeman, are considered “remote towns” according to federal classifications. Using IPEDS data, the following Montana institutions exist in remote towns. Remote towns are territories inside an urban cluster more than 35 miles from an urbanized area.

- Montana State University
- The University of Montana-Western
- Montana Tech of The University of Montana
- Montana State University-Northern
- Carroll College

The size and location of Montana’s higher education institutions show the rurality of the state. Fifty percent of the 2-year institutions are located in rural areas or areas with less than 2,500 residents (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Only The University of Great Falls and The University of Montana classify as being located in small towns according to NCES guidelines. The majority of Montana’s 4-year institutions classify as colleges and universities in remote

locations. With a state that is vast in size, students may have to travel over 100 miles to attend classes at a 2- or 4-year university. For instance, a student in Plentywood, MT in northeast Montana would have to drive 101 miles to reach the nearest community college, Fort Peck Community College. That same student would have to drive 308 miles to reach the nearest 4-year university, Montana State University-Northern.

Poverty in Montana

Montana's poverty rate has been almost 15% since 2005 (Haynes & Young, 2011). Montana's poverty rate exceeds the average for both the US and adjacent states (Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming) since 2000 (Haynes & Young, 2011). Over 18% of Montana youth live in poverty (Pruitt, 2010). Child poverty tends to increase with the degree of rurality. For example, counties close to metropolitan areas have lower poverty rates than counties that are completely rural (Pruitt, 2010; U.S. Census, 2007).

Poverty is significantly associated with the American Indian population in Montana (Haynes & Young, 2011). Counties with the highest rates of poverty (Blaine, Glacier, Big Horn, and Roosevelt) have significant American Indian populations. However, the poverty rate is high in other counties that are not deemed "reservation counties." Liberty, Sanders, and Deer Lodge, all rural counties, also have extremely high poverty rates and do not have a high population of American Indian residents.

Perhaps most significant for this study are the correlations between poverty and educational attainment in Montana. Counties with low levels of education attainment such as Liberty and Glacier have higher rates of poverty than counties with high levels of educational attainment such as Daniels and Gallatin counties (Haynes & Young, 2011). Residents with low

levels of academic attainment have a significantly higher probability of living in poverty, being unemployed, and having decreased lifetime earnings.

Montana Students in TRIO

As an addendum to the Higher Education Act of 1965, TRiO programs were founded to help individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds pursue higher education and with support throughout postsecondary education into graduate school. TRiO programs offer a pathway for students who historically struggle with access and completion of a college degree (Dortch, 2012). TRiO programs primarily serve first-generation and low-income students in addition to students with disabilities, veterans, homeless, and foster youth. These programs address problems with college access and completion. Since the late 1960s, these programs have grown exponentially. In 2011-2012, TRiO programs served approximately 9.7 million students across the United States.

In the original legislation, TRiO was a group of three programs to offer support services for underrepresented students aiming to attend and complete college (Dortch, 2012). Currently, there are six TRiO programs that prepare students for postsecondary, offer support services for students who are in college, and prepare students for success in graduate programs. Upward Bound supports college preparation for high schools students through tutoring, college exam test preparation, and course selection advice. Talent Search offers support for college enrollment by exposing students to college environments, assisting with financial aid applications, and encouraging students to receive a high school diploma. Student Support Services provide students support in completing college by helping with financial literacy, transition from 2-year to 4-year institutions, academic tutoring, and course advising.

Montana has received the grant for TRiO since 1979. For some states, TRiO programs help students from low-income, minority neighborhoods in urban areas. In Montana, underrepresented rural students more frequently come from more rural or “reservation counties.” Fourteen Montana universities have TRiO Student Support Services (SSS) programs. When TRiO students are compared to cohorts of the same demographic (low-income, first-generation, and/or disabled), TRiO students are more likely to attend and graduate from college. Nationally, 27% of low-income high school graduates enroll in postsecondary but 78% of low-income Montana TRiO students enroll (Montana TRiO Fact Book, 2015). Additionally, only 8% of low-income students complete a bachelor’s degree in 6 years when 24% of low-income Montana TRiO students complete a degree.

TRiO programs are well represented in the state of Montana. Upward Bound works to help students from low-income families and students with parents who do not hold a bachelor’s degree to attend and graduate from college. Upward Bound Montana serves 388 students at five universities. Educational Talent Search (ETS) targets students in 6th to 12th grade to attend college. ETS also serves students who drop out of high school. They have four locations around the state. TRiO’s Student Support Services (SSS) is divided into 2-year and 4-year in Montana. SSS serves 2,771 students across the state and they are based out of 14 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities. Montana also has TRiO programs for Veterans’ Upward Bound, Educational Opportunity Centers, and McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement. I do not include these programs in our study because these programs have a mission in addition to college access and completion. These three programs include GED preparation, career services, and skills development.

American Indian students in Montana. The American Indian population is the largest minority population in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In the US American Indians comprise 1.2 % of the population in the country, but 6.5% in the state of Montana. American Indians in Montana are comprised mostly of 12 tribes: Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Chippewa, Cree, Crow, Gros Ventre, Kootenai, Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa, Northern Cheyenne, Pend d'Oreille, Salish, and Sioux.

The University of Montana awards the 40th most degrees for Native American students in the nation. Completed in 2010, the University of Montana created a Native American Center to house the Native American Studies program. Montana American Indian students are eligible for the Montana American Indian Tuition Waiver and non-residents whose tribal affiliation once called Montana home are eligible for the Tribal Homelands Scholarship .The TRiO program has a noteworthy population of American Indian students because of the partnership with Upward Bound at many tribal high schools across the state. Upward Bound helps provide middle and high school students and their families information about college by taking them to a summer program at a college or university. The University of Montana has an Upward Bound program. Many of the American Indian TRiO students gained exposure to college and The University of Montana through Upward Bound.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education is a diverse environment, but some students find their way in more readily than others. For instance, rural students can face significant barriers when applying to, entering, and completing higher education. Existing studies from research from the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI), a decade-long study regarding removing barriers for higher education access, do not tell the full story of rural students and the barriers and challenges

they face. 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).

Access has been an ongoing issue for low-income rural students aiming for college completion (Eller et al., 1998; Torres, 2013). Low-income and minority students may face barriers that prevent matriculation such as poverty and lack of academic preparation. First generation and minority students, who statistically have struggled in postsecondary environment, need more academic support, direct contact with faculty, and consideration of personal needs (MDC, 2001). By examining barriers that rural, low-income students face, students can participate more fully in their higher education experience.

Policy makers do not always consider the unique and particular economic conditions, culture, and geographic surroundings of rural areas (Roberts & Green, 2013). Populations in rural distressed areas need education that can address their unique needs (Eller et al., 1998). Geography, poverty, culture, and history of the place can inform the educational practice of rural students. These strategies are necessary to improve access and completion for historically disadvantaged students (MDC, 2001). Educators can best understand the perspectives of rural students by hearing their stories directly. Such an approach can give voice to rural students who experience barriers to education based on their geographic location.

Although preliminary studies have shown that rural students face distinct challenges in completing college, the research is limited (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012, Guiffrida, 2008; Maltzan, 2006). Despite growing numbers of rural students entering college, this group of college students has received little attention in research throughout the last few decades (Byun,

Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Gibbs, 1998). More research is needed on the access and success of low-income, rural college students in the United States (Beasley, 2011).

In my review of the literature, no researcher had looked at rural students' journeys to college using digital stories. Digital stories provide ways for students to have ownership in the study by telling their own story. Underrepresented students need a way to share their barriers and support systems to college so that practitioners can include students who statistically struggle to persist in higher education. Researchers need to look at students' college journeys using more innovative and dynamic methods where the researched have an opportunity to have autonomy of the stories they tell.

Additionally, qualitative researchers have not considered the pathway of rural students to a flagship university in Montana. Because of the geographical vastness of the state, Montana students tell an important story about rurality and the unique barriers and support systems in accessing college. In addition, this study sheds light on barriers and supports for underrepresented populations such as first-generation, non-traditional, American Indian, and students of low SES who are also rural.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the access and barriers of rural, low-income students in a public 4-year university in Montana. Although all rural students are not low-income, this study will focus on low-income rural students' stories about college access. Rural college students' digital stories will share information about the barriers and ways to access higher education from rural communities. Students were asked, "How do you situate your experiences as rural citizens in relation to your experiences in college access to and success in

higher education?” Rural college students explained how institutional culture, racial dynamics, and gender roles affect their journey to postsecondary enrollment by telling digital stories.

Through digital storytelling, rural college students participated and shared how their rural experience shapes access and barriers to college matriculation. This project addressed recommendations from the RCCI report on how to actively reach out to minority and underserved students, address barriers to higher education, implement a culturally based curriculum, and integrate technology to bridge the digital divide between rural and more urban college experiences (MDC, 2001). Examining rural students' stories is important in understanding access and barriers for the underrepresented journey to higher education (Eller et al., 1998).

Significance of the Study

Existing studies from research from RCCI, a decade-long study regarding removing barriers for higher education access, do not tell the full story of rural students and the barriers and challenges they face. Educators need to understand the perspectives of rural students, and the best way to do that is by hearing their stories directly. Such an approach can give voice to rural students who experience barriers to education based on their geographic location.

Examining the stories of rural students is important to understanding access and barriers for underrepresented students in higher education (Eller et al., 1998). By listening to the unique 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' perspective provide understanding about barriers to education through a student-centered and individualized approach (Eller et al., 1998; MDC, 2001). A curriculum that offers students opportunities to advance technologically through the creation and sharing of a digital story

addresses a common challenge for rural students while offering insight about this group to higher education professionals.

Many studies on rural research focus on the rural deficit (Maltzan, 2006). Studies 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 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.

This study shed light on how rural culture and beliefs intertwine to affect higher education access and completion. I specifically looked at how social and cultural capital contributes to the college going behaviors of rural students. For the purpose of this paper, social capital encompasses the relational networks of knowing people with power and resources that can greatly influence a student's potential to succeed (Bauch, 2001). Social capital provides advantages to students in terms of college access and completion. This study provides qualitative data on how the social and cultural capital of rural students affects college completion. Higher education and K-12 administrators can benefit by learning how to support students with the social capital and resources to help rural students be successful in entering college.

A holistic college support system for rural students has proven to be an effective ways to increase college enrollment and completion (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Holistic resources

can include parental support, advice on financial aid and college applications, and college visits. Schools, communities, and parents all contribute to informing and empowering students to prepare for postsecondary education (Luna De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). In this study, I aimed to find how more inclusive support services help rural students successfully complete college in one of the most rural states in the United States. Relaying expectations to students and their family about the importance of attending college, college requirements, and understanding the culture of college can contribute to successful college entry and completion (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006).

Research Questions

In order to examine (a) rural, low SES 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?

To answer these research questions, rural college students described the unique situations and challenges that affected their access to higher education via digital storytelling, the use of computer-based tools to create narratives. Instructors of transition classes at a 4-year university asked, "How did your rural experience shape your access to higher education?" Students used

photos, stories, video clips, newspaper articles, and other pieces of media or family history to create a digital answer to this question.

Students' perspective provided creative outlets for students and unique data to better understand rural students' experience. I chose digital stories as the primary method of data collection because of the ability to put the power in the hands of the group being studied. Digital stories offer students an opportunity to tell their story and perspective while informing community (Streng et al., 2004; Willox et al., 2012).

Assumptions

The research conducted in this study was based on the assumptions that

1. Participants provided actual photos, stories, video clips, and other pieces of media or family history to answer this question.
2. Participants willingly created digital stories that accurately presented the life in their respective rural communities.

Delimitations

There was a narrow scope for this study based on studying the experience of rural students from one 4-year institution. Only rural college students from The University of Montana participated in the study. Additionally, I selected rural students to create digital stories through a class-based experience. The instructor on record determined selection of participants. Other rural students may have been interviewed in this study but all digital stories came from a class where the instructor agreed to use digital stories as part of the course of study.

My data came from various different sources throughout the state of Montana. I used data from the Office of Commissioner of Higher Education, TRIO, Gear Up, and Upward Bound. However, the data and selection of participants was state centric. Based on the selection of

participants and data, generalizing data for a larger rural population is problematic. The study was limited to the region and does not have a national or international scope.

Limitations

The challenges and constraints for this type of analysis include students' difficulty in using technology to create and produce digital stories (Willox et al., 2012). By allowing students time in class and offering technological assistance, this potential challenge was addressed. In addition, students may have shared personal accounts that related to their decision to enter higher education. While sharing can be both powerful and healing for students, instructors need to ensure that students relate their personal accounts to the question and purpose of the project, "How did your rural experience shape your access to higher education?" In a past study of digital storytelling in a rural community, some participants strayed from the original purpose of the project (Willox et al., 2012).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

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 researchers found contradictory results about the educational success of rural students (Maltzan, 2006). Some studies showed 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 about rural students' pathways to college, researchers need more information about growing up rural and going to college (Yan, 2002).

Hossler and Gallagher's model of predisposition, search, and choice plays an important role for rural students looking to attend college (1987). In all three stages, rural students have unique challenges to seeking, applying, and entering college. In the literature review, I examined how Hossler and Gallagher's model works by considering the barriers and supports for rural students considering college. I also considered Cabrera and La Nasa's newer rendition of the 1987 model that specifically considers the challenges of low-income students as they seek to attend college (2001).

There are plethora of barriers and supports for rural students in accessing and completing college. Students in rural areas face challenges such as geographic isolation, distance to postsecondary institutions, high poverty, and limited employment opportunities in their hometowns (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Parental expectations, first-generation status, educational aspirations, financial status, race, rural values, and finding a place to belong in college emerge as important factors in the research on rural students aiming to enter college.

Rural Education

Rural communities utilize public schools as an important bridge to culture and resources (DeYoung, 1996). School resources provide opportunities to a community that can be isolated from a larger world. Rural schools become the place in a small community to model social norms and roles, and also provide a sense of stability. For example, school boards and districts regularly provide the most jobs in the area. By providing jobs, education, culture, and a sense of stability, rural schools centralize community resources as a hub for social and cultural capital (DeYoung, 1996).

Nationally, statistics regarding rural achievement are contradictory. According to some studies, students living in rural areas statistically have a lower level of achievement as well as a higher rate of high school dropout (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). However, the Rural School and Community Trust, an advocacy group that aims to improve the relationship between rural schools and communities, shows rural schools perform as well as or better than their suburban peers (Williams, 2003). Even though rural schools may perform higher overall, researchers report that rural minority students still perform at lower levels than their White counterparts (Williams, 2003). The achievement gap between White and minority students in grades and standardized test scores still exists in rural schools. According to National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP), White rural students perform higher on every subject area and in every age group than their rural African American peers (Sadowski, 2001).

School resources reflect the type of resources based on the labor market and opportunity in the area (Williams, 2003). Historically, rural communities rely on low-wage, labor-intensive economic opportunities. Low wage jobs and high unemployment couple to create a smaller tax pool for rural counties. Due to a lower property tax, rural schools go underfunded compared to their urban or suburban counterparts (Seal & Harmon, 1995). As a result, schools offer fewer course offerings, aging facilities, and less of the technological advances found in more urban or suburban countertypes (Bauch, 2001).

Rural schools imitate the reforms of urban schools even though rural schools and students have unique issues that relate specifically to their setting. Rural communities vary greatly from their urban counterparts and their schools and reforms should reflect these differences (Bauch, 2001). One of the greatest differences between rural and urban schools is the connection with the community in a rural setting. Rural schools have access to the community's social capital. Urban schools in an area of low socioeconomic status are removed from the social and cultural capital that exists in a different part of the city (Bauch, 2001). Even though urban and rural schools are different entities, they have some similarities. Both urban and rural schools struggle with resource inequality, a gender gap in achievement, job losses, and poverty (Morris, 2008). Despite encountering some of the same issues, in recent years rural schools have moved away from emulating the reforms of urban and suburban schools to attend their own place as a rural school.

Rural Schools and Social Capital

In rural schools, social stratification is more defined than suburban or urban schools because of small towns' rigid and close-knit hierarchical structure (Mactavish & Salaman, 2006;

Seal & Harmon, 1995). For rural poor families, social stigmatization may be a reality. Even though rural students may be “closer” to the social capital in a small town, they have to be able to reach the social capital in a highly stratified society. On the other hand, rural students may have unique conditions for building social capital because of their proximity to and knowledge of resources in the community (Bauch, 2001). Students have to work to breach the stratification between rich and poor.

In rural schools, both economic and racial subgroups, performance lags on state achievement tests and the SAT. (Sadowski, 2001) If standardized test scores indicate student success, the greatest correlation in achievement lies in socioeconomic status (Williams, 2003). Students with a higher SES outperform lower SES students and rural schools have high rates of poverty. Rural Americans tend to be poorer than their urban and suburban counterparts. For instance, rural earnings are only 71% of urban earnings and, of the 200 poorest counties in the United States, 195 of them are rural (Williams, 2003).

According to the report done by the Rural School and Community Trust, “clearly socioeconomic status, highly correlated with race in the United States, has a direct correlation to student test performance The performance gap is thus unlikely to narrow substantially until these socioeconomic factors are addressed” (Williams, 2003). Low SES and minority parents’ income and education, an important part of their economic and academic capital, influences their children’s performance. Parents’ role in both the economic and cultural system and hierarchy affect their children’s level of achievement.

Recently, Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al. found that parent and teacher expectations influenced educational achievement for rural students (2012). Rural students experience unique forms of social capital such as long-standing teacher-student relationships or close school-community

relationships. These relationships can influence students' educational attainment in a positive way. School and community advocates can help mediate the negative effect of economic hardships for rural students in terms of educational aspirations and success (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012).

Summary

As students leave their rural communities and decide to consider college, several factors influence students' decisions to leave their community. Students' rural upbringing influences if they want to attend college, where they want to attend college, and how to balance the loyalty to family and place with independence and desire to leave or attend college. For instance, their educational preparation may influence what type of college rural students look for in their search. Their college search may reflect the labor available in the area (if they hope to move back). Students may be motivated to leave the area to find success or more inclined to stay to fulfill family or economic obligations (Corbett, 2009). Regardless, students' rural background affects why and how students choose to consider options following high school.

College Access

Pathway and Pipeline Programs

To address the achievement gap, there is a trend to develop P-16 initiatives to connect the three systems of preschool, K-12, and higher education. Today, many states have three separate systems that have little communication with each other. The P-16 movement works to connect the three systems as one integrated entity. Through school and community collaboration, P-16 reform works to better prepare students from preschool to K-12 and from K-12 to postsecondary institutions (or grade 16). P-16 reformers advocate for administrators and key education

stakeholders to create lines of communication between education systems so that students can make smooth transitions (Krueger & Rainwater, 2003).

Pipeline and pathways, two terms most commonly used, define the P-16 movement. Both terms describe the movement from K-12 to postsecondary education. Pipeline describes a traditional movement where students go directly from high school to college. The pathways movement has expanded from pipeline research to be more inclusive. Pathways expands the terminology to include the challenges that might keep students from moving directly from high school to college. The pathways P-16 movement looks at ways beyond K-12 to outreach to underrepresented minorities who encounter obstacles in successfully accessing and completing college (Jones, Yonezawa, Ballesteros, & Mehan, 2002).

Advocates stress the benefits of preschool, K-12, and higher education collaboration. Pathway research has stated that both school districts and higher education institutions benefit from partnering and collaborating with each other (Cohn, 2010). School districts benefit by having college and career ready students, an increased proficiency in academic subjects, more scholarships offered to their students, and districts receive resources and targeted professional training from higher education institutions. Universities benefit by having better prepared first year students, reduced costs in remediation efforts and classes, opportunities for faculty research and service, and placements for education professionals as well as student teachers. By partnering, both P-12 and higher education institutions learn from each other and receive substantial benefits.

By creating meaningful partnerships between K-12 and higher education institutions, the pattern of inequality in the school system is disrupted. Collaboration efforts create a diverse collegiate student body that is more academically prepared (Jones et al., 2002). Stronger

alignment between K-12 and higher education policies make the college process more accessible to a larger group of students. Accessibility makes the postsecondary system more equitable.

Although it provides substantial benefits in theory, P-16 challenges include communication and collaboration between higher education and K-12 systems (Mokher, 2010). Higher education and K-12 operate as two separate systems with different goals, operating systems, and budgets. K-12 and higher education interests in terms of lobbying and advocating for funds diverge. In order to lobby for P-16 initiatives, both higher education and K-12 systems need to collaborate and communicate about their respective needs and how they can advocate for both systems needs to be met (Venezia & Kirst, 2005).

By researching what information is needed for K-12 students to transition into the postsecondary system, K-12 and higher education can collaborate to determine what *all* students need to be successful and work towards these needed changes. Through research, thought, and action from both systems' collaboration, students can access colleges and universities as well as come in to these institutions better prepared. As a result, a diverse and inclusive campus can be created. Although P-16 reform is a great concept in theory, barriers exist and need to be addressed in order for change in K-12 and higher education to occur.

College Visits

Americans face an educational crisis regarding college access and completion. Sixty percent of low-income students, measured by free and reduced lunch, graduate from high school. One in three enrolls in college, and one in seven attains a bachelor's degree (Bedsworth et al., 2006). In a study conducted by National College Access Network (NCAN) and Center for Urban Education, several themes emerged in looking at how and why students were not attending college (Jones, Bensimon, McNair, & Dowd, 2011). Although students often have high

aspirations to attend college, many students lack the information they need to attend a postsecondary institution.

The Bridgespan Group and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation analyzed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study to determine what factors contributed to both college access and college completion. According to the results of the study, college visits contributed to academic preparation as well as other important factors prioritized in supporting college-access. Regardless of students' initial interest in attending college, visiting campuses can influence students' minds about the academic and financial feasibility of college. By providing necessary college access information, financial aid information, and offering engaging academic experiences, students can use the campus visit as a time to learn and explore more about college life.

Early Financial Aid

Schools offer a variety of resources regarding financial aid awareness and college preparation. However, oftentimes students who most need information do not receive the knowledge needed to successfully reach college (Kennedy et al., 2007). Early awareness of financial aid is critical for Pell Grant recipients' college completion, but unfortunately only one-third of college outreach programs offer low-income students information before ninth grade (The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008). Most students learn about financial aid toward the end of high school after they have already made up their mind about attending higher education (Perna, 2004).

In order to have a successful college-going culture, the entire school needs to be involved (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). Students, parents, teachers, and administration all have a role in contributing to this type of college-focused environment. The college message needs to be

consistently reinforced at different points throughout a student's high school career. "Increasing low-income students' knowledge of what it takes to succeed in college requires an ongoing effort by everyone involved in their schooling" (Luna De La Rosa & Tierney, 2007). A school's culture contributes to students' access to college knowledge. Providing accurate information is critical especially in learning about financial aid. Schools, communities, and parents all contribute to informing and empowering students to prepare for postsecondary education (Luna De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006).

College Choice

College choice and completion is a complex interweaving process that includes family background and involvement, SES, and school-based factors such as preparation, class offerings, and college and career guidance (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Students decide to go to college by searching where and how can they attend college. Academic preparation and economic feasibility affect the college choice process. Decision-making is linked to students' socioeconomic and demographic situations (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Hossler's three-stage process—predisposition, search, and choice—explains students' journey from high school to college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This model is the foundation for college choice process and literature. Cabrera and La Nasa built off of Hossler and Gallagher's 1987 model to be more inclusive of students searching from low-income backgrounds (2001). Cabrera and La Nasa's research used empirically driven data from low-income students about the college search process. They add the completion of three tasks to their model: graduating from high school, being college ready, and applying to attend a postsecondary institution.

Predisposition, the first stage in Hossler and Gallagher's model, describes students' decision to attend college based on demographic and background characteristics. High school culture, family involvement, teacher influence, and experience with college admissions all influence students in deciding where and if they can pursue the college search. Parental influences prove to be the largest factor in determining students' decisions to attend college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). However, SES also greatly affects students in the predisposition stage. Family SES influences what students know about the benefits of a college degree. Predisposition stage deals with students' social and cultural capital to attend school. For example, music programs, AP, and foreign language programs can increase students' social capital and can improve students' chance of attending college.

Search is the second component of Hossler and Gallagher's model. Search includes where and how to gather information about colleges. Students' ability to access knowledgeable people and resources can improve students' search for college. More affluent students tend to have more resources such as private counselors or large college savings plans that aid the college search process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Students without reliable and informative resources may eliminate certain schools based on institutions that they consider too expensive without understanding financial aid packages. The search stage is largely influenced by the accuracy and type of information students receive about college.

Students' choice, the final stage of the model, is determined by institutional characteristics, rankings, financial aid, and policy changes. Students ultimately make a final decision to attend college by weighing these different factors (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Students consider financial aid packages, distance away from home, and prestige of the institution in making a final decision about where to attend college.

More recently, scholars who aim to diversify higher education through college choice critiqued Hossler and Gallagher's model (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Perna, 2006). Their critiques considered that socioeconomic status greatly influences students' choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). For certain minority students, in particular American Indians, family plays an important role in college choice (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). In addition, there are many factors that can influence college decision making such as college counseling and college going culture at schools (Perna, 2006).

Additionally, a college's physical placement can affect student choice (Rhoades, 2014). Scholars looking at college choice overlook the importance of proximity and college choice (Rhoades, 2014). Particularly for low-income students, the local ecology of higher education influences college decision-making. For instance, if there are three community colleges in a metro area, a low-income student may choose the most attainable school based on transportation costs, marketing, and exposure. Similarly, local ecology affects decision making of rural students who may live hundreds of miles from the nearest university (Koricich, 2014). Students choose colleges based on proximity and recruitment strategies geared towards their physical placement in relation to the college.

The college experience offers students an opportunity for personal, academic, and social growth. By attaining a bachelor's degree, doors open for employment and college graduates see an increased earning potential and a better chance of financial security (Holland, 2010). Growing college participation increases the value of a degree both socially and economically (Liu, 2011). Based on the importance of SES in the search for a college, aspiring college students from low-income backgrounds may need additional support in accessing college.

Retention

Although college access is important, college retention and completion are the primary goals for institutions of higher education (Renn & Reason, 2013). Despite years of focus on this topic, about 59% of students who begin college graduate from a 4-year university (NCES, 2014). This number remains relatively stable despite years of research and policy focusing on the topic of retention (Renn & Reason, 2013). Stagnant retention rates can be seen as a success because of the growing number of students entering college including underrepresented students. Despite the growing number of underserved students attending college, such as first-generation and low SES populations, graduation numbers have not decreased.

Terenzini and Reason's Parsing Model described the many factors that contribute to students' persistence in college (2005). Specific environments and experiences contribute to students leaving or continuing with college. In particular, three different components influence college persistence: organizational characteristics, peer environment, and individual student experiences. Organizational context includes policies, practices, faculty culture, co-curricular programs, and academic practices. Individual student experiences include classroom, out of class, and curricular experiences. Peer environment is shaped by how students interact with other students in the context of one's student experience. For instance, a student's interaction with other students in or out class creates the peer environment (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

Terenzini and Reason's model provides a way to examine what makes students successful in college and what supports are needed to aid in retention (2005). Inputs that students bring into their college experience include socioeconomic status, academic preparation and performance, and personal and social experiences. Students in this study identified as rural

students, but many also identified as veterans, first-generation, coming from low-income families, and varied degrees of academic preparation.

Some of these background characteristics may assist students in graduating from college. For instance, if a student's family can provide the cost to attend college and the student's parents are familiar with the college process, that student may persist more easily than a student who cannot afford the cost of college and is not familiar with the enrollment and advising processes. For these reasons, some students may struggle more than others in completing college. Support services exist to help students matriculate despite disadvantages that may make college persistence difficult.

Rural Students in College

Researchers have found that students from rural areas have different needs than their non-rural counterparts (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Cope, 1972; Gibbs, 1998; Yan, 2002). Starting in the 1970s, researchers began to look at patterns in rural college student development. Since these important studies of the 1970s, researchers built a foundation of patterns in rural students' pathways and persistence in college. Recent researchers also show rural students' unique needs to successfully attend and complete college (Beasley, 2011; Hodsdon, 2012; Maltzan, 2006)

Recently, qualitative researchers examined rural students' adjustment to college (Beasley, 2011; Hodsdon, 2012; Maltzan, 2006). Despite different approaches such as ethnographic study (Beasley, 2011), historic narrative/phenomenology (Maltzan, 2006), and narrative inquiry (Hodsdon, 2012), researchers sought to understand the rural students' pathway to college. Beasley's (2011) study focused on students in West Virginia; Maltzan (2006) focused on Ohio; and Hodsdon (2012) studied students in Northern Colorado. The following themes provided important information about rural students' pathways to 4-year institutions.

Barriers and Supports to College Access for Rural Students

In the following section, I describe barriers and supports for rural students' college access based on previous reviews of the literature (Beasley, 2011; Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Maltzan, 2006; Schultz, 2004). Parental expectations, financial status, students' expectations and aspirations, academic preparation, first-generation status, gender, the impact of race, rural values, and finding a place to belong emerged as themes from the current literature on rural students' pathways to college.

Parental Expectations

For rural students, parental influence is the most influential factor in determining whether rural students attend college (Schultz, 2004; Yan, 2002). As part of Hossler and Gallagher's predisposition stage, parental influence, a background and demographic component, determines how students' proceed with pursuing the search and application to college (1987). Both parental support and education levels play into the success of students' access and completion of college.

Parental support and encouragement plays an important role for rural students attending and completing college (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Historically, parents from rural areas have had lower educational aspirations for their children (Rosigno & Crowley, 2001). Students from rural backgrounds discuss college plans with their parents less frequently than their urban or suburban peers (Yan, 2002). Parental discussion about college continues to be a significant factor in determining whether a student attends college or not. Despite fewer conversations about college than urban or suburban peers, parental expectations for rural students to attend college has increased in recent years (Legutko, 2008). Due to a recent increase in parental support, rural students attend college at higher levels than ever before. When both parents support students' decisions to go to college, students tend to be more successful in college (Schultz, 2004).

Beasley's study looked at the importance of family expectations and college going behaviors. Beasley looked at rural students' adjustment to college through an ethnographic case study. Beasley followed rural West Virginia students from Mingo County who attended 2- and 4-year institutions. She considered how rural culture influences college pathways. Beasley found that family expectations, support, and educational background significantly influence rural students' aspirations and college going behaviors (2011).

Hodsdon (2012) also examined how familial support affected rural students' college going behaviors. Hodsdon traced the educational journeys of rural first-generation students at the University of Northern Colorado. She looked at beliefs, people, and experiences that led to their decision to attend a 4-year institution. She found that self-determination, familial and peer support, and the goal of a college education motivated students to attend and persist (Hodsdon, 2012). Hodsdon found that rural students maintained relationships in their home communities. Rural students in her study selected their university based on the smaller, approachable, and friendly atmosphere of the campus. This research supported quantitative research that states rural students prefer smaller colleges in rural areas (Gibbs, 1998).

In agricultural rural communities, fathers are less likely to support students' decision to attend college than urban or suburban fathers (Chenowith & Galiher, 2004). Rural students who did not attend college reported more frequently that their fathers did not expect them to attend postsecondary school (Yan, 2002). Fathers from rural agricultural families hesitated to fill out FAFSA needed to secure financial aid for low-income rural students. They were also less likely to support college because of work that would not be done on the farm or property. Fathers' occupational status and level of education was particularly salient in rural students' decisions to attend college (Chenowith & Galiher, 2004).

Financial Status

Socioeconomic status holds a heavy weight in students' search for college. Direct implications, such as the price of an institution, influence how a student can afford to attend college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). However, indirect implications affect every stage of the college process. From attaining accurate information about institution type, fit, and cost, to resources available in the school, as well as interactions with parents and peers, SES affects every component of the college choice. Students' SES directly relates to the quality of high school they attended and exposure to people with access to accurate information about college.

Families' financial status play an important role in students' decision to attend and finish college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Family income significantly contributes to college completion for rural students (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Rural students from families making \$50,000 earn a college degree at higher rates than students from families making \$25,000 or lower. If students have financial support, they are more likely to attend. On the other hand, a strained financial situation can be a deterrent for rural students in deciding to attend college (Schultz, 2004). In deciding to attend college, rural students consider the cost of tuition, oftentimes leaving home and finding housing, as well as foregoing full-time employment. Financial reasons and social reasons, such as leaving family and being too far from home, are the two main obstacles for rural students.

Having financial information also contributes to barriers and supports for rural students aiming to attend postsecondary schools. In a study of West Virginia high school seniors, the most commonly cited problem was lack of financial information in achieving college access (Chenowith & Galiher, 2004). Parents with low socioeconomic status were less likely to make

accurate estimates of college tuition and tended to overestimate the cost of college. Having the correct information about the cost of attendance plays an important role in a student's decision to attend college (King, 2012).

Expectations and Aspirations

Educational aspirations varied for rural students depending on ethnicity, job opportunities, and access to cities (Johnson & Strange, 2009; Provasnik et al., 2007). For instance, in a study of rural Alaskan natives, rural students hold high aspirations but few had articulated clear goals relating to postsecondary education (Doyle et al., 2009). The rural students in Doyle et al.'s study did not know how to attain their educational goals despite having high aspirations.

High aspirations and unclear directions on how to achieve educational goals conflicted with Hu's (2003) study on students' postsecondary aspirations based on data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS). Hu's study suggested that rural students have lower educational aspirations than urban or suburban peers. Rural 10th graders had less desire to attend a 4-year college or graduate school than their peers in other geographic locations.

In another study, Howley argued that rural students have lower educational aspirations due to social interaction and less familiarity with postsecondary options and benefits (2006). Rural students' desire to maintain relationships with family may exceed individualistic goals associated with degree attainment (Howley, 2006). All three of these researchers (Doyle et al., 2009; Howley, 2006; Hu, 2003) showed the complexity of rural students' aspirations and expectations.

College Type and Location

College location affected college completion for rural students according to some studies. In the 1970s, researchers found that rural students had higher attrition rates in large public universities than their suburban and urban peers (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Cope, 1972). Cope (1972) studied rural freshman at a large Midwestern university and found that more students transferred to another institution because of their lower levels of adjustment to the college.

Schonert et al. found rural students tend to graduate at higher levels from rural colleges (1991). These researchers found mismatch between institutions and rural students (Schonert et al., 1991). Even successful, high-scoring rural students often transfer from larger public institutions to smaller, more rural colleges.

Gibbs also looked at the type of institutions where rural students graduated. He examined data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth to determine college trends of rural students (1998). His study found that rural students are as likely to graduate with a college degree as their more urban peers. This study aligned with more recent studies from researchers at the National Research on Rural Education Support (NRES). Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al.'s study (2012) on predictors of bachelor's completion of rural students at 4-year institutions described how various factors contribute to degree attainment. Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al. also found that rural students are as likely to graduate from college as their non-rural counterparts.

Gibbs also found that rural students are more likely to graduate from a less selective institution and an institution located in a rural area. Even though only 20% of colleges are located in rural areas, 53% of rural students graduated from a college in a rural location (Gibbs, 1998). Rural students' social and economic environment shapes students' decision if and where to attend college.

Academic Preparation

Although contradictory results emerge from previous studies, rural students tend to be less academically prepared for postsecondary education (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Differences occur in curriculum intensity. Rural schools have significantly lower curriculum intensity than their suburban or urban peers (Maltzan, 2006). 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.

Supporting Cabrera and Nasa's study on low-income students and college access, Yan found that students attend college at lower percentages if they had not taken a postsecondary entrance exam (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Yan, 2002). There was a strong correlation between taking postsecondary entrance exams such as ACT and SAT and college attendance. As Cabrera and La Nasa stated in their study, students must fulfill college entry requirements in order to enter high school (2001). Low-income students who did not complete the requirements to attend college during high school were less likely to attend postsecondary institutions. For low-income students who were less likely to attend postsecondary schools, graduating from high school, taking entrance exams, and applying to college are important and necessary steps in moving forward (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001).

Conflicting research existed about rural students' academic performance, dropout levels, and test scores. According to one researcher, students living in rural areas statistically had a lower level of achievement as well as a higher rate of high school dropout (Roscigno & Crowley,

2001). However, according to the Rural School and Community Trust, rural students performed on high stakes tests as well or better than their suburban peers (Williams, 2003).

Perception of ability also influences rural students' college-going patterns. Rural students' perception of their preparation, intelligence, and comfort with school contributed to college plans (Chenowith & Galiher, 2004). Low confidence in perception of educational ability prevented rural students from pursuing college.

Number of science courses taken in high school as well as experience at a college affects rural students' journey to college. In studying rural students in Pennsylvania, Yan used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) as data for her research (2002). Yan found SES, high school program, number of science courses taken, and some college experiences such as institution type and number of enrollment shape rural students' college experience. Yan found that science courses and college preparation contributed to students' success in college.

First-generation Status

The national government and TRiO services consider a student with neither parent who graduated from college a first-generation student (Dortch, 2012). Considered "at risk" in retention and persistence discussion, college administrators have begun to take notice of first-generation students (Hand & Payne, 2008). Navigating the college process is difficult and that challenge intensifies if neither parent attended college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Chenowith & Galiher, 2004). Students were more likely to attend college if their parents attended and graduated from postsecondary institutions (Chenowith & Galiher, 2004).

Rural students were more likely to be a first-generation student coming from a low SES family than their urban or suburban peers (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Maltzan, 2006). Whether a parent attended college played an important role for rural students because

information about college access may not come from the community (Schultz, 2004). As parents' education levels increase, a student's chance of attending increases. Even when parents supported college but did not know the process to apply and attend college, prospective students were at a disadvantage (Doyle, 2009). Families supported postsecondary in theory but were unfamiliar with the steps needed to apply and attend college because parents had not done so themselves.

First-generation students from rural areas have increased financial concerns about attending college (Hand & Payne, 2008). Even with scholarships and financial aid available, students have to work part time to pay expenses not covered by aid. By being in college, students may forego full-time work and cannot support family back at home. Their work money goes to living expenses instead of contributing to family needs.

First-generation students who statistically struggle in postsecondary need more support in making the transition to college (MDC, 2001; Torres, 2013). Effective support for first generation students can be direct contact with faculty, financial guidance, and consideration of personal needs, and peer support (Hand & Payne, 2004; MDC, 2001; Torres, 2013). These types of supports can help first-generation students navigate the pathway to college and through college completion.

Gender

Researchers have examined the gender differences of rural students' college attendance patterns. Yan found that more rural women attended college than rural men and that a more academic curriculum and taking college entrance exams contributed to their college attendance (2002). Chenowith and Galihier's study (2004) found no gender differences in college going rates. However, they found that women and men decided to attend college based on different

factors. For example, parents' education levels and peers' plans to attend college was more salient for men than women (Chenowith & Galiher, 2004). For women, perceived intelligence and high school curriculum rigor played a larger role in determining college attendance.

Race

Despite the stereotype of White farmers and racial homogeneity, rural America has increasingly diversified (Williams, 2003). An increase in African American, Hispanic, and Native populations changed the demographics of rural America in recent years. Despite the growing diversity, the demographics vary greatly based on the region. States bordering Mexico have seen an increase in Hispanic rural students and rural students in the South are primarily African American. Rural education reflects this growing diversity in their school populations (Williams, 2003). Recent research stated that rural students at large schools with large minority populations had higher educational aspirations than their more homogenous peers (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012).

Research supported that minority rural students perform lower on standardized tests and have lower degree completion (Williams, 2003). The Rural School and Community Trust showed that rural students perform higher overall but that their minority students still perform at lower levels. An achievement gap between White and minority students' performance in grades and in standardized test scores existed in rural schools. Poverty for rural African Americans tended to increase educational problems and lower achievement rates (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Additionally, Hispanic rural students were less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than their Asian, African American, or White peers (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Hispanic rural students were also less likely to receive a bachelor's degree than Hispanic suburban or urban peers.

After 2 centuries of being underserved by America's educational system, American Indians have faced marginalization, cultural discrimination, and impoverishment that have led to educational and economic gaps in tribal regions (AIHEC, 2007). Historically, American Indian students have had the lowest retention numbers and smallest percentage of college graduations of any minority group (Stein, 1999). American Indian students faced many challenges in attending postsecondary education (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Stein, 1999). Challenges included high morbidity rates, alcohol-related deaths, and a high proportion of single-parent households. In addition, transportation to colleges from reservations and childcare while students study and attend class were additional barriers many American Indian tribal students face (HeavyRunner& DeCelles, 2002).

A social support model, called the Family Education Model, can help college students address college barriers (HeavyRunner & De Celles, 2002). Developed by higher education professionals and social workers in the state of Montana, the Family Education Model improves educational access by providing social supports to family members of the student. For example, college students need a way to include family on activities on campus so that families feel integrated into the college community and education process. The family education model suggested wraparound support services for students and their family throughout the college experience.

In addition, the authors of this model recognized tribal students' culture in establishing "family" at college and at home (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Family was a consistent reason for American Indian persistence in college (Guillory & Wolverton, 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.

Transition

Cope's study found that rural students struggle to adjust to the setting of a big university in a more urban setting (1972). For some rural students, there is incongruence between the background of home and the college environment. Aylesworth and Bloom found similar results in their study of rural students at the University of Colorado (1976). They, too, found that rural students experience difficulties in transitioning to a larger college.

More recently, Maltzan looked at transitions for rural students at a large midwestern university (2006). Maltzan's study considered cultural backgrounds that shaped rural students' pathways to college. Maltzan found that low SES, first-generation status, familial support, and race were identified barriers to enrollment and persistence in higher education. She found that rural students struggled to adjust to larger classrooms and campuses, more diverse settings, and the amount of social and academic opportunities (Maltzan, 2006). Maltzan found that rural students felt out of place at larger colleges and they maintained strong relationships with family and friends in their home communities while they were away.

In Aylesworth and Bloom's (1976) study, they found that rural students tended to continue their education but transferred to smaller more rural institutions. Schoner et al. also found that rural students were more likely to graduate from rural colleges and universities (1991). Distance to colleges was also an important factor in how students decided to attend college (Koricich, 2014). Rural students may choose more rural colleges due to proximity and travel costs (Koricich, 2014). Like Gibbs (1998), Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al. found rural students

were more likely to attend a public and less selective institution than their suburban or urban peers (2012).

Rural Values

There is a common perception in rural communities that there are limited economic opportunities for students in rural areas (Corbett, 2009). More urban residents construct rural places as educational and economic problems where residents are attached to the place even after there is no economic “purpose” left in the area (Corbett, 2006). This spatial challenge pushes rural youth to overcome any place attachment to find “success” (Corbett, 2009). In some rural communities, a student’s ability to leave their rural home and engage in academic and economic spaces equates to success. Corbett’s research showed that some rural community members see the rural area as a place the younger generation must leave in order to “make it” financially (2007). The geographic mobility of rural youth out of rural areas has created changing social, cultural and educational contexts in rural communities. This concept of ‘there’s nothing for you here’ pushes students to pursue higher education outside of the rural area.

However, 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. The students who desired to leave adopted an assimilation acculturation strategy. An individual focused on moving away from one’s home culture, in this case rural life, and adapting to the more dominant culture adopts an assimilation acculturation

strategy. This strategy is issue driven and motivated by a degree or financial success (Dees, 2006).

Information is lacking on rural students' values and the desire and decision to attend college (Beasley, 2011). Rurality is an overlooked demographic that may need to be recognized for retention and access (Maltzan, 2006). Although debatable, rural students attend college less frequently than their suburban or urban counterparts. Out of those who attend college, rural students persist at lower levels. The relationship between growing up rural and going to college lacks in current literature.

Finding a Place to Belong in College

When moving to college, rural students tend to struggle more in moving to college and balancing loyalty to family with college responsibilities (Hand & Payne, 2008). Rural students work hard to adapt in an environment that is different from their home (Schultz, 2004). Size of classrooms, residence halls, and campus can shock students from small communities. These changes can be difficult and emotionally charged. Students from rural communities need a network, support, and one-on-one relationship with faculty or staff (Hand & Payne, 2008).

Conclusion

From the 1970s until present day, researchers have conducted important studies about rural students' college access and persistence. Researchers have found important trends about rural students in college. Rural students were more likely to attend a nonselective college (Gibbs, 1998), transfer to a smaller rural college (Schonert et al., 1991), more likely to be overwhelmed by options and size of a public 4-year college (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1972; Cope, 1972), and were more likely first-generation and low-income (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). Research lacks 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).

Researchers found important conclusions such as rural students struggle to adapt to college and a more urban and diverse setting (Maltzan, 2006); 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 postsecondary (Beasley, 2011) and positive relationships with teachers, mentors, and staff help build positive academic identity for rural students’ transition (Hodsdon, 2012).

I examined ways to include rural students’ stories in redefining rural students’ needs in terms of college access and success. Because rural students may face barriers such as economic difficulties, first generation status, and poor academic preparation that affect college attendance and persistence, researchers should explore rural college students’ experiences (Maltzan, 2006). Even though quantitative research on access and rural students in K-12 exists, qualitative research is missing the story of rural students’ college experience (Beasley, 2011). Rural students need to tell their story so that practitioners, policy makers, and researchers can use experiences to support more rural students through college. More qualitative studies are necessary to show how cultural differences affect college going and persistence for rural students (Beasley, 2011).

Most studies on rural college students have been site specific and all studies have been done in the Eastern part of the United States (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). There were studies about student experiences in Ohio, West Virginia, North Carolina, New York, and Iowa. However, based on this literature and other literature reviews on rural students’ access to college,

no qualitative studies have been done about rural students in Montana. As one of the most rural states with communities that are geographically isolated, research on rural Montanans' educational experience is important (Pruitt, 2010).

Because of the increasing diversity of rural America (Williams, 2003), qualitative studies of rural students need to include more racial groups (Beasley, 2011). Researchers found that minority rural students fall behind their White peers in standardized and state testing (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Williams, 2003). Minority rural students have lower degree completion (Williams, 2003). Because of this disparaging gap, qualitative researchers need to consider the experiences and challenges of minority students in rural America *from* the perspective of minority rural students.

In Montana, several rural counties have a majority American Indian population. Although American Indian college enrollment has doubled since the 1970s, American Indians continue to have the lowest educational attainment of all racial minority groups. Only 42% of American Indians pursue any type of postsecondary attainment compared to 53% nationally (AIHEC, 2007). American Indians' stories about attending college could provide important information to educators about how to best support rural American Indian students aiming to attend college.

Additionally, no studies have used digital stories to collect data about rural students' access to college. Digital stories elicit a way to hear students' stories about their unique pathways to college. Digital stories help to understand how young people process and conceptualize success (Wexler et al., 2014). Digital stories stimulate conversations and engage students to tell their story.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

Qualitative research examines the meanings people give to social issues (Creswell, 2013). 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.

I used digital storytelling as a way to reveal and understand participant experiences. Rural low-income students illustrated their pathway to college through digital stories, or 3- to 5-minute videos that used audio, video, and photos (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 chose digital stories as a way to empower students to tell their story about getting to college (Willox et al., 2012). By telling their stories, students get around barriers of writing that

may be a source of fear for some students. I avoided formal interviews or focus group as the initial contact because being part of a formal research study may be intimidating or something not of interest. Many students in the study were first-year, non-traditional, and first-generation students who may fear the college environment (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). First-generation students are significantly less likely to participate in an academic commitment outside of the classroom environment (Pascarella et al, 2004).

I asked for digital stories to be a class assignment to increase student participation. I partnered with university instructors of a transition class, C&I 160. As a researcher, I wanted their stories to be shared in a comfortable setting where the students had the power to share what and how they wanted. I researched and selected the method of digital stories for research participants to have power to tell their story (Willox et al., 2012). Research participants chose what to include and how they wanted to tell their journey.

I then used grounded theory as a mechanism for analyzing and presenting the data. In this study, I used grounded theory methodology 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.

By using a constructivist grounded theory approach, the research participants, their experiences, and my interpretation of the data made reality (Charmaz, 2006). Data and analysis were created from shared experiences of participants and researchers. Together, researcher and participants’ experience and interpretation created or constructed knowledge. I looked at how

and why participants found meaning in certain aspects of their college journey. My interpretation as a researcher continues to be a process in construction even after the research is “finished.”

As a researcher, I sought to understand how participants presented and represented their lives. Through students’ demonstrations, I gathered insight into 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, I gained a sharper focus to social issues influencing college attendance.

Research Questions

I (a) examined rural, low SES students’ perceptions of opportunities and barriers to a 4-year college and (b) explored the cultural values (i.e., family background, rural culture, and rural school preparation) that affect college access and completion. I used a qualitative analysis to answer the following questions:

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

To answer these research questions, rural college students described the unique situations and challenges that contributed to their access to higher education via digital storytelling, the use of computer-based tools to create narratives. Instructors of transition classes at a 4-year university asked students the following questions as a part of the digital stories assignment, “How did your rural experience shape your access to higher education?”

This assignment was part of a semester-long class on learning strategies that included topics of time management, campus resources, writing skills, critical thinking, and grit, resiliency, and persistence. The instructors and I designed the assignment as a reflective exercise for students to consider their challenges and supports in getting to and succeeding in college. They used photos, their stories, and sometimes video clips, or music to create a digital answer to these questions. Students told their story while a partner filmed their story or some students chose to film themselves to have more privacy.

Data Collection

Digital storytelling weaves audio, photos, video, and voice to tell a story about the participants' lives (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2010). Digital stories are short movies, generally 3 to 5 minutes, that cover community issues or problems from a personal perspective. Digital storytelling is commonly used for community health initiatives, youth empowerment, youth literacy, mental health, technology literacy, and learning/teaching a foreign language (Yuksel, Robin, & McNeil, 2011). Participants benefit from creating digital stories by increasing skills in reflection, higher-level thinking, language, social, and writing.

Digital stories have been used to empower individuals to reflect upon the strengths and concerns of their community. Researchers also have used digital stories as a tool for Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) because of their ability to tell the story from the perspective of the people who live and exist in the community (Graziano, 2004). By listening to the voices of a population that often goes unheard, digital stories can guide the research focus for a community and move beyond facilitating discussion toward assessing needs that bring community members and leaders to reconstruct and reconsider what they know to shape future community policy and decisions (Streng et. al, 2004).

Digital stories were the primary method of data collection for my 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 (Wilcox et al., 2012). Digital stories gave students an opportunity to creatively respond to barriers and supports that guided them to college (Wexler et al., 2014). By creating digital stories, individuals reflected upon the strengths and concerns of their community and how these factors shaped their journey to college. As a researcher, I analyzed this creative response to better understand rural students and their stories.

Digital stories create partnerships among community members and allows for voices that often go unheard to be heard by community leaders as well as other members of the community (Streng et al., 2004). In this study in particular, rural students informed fellow students as well as higher education professionals about their needs and experiences getting to and staying in college. By capturing the needs and experiences of students, digital stories provided an auidial and visual representation of life as a college student from a rural community. By listening to others' stories, students hopefully gained a better understanding of each other's experiences. This information can provide valuable information to decision makers at the university and state level.

Digital Stories from the Field

In my review of the literature, researchers have not used digital stories to tell the story of rural students entering college. However, the research emerging from digital stories tells the narrative of different populations. Researchers using digital stories found ways to promote indigenous wisdom (Wilcox et al., 2012); understand the lives of Alaska Native People (Wexler, et al., 2014); and explore rural contexts with middle school students (Wake, 2012). In the following sections, I review research studies that used digital stories. All of these researchers

focused on telling the rural perspective through digital storytelling. They used different frameworks to guide their research.

Promoting indigenous wisdom. Willox et al.'s (2012) storytelling in a digital age espoused digital storytelling as an emerging narrative method for preserving and promoting indigenous oral wisdom; they told the story of a remote community in Canada. They focused on the connection between climate change and physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional healing (Willox et al., 2012). Through digital storytelling, they used place-based education to utilize community members' voice. The research team provided a case study with an emerging methodology to tell community stories. They employed methods that are important to the future of qualitative research according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005). They attempted to deconstruct power by listening and responding to participant voice as an important part of the researchers' method. They focused on community participation while decolonizing method and more traditional ways to research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Understanding Alaskan Native lives and traditions. Wexler, Eglinton, and Gubrium used digital stories to understand Alaskan Native people's lives (2014). In rural Alaska, students told their stories of their everyday lives. They used a rigorous coding and thematic analysis to find themes in the stories. Researchers found self-representation, sites of achievement, and relationships as themes throughout the digital stories. Wexler et al. applied a modified grounded theory approach to inform the practice of their study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

They incorporated audio, visual, and texts into their analysis of the digital stories (Wexler et al., 2014). For instance, they considered the music the student chose in creating his or her digital story. In addition to analyzing the content of the digital story, the researchers also

analyzed choice and type of song picked for the video. Researchers viewed a student's pick of hip-hop or indigenous music as data (Wexler et al., 2014).

Exploring rural students' identity. Rural middle school students at two different schools explored their identity living in a small town in the Southeastern part of the United States (Wake, 2012). Wake used comparative grounded theory as her methodology for this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The researcher oversaw an identical process in two locations and students in both locations shared their stories at a public viewing with both school communities. Wake analyzed both sets of stories to determine codes and concepts for her research. From her study, categories about school, community, teenagers, and friends/peers emerged (Wake, 2012).

Site Selection and Rationale

In selecting a site, I chose a public, urban, 4-year university that serves rural students from around Montana and neighboring states. The University of Montana in Missoula, Montana is the state's flagship university, founded in 1893. The University's enrollment was 14,525, about 1,000 students less than the rival public institution, Montana State University. Institutional Research and Evaluation, Inc. consider University of Montana one of the best 100 buys and *Washington Monthly Magazine* names University of Montana as one of the top 100 for Research, Service, and Social Mobility (About UM, 2015).

In a more negative light, authors have described The University of Montana as "America's Rape Capital" following a series of rapes reported in 2012 (Gray, 2014). Although not directly related to the study, this title sheds light on issues of the university's college culture. Working to change this name and perception, The University of Montana has made efforts to educate students and faculty about rape culture through initiatives on campus (Gray, 2014). However, if they are aware of it, this reputation of "rape capital" could contribute to rural

students' apprehension about large public universities (Gibbs, 1998), adapting to "city" life (Maltzan, 2006) and choosing smaller and "friendlier" campuses (Hodsdon, 2012).

I chose a flagship university because of the difficulties of attending a flagship university as a low-income student (Harris, 2009). In recent years, higher education scholars critiqued flagships for moving away from their mission to serve students of the state (Haycock et al., 2010). With decreasing appropriations from the state and increased competition for students, low-income students compete with out-of-state students paying higher prices (Harris, 2009). Recent researchers critiqued public universities for decreasing representation of low-income students and spending more aid to recruit students from wealthier families (Haycock et al., 2010). Even though students plan to attend college, low-income students have added financial obstacles in attending a flagship university (Haycock et al., 2010).

I chose the large flagship university because researchers showed rural students pathway to attend and succeed in a large, more urban university is difficult (Byun, Meece, Irwin, et al., 2012; Gibbs, 1998). Rural students tend to choose less selective schools (Gibbs, 1998) and transfer to rural colleges (Schonert et al., 1991). Schonert et al found rural students were more likely to graduate from rural colleges (1991). Additionally, students may have to travel farther from rural areas to attend the flagship university. Travel distance and travel costs can affect rural students' entry and retention to college (Koricich, 2014). For these reasons, rural students' decisions to attend the flagship university are statistically unpopular. Students in my study, however, provided information about why and how they made the decision to attend a large flagship university from a rural background, despite the obstacles.

I purposely selected an institution serves students from all areas including rural ones. In order to answer the research questions, rural participants in the study needed to experience a

dichotomy between rural and urban life. In this study, students come from rural backgrounds and look at ways to negotiate their college experience in a more urban setting. Students reflected on their rural upbringing in their college experience and now have a point of comparison. Rural students in a more urban college setting can describe if there were unique barriers to college access based on their upbringing in a rural school, family, culture, and society.

Low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students most often attend public universities, and because these groups are the focus of this research, I chose a public university as the research site. Although not always the case, public universities usually boast more affordable tuitions than their private peers. In Montana, a public university's tuition and fees for the 2014-2015 school year were \$6,350. This number did not include room and board, books, transportation, or miscellaneous charges. For a small liberal arts private college in the state, tuition and fees were \$30,104. This number also did not include any additional charges or room and board. I chose a public university because of its affordability and mission to serve the students in the state.

In this study, I looked at the pathway for a rural student to attend a flagship university. Although a public 2-university may have been more affordable and easier to access, college students' journeys to successfully attend a large 4-year university from a small and isolated rural community told underrepresented stories. I sought to understand students' decisions to move from home and attend a more urban college despite the decision being more difficult (in terms of college acceptance) and higher cost of attendance.

Research Participants and Rationale

I relied on help from the University's TRiO office in finding research participants. Because TRiO works with underrepresented students, research participants were rural students

who also came from low-income families and were first-generation students. Although not all students from rural communities were from low-income households or were first generation students, I looked at rural students who were either from low-income families or were first generation students in this study.

Forty-nine students submitted digital stories. Six of the 49 students were part of a class of mentors for the C&I 160 class, a transition class for students participating in the TRiO program. All six mentors were upper class students who had taken and done well in C&I 160. The remaining 43 stories came from students who took the class C&I 160. Although C&I 160 was a transition class designed for college freshman, many students in the class were sophomores or juniors. Additionally, eight students signed up for the class because they were falling behind in their classes, and TRiO staff offered a class to help students struggling academically.

Out of the 49 students, 11 students were considered rural students by the definition used by the U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2014). Their researchers defined rural as under 2,500 residents. The U.S. Department of Education broke 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 (2007) to be areas of 50,000 residents or more. Urban clusters have 2,500 to 50,000 residents.

In my study, 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. Those from small towns over 100 miles from a city of 50,000 people exhibited many of the same challenges as students from rural areas. For example, students from Lewistown (104 miles from a town of 50,000) or Havre (112 miles from a town of 50,000) experienced geographic isolation despite being from towns or small urban clusters. Three students in the

study came from remote towns of 5,900 and 9,700 residents. I chose to include them in the study because they experienced challenges of geographic isolation in their digital stories. In line with Gjelton's classification of rural communities, these communities were isolated and that distance affected transportation, commerce, cultural activities, and communication (1982).

I did not include students who did not claim Montana as home. Because my study focused on the uniqueness of Montana's size and small population, I chose not to include students who were not from Montana. Some students I included in the study moved away from Montana but they claimed Montana as home or an important part of their heritage. For instance, one student, Shinnell, was born in Montana, raised in East Texas, and wanted to come back to Montana because of her tribal and familial history in Montana. Although there was a student from rural California and one from Alaska, I chose not to include them in the study because of my focus on Montana students, geography, and unique challenges.

In total, I collected 14 digital stories to draw conclusions about access and barriers to higher education for rural students. All students in the study were either classified as rural (population under 2,500) or lived in a geographically isolated place in Montana. All 14 students agreed to be part of the study.

For this study, rural college students described via digital storytelling the unique situations and challenges that affected their access to higher education. Instructors of transition classes asked, "How does your rural experience shape your access to higher education?" Students used I-pads, cell phones, and laptop computers to create videos about their college journey. Participants had the opportunity to work together, tell their story, listen to others, and learn about technology in the process (Wilcox et al., 2012). Students' perspectives provided creative outlets for students and unique data to better understand rural students' experience.

Data Collection

I worked with instructors to integrate this project into the goals and purpose of the class. C&I 160, *Learning Strategies in Higher Education*, develops 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.

The two TRiO instructors introduced the digital story assignment to C&I 160 students. The two instructors explained the assignment again weeks before the in-class production of the digital story. Both instructors described the requirement of the digital story assignment and showed a video of me explaining the purpose of what a digital story is as well as an example digital story created by student mentors. Instructors gave students the opportunity to work on the assignment before the in-class session and turn the assignment in early for credit. While all students needed to complete a digital story for the purpose of the class, only students who chose to participate in the study had their digital story included in the research.

When I came for the in-class production, students knew about the concept of a digital story, the details of the assignment, and had seen an example of a digital story. I gave a brief synopsis of my study, explained how they could choose to participate as a research participant, and gave them two prompts to help them create their video (listed in Appendix D). With the first class, I gave students an outline to help them organize their thoughts for making the video (Appendix C). The outline was highly structured and designed to answer the two main components of the digital story: (a) What were the barriers and challenges that made attending the University of Montana difficult and (b) What were the supports that enabled you to attend

UM? Students had time to look over their outline before pairing up with another student to tell their story to the partner while being filmed. Students also had the option of filming their own story if they did not feel comfortable sharing their college journey with another student.

After reviewing the first class' stories, I realized that students were stifled by the structure. Students who used the outline as a guideline produced a very structured digital story with not enough room for creativity. In the second and third classes, I provided the outline and a list of prompts (Appendix C and D). By giving students the options to use either or both the prompts and outline, students told a more in-depth story of how they got to UM and some of the challenges and supports. Students also shared more about their hometowns, what they enjoyed doing in their spare time, and how they liked their experience in college. Although some students took out of class time to add media, music, and titles to their story, most students decided to tell their story while being filmed by classmates or filming themselves in class.

In examining how rural students situated their rural experiences in relation to college access and success in higher education, I used various mediums in this study. Researchers found students who experience barriers to formal education may hesitate in sharing their educational experience through written word (Wilcox et al., 2012). The ability to tell their story orally and reflection with other students in the class about their educational experience provided a more inclusive approach for students to voice their experiences.

I did not anticipate students' nervousness in telling about their college journey. The level of excitement varied from student to student and from class to class. Some students in the class of mentors expressed dislike of hearing their voice on the video or being on camera. Even though the mentors had some of the most powerful, moving, and personal stories, they did express fear in making the digital story. In the three other classes, most students seemed comfortable, but two

students asked for an alternate assignment and chose to write a paper. One student expressed that he thought the assignment was stupid and not worth his time. Several students completed the assignment for class but chose not to participate as a research participant. However, they were all students from more urban locations.

In similar studies using digital storytelling as data collection, participants encountered user error in the creation and editing of digital stories (Ward et al., 2014). Instructors chose to simplify the project by making it an in-class project with the option to work on the project outside of class. Students had access to computers and a class session was dedicated to helping students complete their project. Providing this time and support addressed students' difficulties in using technology to create and produce digital stories (Willox et al., 2012).

Originally, I planned to partner with KCPN and the Media Arts department to help with technological components of the video. After fleshing out the digital story assignment with the TRiO instructors, the instructors and I decided to simplify the technological components of the digital story. I wanted the digital stories to be a way for TRiO students to share their college journey. The instructors feared that too much editing, adding elements of media and music, would overwhelm many of the freshman and non-traditional students. The instructors and I veered away from adding technological components to keep the assignment approachable for all students.

In the consent form (see Appendix A), I asked students if they would agree to participate in a 30 to 45 minute interview if I felt they would contribute to the study. I did not follow up with urban students. I did send emails to every rural student who agreed to participate in an additional interview. I received valuable information from the digital stories but felt that the digital stories could be supplemented by interviews. These students had all met me, completed

the assignment, and felt comfortable enough to agree to an interview. My response rate was low. Out of the eight students I emailed, I heard from four. I interviewed all four students who responded to the email.

In the consent form for digital stories, I offered students an opportunity to provide more information about their college journey by engaging in a 30-45 minute interview. From the interviews, I was able to follow up on questions I had from the watching the digital story. Four interviews provided a more in-depth version of students' stories. For instance, I met with a student, Hollie, who went more in depth about her personal challenges, family history, and support network in the interview. I also interviewed another student, Jamie, who talked about the importance of family and community support, two essential rural values according to Jones (1994). Both Hollie's and Jamie's stories brought up prevalent themes in the literature review. I had more questions to ask after watching the video and conducting the interview allowed me to do so.

Six mentors for the C&I 160 class participated by creating digital stories before the C&I 160 assignment was due. All six mentors were upper class students who had taken and done well in C&I 160. Examples from these students were shown in class. Their stories were shared with students to make students feel more comfortable making their own video. Direct, personal contact is crucial to meet individual needs for students overcoming barriers such as low-income and first-generation status (Eller et al., 1998).

Strong partnership with the community is an essential component of improving education (MDC, 2001). Mentors shared their videos with students in C&I 160. TRiO instructors posted and shared videos at conferences and on their website. They wanted the message of TRiO students' experiences to be shared with the community. In addition, sharing and collaboration

between college and community increases interactions and build stronger partnership between the two entities.

Data Analysis and Techniques

Qualitative researchers focus on describing phenomena instead of explaining why or how a situation occurs (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Researchers interpret based on their observations, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. In this study, I used students' digital stories to tell the story of research participants, and I used grounded theory to analyze digital stories through constant comparison. Grounded theory gave me a framework from which to code and create hypotheses from the study.

Photos, digital story, written reflections, and interviews described what components of the rural experience contributed to students' higher education journey. Poverty, lack of technological access, family support, gender perceptions, feelings of racial inferiority, and lack of academic preparation were barriers and themes that could be extracted from the data based on a preliminary research review (Eller et al., 1998; MDC, 2001; Ward et al., 2014; Willox et al., 2012).

I analyzed the data in several phases. First, I organized the data by each student's story so that the amount of data would be manageable. I transcribed the four interviews and the digital stories. Due to the large amount of data, I created a data-recording chart that examined in-vivo codes, or real life data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I went through the steps of grounded theory: coding, creating concepts, creating categories, and developing a hypothesis and theory to explain how rural students navigated the pathway to higher education (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

I coded the information formed from students' stories and then connected these in vivo codes with themes widespread in access and barrier to higher education literature. I used the

literature review to help me create codes. For example, I created codes such as financial status, parental expectations, race, gender, and classification as first-generation to use to code digital stories. Information that reoccurred throughout the digital stories and in the four digital stories was coded according to themes that emerged across several students' stories and literature in the field (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 109). After listening to several stories, I added codes such as family support, family health issues or problems, and on-campus support systems.

I coded stories of all students that gave permission to be research participants. I included urban and suburban students' stories because I wanted to see if different themes emerged between rural and more urban students. Whether students were rural or urban, their participation in TRiO meant they were first-generation college students, income eligible, veterans, or had a documented physical or learning disability. Because all TRiO participants have some documented challenge that makes college completion statistically more difficult, I found that I needed a comparison between rural and more urban students' stories.

In my next phase of data analysis, I created concepts. I re-watched the digital stories, took descriptive notes about each video, and coded the four interviews (Wexler et al., 2014). I considered the gender, race, hometown region, and general educational theme of each video. Considering the screens such as culture, age, gender, class, social status, education, family, and values was at the crux of my analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Examples of general educational themes are that parents influenced college choice, mentors in high school encouraged students to go to college, friends and peer group contributed to college going behavior, or academic preparation aided or hindered educational opportunity.

If any students misinterpreted or did not complete the assignment, their stories would have been eliminated from analysis at this stage. Of the 14 digital stories selected, I was able to

include all 14 stories. All 14 students answered the two research questions of “How do you situate your experiences as rural citizens in relation to your experiences in college?” and “What were the barriers or supports to college enrollment in a 4-year flagship university from your home and college community?”

By analyzing digital stories and the four interviews using grounded theory, I was part of what I studied not separated from it (Charmaz, 2006). I used grounded theory to shape the conceptual content and direction of the study while leaving room for emerging analysis that can exist (Charmaz, 2006). As a researcher, my interaction with the data formed the direction of the analysis of digital stories versus an external prescription. I chose the grounded theory research process because of the fluidity, interaction, and open-ended nature of this type of analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Before experiencing and analyzing the data, I could not define what theory would emerge from the codes, concepts, and categories developed. I had look to past research to guide my analysis and understanding of the digital stories created. However, I aimed for students’ stories to inform the theory that developed over the course of this research (Willox et al., 2012).

Positionality

My role as a researcher was influenced by the idea of researcher/researched, reciprocity, and social constructivism. Denzin and Lincoln described research as power over another group of people (2005). Although qualitative researchers made progress in creating more inclusive research, historically researchers silenced and marginalized oppressed groups (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I still risked portraying underserved students in higher education negatively or unfairly. As a researcher, I was telling marginalized groups’ stories.

I questioned the privileged position of researcher/researched as part of my study. As a researcher, the power dynamic is an issue of reciprocity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2001). I held a certain power in relation to the college students I asked to complete a digital story or interview. I was in a position of power over the students who participated to create digital stories. This power dynamic had the potential to shape students' responses. Ideally, research should be an even exchange between researcher and researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Although I aimed to construct truth from students' stories, I conducted the study and coded the data. I wrote the research from their stories. My role as a researcher undermined reciprocity because of the power inherent in the researcher/researched dynamic.

My research included a sense of responsibility to the "Other" or the researched (Scheurich, 1996). In the context of this study, I interviewed underrepresented college students from low-income families about the barriers to attending college. I am not from a rural or low-income family, and I had to carefully listen to their stories without "othering" their stories. As Scheurich covered in the *Masks of Validity*, valid research includes a responsibility to protect the experience of the "Other" (1996).

I aimed for students' stories to guide the research. I saw truth and knowledge as socially constructed, or determined through social interactions and community (Creswell, 2013). Research participants, students from rural communities, told the story that literature and research failed to tell (Downey & Anyaegbunam, 2010). Even though I aimed to seek truth from others' stories, my background and experience affected my interpretation. My background as a Southern woman from suburban Alabama, and experience as a doctoral student in Higher Education Administration, still influenced my analysis of rural Montanans' stories (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations: Community Building Through Digital Storytelling

In examining rural students' experiences, I argued that the community story and outlook offers insight. By hearing directly from rural students about their home community, students' strengths and concerns provide outsiders a way to better understand and ultimately begin the quest for equity in rural education. By linking place and pedagogy, a community based research approach begets rural residents to describe their experience of place (Gruenewald, 2003). This research positioned residents' experiences from this area and how the space that they occupied shapes who they are, how they perceived themselves and their community, and how place made them. Place pedagogy took place through the sharing of stories for students from rural communities and into their college experience (Somerville, 2008).

Place shapes our culture and identity as well as defines power and political implications of place on lives and educational experiences (Gruenewald, 2003). Combining "critical pedagogy" and "place based education" synthesizes the "spatial aspects of the social experience" (Gruenewald, 2001, p. 3). By using place-based pedagogy, students engaged in caring about the places that they were from as part of the educational experience. Critical pedagogy is also needed for students to start to question the status quo and assumptions made about dominant sources of power involved in conventional education.

This type of project centered on place-based education. Place-conscious education uses the dimensions of place by looking at the perceptual, sociological, ideological, and ecological. These dimensions of space describe how places *make* us by shaping our possibilities and our identity (Gruenewald, 2003). Digital stories incorporated approaches that educators and students can use to learn about the place where they are from and apply that knowledge to raise consciousness about the problems and strengths of their cultural space. This type of pedagogical practice

engages students and educators as “problem solvers and place makers” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 640).

In addition, place-based education helps rural students find a relevant educational experience that can motivate students to be successful in college while also encouraging students to be invested in the area that they call home (Corbett, 2006). Creative and dynamic educational experiences encourage rural residents to re-claim their home and value the unique qualities of rural life. Movement from urban and rural educators suggests that place-based approaches to education are superior to “a generic placeless curriculum and pedagogy” (Corbett, 2006, p. 291).

Emerging arts based methodology gives students an opportunity to tell their stories where literature and research have failed communities (Downey & Anyaegbunam, 2010). Digital stories would be considered an emergent arts-based methodology as described by Somerville (2008). The emphasis is in the undoing of the dominant story and a retelling of the story based on the community members who are actually sharing their story (re-inhabitation).

Digital stories offer students a way to reframe their own upbringing and college journey. Reframing deconstructs in a way that Soja described as “a deeper exploration of those critical silences in the texts, narratives, and the intellectual landscapes of the past, an attempt to reinscribe and resituate the meaning and significance in history and in historical materialism” (1989, p. 73). Reframing allows students to retell their story and to reinscribe and resituate meaning to the rural experience. Residents claim the strengths and weaknesses of their own community and they can define those strengths/weaknesses based on their own experience in a more urban college.

Quality Assurance

The challenges and constraints for this type of analysis included students' difficulty in using technology to create and produce digital stories (Willox et al., 2012). By giving students clear and concise guidelines for the assignment, allowing class time to address technical concerns, and having personal knowledge about the technical equipment used, I attempted to minimize students' technical difficulties. In addition, students shared personal accounts that related to their decision to enter higher education. While sharing can be both powerful and healing for students, instructors attempted to ensure that students related their personal accounts to the question and purpose of the project "How did your rural experience shape your access to higher education?" In a past study of digital storytelling in a native community, some participants strayed from the original purpose or the project (Willox et al., 2012).

Several different digital stories and interviews were all part of the data collection. Triangulated inquiry, the use of different methods, sources, and types of data, guided my analysis (Creswell, 2013). By comparing themes, different types of data, and stories among the students, I had a broad and deep understanding of access and barriers for these students. By analyzing different types of data for each student and looking at themes that crossed several students, I used techniques of triangulation.

After thematic codes and concepts were created, I involved staff members from TRiO in peer debriefing. I had staff review all the digital stories and I discussed with them preliminary findings to listen to their feedback (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I ensured trustworthiness through peer debriefing with TRiO colleagues about findings during data analysis. I also created a systematic audit trail through my coding system (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

In qualitative research, issues of trustworthiness, or the believability of claims, determine credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As the researcher, I acknowledged that my background and experience working with rural students may have shaped the analysis of the data. I used member checks and analyzing several types of data to ensure validity of this researcher. Knowledge, as socially constructed and determined through social interactions and community, was the underlying assumption of the study. The researcher's background and experiences influence how data are gathered and interpreted from participants (Creswell, 2013).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Fourteen students were included in the study. Below is a list of the students' pseudonyms, where they are from, and population size. Following the list of students, is a brief description of students' stories and how they conducted their digital stories. I then describe the identities, rural, American Indian, first-generation, and low SES that defined the student population in this study.

Table 2			
<i>Research Participants</i>			
Name	Location	Population	Identities
Wyatt	Charlo/Columbia Falls	439	American Indian, financial barriers, non-traditional
Chad	Condon	343	First-generation
Hollie	Ronan	1,916	American Indian, first-generation, financial problems, non-traditional
Jamie	Plains	1,064	First-generation, financial barriers, non-traditional
Lawrence	Rocky Boy	890	American Indian, first-generation, non-traditional
Tanya	Shelby	2,596	American Indian, non-traditional
Jenny	Box Elder	794	American Indian, financial barriers, first-generation
Lena	Browning	1,035	American Indian
Tara	Arlee	602	American Indian, financial barriers
Shinnell	Seeley	1,659	American Indian, financial barriers, first-generation
Amanda	Victor	745	Financial barriers
Taylor	Havre	9,771	Financial barriers
Jewel	Lewistown	5,900	Financial barriers
Adam	Havre	9,771	Financial barriers, Veteran, non-traditional

Descriptions of Participants

Wyatt

Wyatt was from Charlo, Montana, a town of 439 people located on the Flathead Reservation. Wyatt faced adversity throughout his life. He was put into a group home and moved to Columbia Falls, a small town in Northern Montana. Wyatt dropped out of high school and later received his GED after spending two summers taking classes. He worked in the oil fields of North Dakota to make money before coming to University of Montana.

Wyatt chose to film his digital story outside of class. He filmed himself talking about his college struggles. His video was short and he told his story about getting to college in a curt but confessional tone.

Chad

Chad grew up in the Seeley Swan valley, in a small town called Condon. Chad struggled academically throughout middle and high school. His teachers often told him he would never go to college. He is the first one from his family to go to college and many family members have not graduated from high school. His mom has always supported him and encouraged him with school.

Chad filmed his digital story in class with partners. His approach was to tell about the struggles he encountered and how he had made it. Chad's digital story had an inspirational message to students struggling in school, "don't give up."

Hollie

Hollie attempted to go to college after high school. She had grown up going to UM for Upward Bound each summer. However, she had to drop out to work. Now that she is back in school, she feels like she has a much better idea of what she wants to do. She is pursuing

education despite having to take extra math classes to graduate. Hollie grew up on a reservation near the Mission Mountains before her family moved to the Missoula area. When she moved to Missoula and away from the reservation, she experienced racism against American Indians for the first time. Moving away from her reservation was a difficult transition because she left family and culture that are important to her.

Hollie participated in a digital story and interview. Hollie completed her digital story in class and filmed the story with a partner from class. In both the interview and digital story, Hollie was open to talking about her journey to and in college.

Jamie

Jamie grew up and lived in Plains, MT before coming back to college. Jamie explained, “I did come here after high school and it was a very different experience. I am suffering now. I didn’t drop classes. I didn’t know. I am on academic probation because there wasn’t the help 11 years ago that there is now.” Jamie was pursuing a degree in pharmacy because she had previously been a pharmacy technician but wanted more for her children and her family. Jamie shared about her college journey in both a digital story and interview.

Lawrence

Lawrence decided to come back to college because he wanted a better life for his wife and children. He had tried to get into the military but was always bogged down by processes and paperwork. Now that he has committed to college, he is determined to get a degree. He will never move back to his hometown and reservation, Rocky Boy. He believed “Rocky Boy is probably the worst place you can go in Montana.”

Lawrence’s video was substantially longer than other students. In Lawrence’s digital story, he shared openly about the reservation where he lived and the difficulties he encountered

in making it to college. From a researcher's perspective, the digital story appeared to be a way for Lawrence to tell himself and others that he was going to succeed by graduating college.

Tanya

Tanya was from Shelby, MT, a town 87 miles away from the nearest city of 50,000 residents. Tanya was pursuing pharmacy but had found that her greatest struggle in college was academics. Faith was an important support factor in her college journey. She had also found guidance from the Native American Center and TRiO. Tanya partnered with two other students in class to film her digital story. She followed an outline, quickly discussed barriers and supports, and was ready to be off camera.

Jenny

Jenny grew up in Box Elder on the reservation. She was always surrounded by family and is close to her seven siblings. Leaving her family to go to college had been difficult. She saved money to get to college but said that GEAR UP made college financially possible for her to attend. Jenny created her video outside of class. Her video also took on a confessional tone especially when she talked about missing her family.

Lena

Lena first attended Montana State University, followed by Browning Community College (BCC), and was about to graduate from the University of Montana. Lena's mother, who works at BCC, and Lena's best friends from high school have been support factors in continuing in college. Lena's native heritage was important to her and she ultimately wanted to go back to her community, Browning reservation, to help people at some capacity. Lena filmed in class but did not work with a partner.

Lena produced an in-depth video that was informative about the barriers and supports to college. She also agreed to be interviewed. In her interview Lena talked further about challenges and supports in her college journey. In particular, she talked more about the reservation where she grew up and the plans she had for after college.

Tara

Tara grew up on the Flathead Reservation in the small town of Arlee. Her family had been the biggest support and yet one of her biggest challenges in completing college. Family problems had made it difficult to stay at school and focus but she knew she could never make it in college without the support of her family. Because Tara needed to work to stay in college, finding a balance between work and school was difficult.

Tara's digital story was filmed independently outside of class. Her story appeared to be both honest and raw. Tara spoke openly about the family challenges she faced and how they influenced her college journey.

Shinnell

Although Shinnell moved around as a child and spent much of her time in a small town in East Texas, her family moved to the town of Seeley with 1,659 residents. She was half Native American and not registered with her tribe, but has still found great support from the Native American Center as well as receiving a Native American Scholarship. Although she was hesitant to start college after spending the last year abroad, she has found great community and connected with her culture and heritage while being at UM.

Shinnell completed her digital story in class. She also agreed to participate in the interview. Although she was friendly and approachable during the interview, her digital story

captured the essence of her college journey. Shinnell did not have much to add when we sat down for an interview.

Amanda

Amanda was from Victor, MT, a town of only 745 people, and went to Victor High School that has a student population of 300 because students come from other surrounding rural areas. Amanda had attended school with the same people and friends since she was in kindergarten. Transitioning to college had been difficult because of having to learn to meet people for the first time. And even though she had support from her high school teachers, she felt that she did not have the academic preparation that students had at larger high schools. No AP classes or higher-level courses were offered at Victor. In Amanda's digital story, she seemed annoyed and frustrated with the educational system she came from while being thankful for a supportive community and high school teachers.

Taylor

Taylor was from Havre, MT, a larger town than many others in the study. However, Havre is geographically isolated and is over 100 miles from the nearest town of 50,000 people. Taylor decided to come to college to get away from the small town that she disliked. She loved Missoula and enjoyed being in a bigger city. However, transitioning to college had been difficult. Taylor was always worried about the cost of college and how she will pay off her debt after she finishes her degree.

Taylor completed her digital story in class. Other students were in the class while she was being filmed. After telling her story, students and the instructor asked her questions about her journey to college. Taylor's digital story brought up a class discussion about choosing majors and financial barriers.

Jewel

Jewel came from Lewistown, MT, a larger town in the study but geographically isolated in its placement in the state. Lewistown is over 100 miles from a town of 50,000 residents. Jewel felt lost after coming to UM. She was overwhelmed by the campus size and meeting people. TRiO and joining a sorority had been support factors in Jewel's college journey. Jewel quickly discussed barriers and supports in her digital story. She made her digital story in class. The video was short and to the point.

Adam

Adam came to college after being injured in the military. His college education was part of his vocational rehabilitation. Adam had lost his grandparents since he had been in college. Their deaths were challenging for him because he was so far away from friends and family. "I had no one. No friends. Nobody. I drank a lot." His vocational rehabilitation counselor got him back on track to graduate. TRiO had also provided him with resources and academic support to assist him in his college journey.

Adam completed his digital story at home. He spoke very openly about his struggles and shared about personal problems that he chose to include. Adam's digital story took a candid and confessional tone.

Student Identities

Rural

All 14 students in the study were included because of their rural status. Eleven students lived in an area of under 2,500 residents. Three students were from small communities that were geographically isolated from towns of 50,000 residents or more. All students were from Montana

or had spent some of their time growing up in the state. Students from rural California or Alaska were not included.

American Indian

Wyatt, Hollie, Lawrence, Tanya, Jenny, Lena, Shinnell, and Tara, or eight of the students identified as American Indian. Students brought up their identity by talking about their tribe, the reservation where their family was from or currently lived, and receiving a Native American Scholarship. Students varied in how much they talked about their identity as an American Indian. For Hollie, Lawrence, Shinnell, and Lena, their status as an American Indian was crucial to their story. Other students, like Wyatt or Tara, barely mentioned this part of their identity.

First Generation

Chad, Hollie, Jamie, Lawrence, Jenny, and Shinnell were first-generation students. Although more students in the study may have been classified as a first-generation student, these six students described their first-generation status as a barrier or as a reason for them to succeed. Chad, Jamie, and Lawrence seemed determined to finish their degree as a way to make their families proud.

Non-traditional

Six students classified as non-traditional students. Wyatt, Hollie, Lawrence, Jamie, Tanya, and Adam all identified as being non-traditional or adult learners. Wyatt classified as non-traditional by receiving a GED before attending college. Adam was both a veteran and took time off before starting in college. Jamie, Hollie, Tanya, and Lawrence all were adult learners and had several years between high school and being in college.

Low-income or Financial Difficulties

Chad, Lawrence, Tanya, and Lena were the only students who did not describe financial struggles in their digital stories. All of the other 10 students talked about financial barriers in their lives. Students referred to financial aid, needing scholarships, having to work to afford college, and student debt. Because one of the qualifying factors of TRiO is being from a low-income family, I know low SES was a barrier for some of the 14 students. However, students did not have to classify their financial status as part of the study. I only grouped students in this category if they talked about their financial status as a barrier.

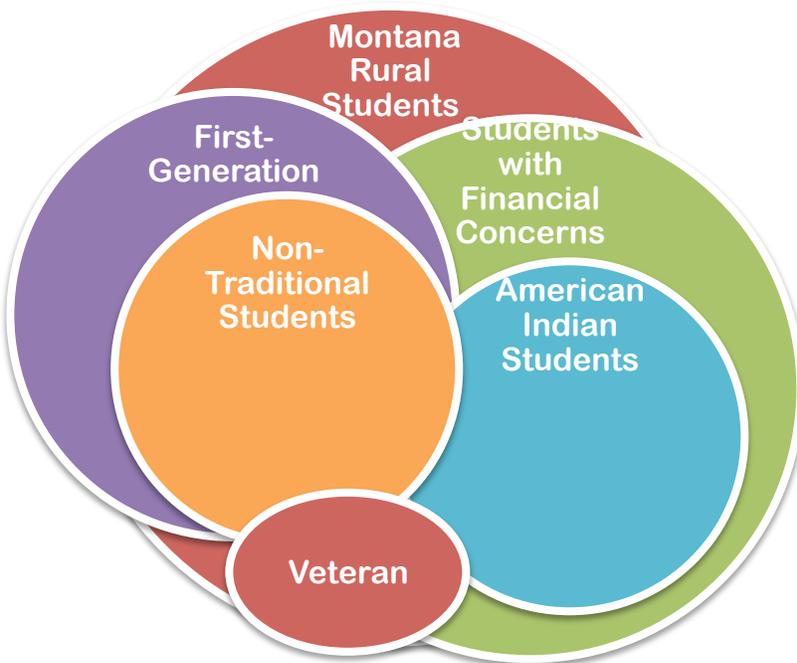


Figure 1. Overlapping identities of the study participants.

Overlapping Identities

As shown in Figure 1 above, 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.

Research Questions

I aimed to examine (a) rural, low SES 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. I sought answers to the following questions.

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?

Barriers and Supports

In the following section, I include a list of the barriers and supports. I used themes that were common in literature on rural students to assist in creating codes. I created codes and themes that emerged from the data such as family support, family problems and health issues, on-campus support, pathway to college, and self-motivation.

Barriers and supports are listed together as factors that influenced college students' journeys, because barriers and supports to college enrollment were not always mutually exclusive. Factors in the literature review such as 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 and I chose to

address each concept as a theme instead of strictly as a barrier or a support. Most themes in the study had elements of being both a barrier and a support.

College Choice

Based on students' responses, I grouped responses on college choice into three categories. Location, academic programs, and financial reasons guided students' decision to choose the University of Montana. Students chose UM to be close to home. Students selected UM based on specific programs offered. Last, students decided to attend UM because of financial scholarships and in-state tuition.

In their digital stories, students expressed that they wanted to be close to home. Some students desired to go farther away but ended up staying close to home. For example, Chad shared in his digital story,

I chose Missoula because it's close. I actually wanted to go to Virginia. We went there on a trip one time. I felt like I could build up my opportunities better there. But I decided to stay here; it's close to home. I like going home to see my mom. We get along really well.

In an interview, Hollie, talked about the financial and emotional benefits of living with family members while studying at UM. Being able to live with family provided both emotional and financial support in making college feasible for Hollie.

Students also decided on UM based on specific academic programs and parents' perceptions of programs. For instance, Jamie came to UM because the pharmacy school was located in Missoula and she knew she wanted to be a pharmacist. Tanya had a similar reason to choose UM, "I am studying microbiology and forensics. I chose UM because my parents really wanted me to go to pharmacy school and UM has a great pharmacy school." Jewel wanted to attend UM for the Fine Art program.

Students in the study made choices on where to attend college based on financial reasons. Amanda expressed a desire to go elsewhere but only being able to afford the University of Montana. Amanda shared in her digital story, “UM was not my first choice. I wanted to go to Carroll but I didn’t have enough money.” Other students expressed similar sentiments of being limited by in-state school options. For example, an American Indian student in the study, Shinnell, was able to attend UM because of Native American scholarships that made college affordable.

Students in this study had “made it” to a flagship university. Although students expressed financial concerns, these concerns did not prohibit them from studying at a flagship university. Two students had attended community colleges and transferred, but other students had found ways to finance their education at UM. Some of the students in the study received Native American scholarships. One student talked of the financial support of GEAR UP, a federal program encouraging middle and high school students to attend college. Financial concerns were about the cost of college not about the cost of UM. Students never discussed community college or regional universities as more cost effective options.

Parental Expectations

Parental expectations varied for students in the study. While some parents pushed their students to attend college, other students’ parents discouraged their children to go to college. For instance, Taylor’s parents had concerns about the debt coming with a college degree. Taylor said, “My parents weren’t the most supportive of me going to college.” Another student expressed that her family could not afford to help with college. So although the parents were not advising against college, the student was dependent on scholarships to attend college.

For three traditional students in the study, parents' expectations did play an important role in the students attending college. For instance, Shinnell shared in her interview,

to be super transparent, the primary reason I'm here is because of expectations from my parents. I'm not exactly sure of what I want to study and start now, but because of their prodding and nudging, I was just like ok, fine. I'm coming.

Tanya originally chose to come to UM because of her parents. Tanya's parents wanted her to attend pharmacy school and UM has the only pharmacy school in the state. Jewel said her parents were one of the biggest supports in her college journey because "they encourage me with anything I decide to do."

Six of the 14 digital stories came from non-traditional students, students who delayed enrollment, had dependents, or were financially independent for financial aid purposes. In the non-traditional students' stories, parents' expectations about college were less relevant. In Jamie's story, parents had encouraged her to go to college after high school but had almost "given up" on the possibility of her returning to school 6 years later. The non-traditional students cited supporting their family, wanting to make a better life for their family, and being tired of "dead end jobs" as their reasons for returning back to college. Non-traditional students did not talk about parents as a major factor in returning or deciding to attend school.

Financial Status

Money was 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 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 UM 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.

Expectations and Aspirations

Jamie had a clear goal of wanting to become a pharmacist. She knew that she wanted to go to college because she knew that she wanted to get into pharmacy school. Any other student who expressed an aspiration did so with more ambiguity. For instance, Lena expressed in her interview that she had previously wanted to attend medical school but she questioned whether it was now possible with a switch of majors. She knew she wanted to eventually go back and help people in her reservation but did not know when or how she would be able to best do so.

Lawrence was determined to get a college degree but did not mention what he wanted to get the degree in or what he wanted to do with a college degree. Amanda studied Health and Human Performance because she was interested in healthy living but was unsure of what she would do with the degree.

Students had aspirations but there was also ambiguity in what or how they would accomplish their goals. Students expressed their desire to complete college, get good grades, and receive scholarships. However, students also confided that they had no idea what they wanted to study or what they wanted their career to be. Some students admitted to feeling lost or discouraged because they did not know what they wanted to study.

Taylor's college journey showed the perplexity of students' educational aspirations. On the one hand, Taylor stated in her digital story, "During my time in college, I am going to try to get scholarships, get good grades, and get a degree." On the other hand, there was much confusion in what that degree would be or how to pay off student debt.

What I like most about college is having options. I like having options but I don't know what I'm doing with these options. I've changed my major about five times. Everyone says I have time to decide, but time goes really fast. I don't know what I'm doing after college. Trying to find a job. Pay off loans.

Academic Preparation

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."

Chad had a different situation but still experienced academic struggles. He felt that lack of academic preparation was one of his greatest challenges in college.

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.

Yan found that science courses and college preparation contributed to students' success in college (2002). 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 Victor High School. It's 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].

First-generation Status

Six students identified as first-generation students, or neither parent had graduated from college. Although more students in the study could have been first-generation, these six students shared first-generation as part of their identity and college journey. In this study, students were more likely to be first-generation due to their participation in TRiO. One of the qualifications for getting TRiO support is being a first-generation student.

Most students in the study expressed the challenge of lack of information about college processes. Navigating the college process is difficult and that challenge intensifies if neither parent attended college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Chenowith & Galiher, 2004). However, some students mentioned their first-gen status as a source of pride and the sentiment that “I *will* be the first to graduate from college.” Chad shared about being a first-generation student. “My family never went to college ever. A lot of my family didn't finish high school. I will be the first one to get a degree.”

Shinnell, a student in the study, expressed how lost she was because of being a first-generation student. She needed more information about the college process that her parents could not provide. She sought the resources of TRiO to help navigate the college process as a first-generation student.

The part that really intrigued me [about being in TRiO] was being first-generation. In the application process, I had a lot of questions and my parents had never been to college

well only like one semester of college. I didn't know what I was doing and I thought someone can help me with this.

Gender

Students in the study did not address gender issues in attending college in their digital stories or interviews. I did not see any noticeable difference between men and women in college going decisions. More women than men were part of the study. Out of 14 digital stories, there were only 4 men. However, the sample was not large enough to make a conclusion about college-going behaviors of rural men and women.

Race

In Montana 6.5% of the population is American Indian. In this study, 8 of the 14 students in the study, or 57%, identified as American Indians. American Indian students in the study expressed challenges in moving from their reservations to the university setting. Hollie expressed her confrontation with racism and sexism after moving from a reservation.

When I moved here it was a huge culture shock. In our tribe and actually in a lot of native tribes, women are not looked at as inferior. And either I didn't have it or I don't remember it, but I didn't experience racism until I moved off the reservation. So when I moved off {the reservation}...I was called names, people followed me around. Then it was just like this acceptance, this social acceptance to demean women. That was never ever a thing. When I grew up my stepdad actually told me that women are more important than men because they bring life. There are councils for certain things where the men are chiefs but he counsels to the women elders who give him advice. Women were integral. When I moved off, it was constantly expressed this difference to me.

However, students in the study also mentioned the supports of a strong community formed with other Native Americans on campus. This connection and support network acted as a support to college completion. Shinnell expressed that college has actually been a way to connect with other Native Americans.

The Native American Center is so great. I was separated from my culture. And I was also nervous because I'm half and I'm not enrolled. I didn't know how people would respond to me, but it was amazing. They are so welcoming . . . I am really comfortable there.

Lena shared that “I love spending time with my friends here. I love the atmosphere of a university.” She was able to find new community on campus while maintaining a relationship with her best friends from her reservation.

Students in the study wanted to give back to their communities and families back home.

Lena stated,

Our tribe needs a lot of help. We have earned this reputation of being terrible, I guess. We can't work together. I think in the next few years we are going to get it together and in that time I will figure out what I'm doing and how I can contribute to that.

Transition

Some students expressed the difficulty in adapting to college in their digital stories.

Amanda shared difficulties transitioning to college because she was used to knowing everyone in her small town and high school. Jewel said a challenge in transitioning was feeling lost and being lost on campus. One student missed her family and siblings; that made transitioning emotionally challenging. 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.

Taylor experienced difficulty transitioning to college while also feeling more included in a bigger town. Although she had some struggles adapting, she enjoyed being in a larger town and out of her small town environment in Havre.

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 . . . I've been here for two years but I decided to come here the month before school started and the whole time I've been here I have struggled with transitions from high school and with financial status. My family wasn't the most supportive of me going to college.

Rural Values

Leaving the community is complex decision for rural students. Rural values contribute to the complexity of leaving home. As found by Jones (1994), rural values include (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. Both family and a sense of community guided Jamie's digital story and interview. She liked her life in her small town and it was a difficult decision to leave her life there and start college. She felt a sense of community in Plains. It took her years to decide to come back to college. Her family and friends all live in Plains, MT.

Everybody was friends. It was really nice. You knew everybody and everybody's parents. You couldn't do much of anything without someone hearing about it. I would consider moving back. It's a good place to grow up and a good place to raise a family. The job that I worked was as a pharmacy technician and I'm going back to go get my degree in pharmacy. My boss ran the Plains Drugstore, it's called; she went to pharmacy school here and her daughter is in pharmacy school here and so is my cousin.

Her extended and immediate family as well as her former bosses supported her journey back to college and made it possible for her to come back to school.

They have been really supportive. When my son was sick, my mother-in law took off four days of work to take my son. When I need to study at night, my husband will watch the kids. My bosses have been really supportive. If I needed help with anything, they would do it. They would do anything for me.

Tanya expressed the importance of faith in her college journey.

I am a huge believer in going to church. I'm a huge believer of faith and that's helped me a lot . . . You have no idea of what you're doing. It's ok to not have control of your future. I'm a huge believer that someone does know what you're going to do and that's God. If you have huge faith in him and in yourself you'll do great.

The majority of the students in the study mentioned family as an important value in their lives and in their college process. Lawrence wanted to attend college because his mother could never afford to graduate even though she had started college. Hollie's family supported her by

letting her live at home so that she could work less. Lena's mother encouraged her to go to school but made a point not to talk about "missing" Lena so that she would continue and finish her degree.

Leaving "Home"

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.

Lena had a different feeling about her reservation and 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 Browning."

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

I went to Havre 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, Amanda 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 Victor High 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.”

Finding a Place to Belong in College

Amber expressed her difficulties transitioning from a small high school. She said, “Since it was a small school, I knew everybody since kindergarten. Going from that is tough because I don’t know anyone and I’m not a very social person. I don’t put myself out there.” Others expressed “feeling lost,” “actually getting lost,” and “not knowing what to do.”

One student, Lena, adjusted to college by surrounding herself with a community from her small town and reservation, Browning. 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.

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.

Family Problems and Health Issues

Out of the 14 digital stories, 8 of the students identified as Native American. Six of the eight Native 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 I 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. "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."

Family Support

I included family support because I found that support and expectations were different. Many of the research participants were non-traditional students. Support came not only from parents, but also from husbands, children, and cousins. American Indian students in the study also shared the importance of extended family members in supporting their college journey.

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 & Wolverton, 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 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.

Students valued the support of husbands, uncles, aunts, grandparents, parents, and in-laws as crucial support factors in their college journeys.

Self-Efficacy

Chad shared in his digital story, "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." Although Chad struggled with school all his life, he also believed he could succeed in college. Lawrence 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."

In C&I 160, instructors covered resiliency, grit, and perseverance. Students in the class and in the study learned about study skills, how to find resources on campus, adaptation techniques, and the importance of resiliency and grit to being successful in college. In this study, students talked about the importance of resiliency and how they learned that they could fight through so that they received a degree.

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. Students stated, “I love learning” or “I love school.” Students also made comments like “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.” Jamie left a job, her home community, and because she believed that she could attain a degree.

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 transition class, C&I 160.

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 C&I 160, a 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 of Montana because she spent her summers at UM 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. 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).

Intersecting Identities

Students have multi-faceted and many components of their identity (Renn & Reason, 2013). Although some students in the study expressed and identified with rural values such as faith, sense of community or strong connection to family, students associated with other parts of their identity as well (Jones, 1994). Students also identified as minority students, veterans, first-generation students, and adult learners. Students' many identities influenced their journey to and in college. For many students in the study, rural consisted of one component of their identity. One student was rural, a veteran, and also a first-generation student. Another student was rural, American Indian, and low SES. Other components of their identity contributed to their college-going behavior.

As a researcher, I found isolating rural as the only identifying aspect of the student difficult. Students talked about struggles, supports, and connection to their rural community or family. However, identifying the college attendance pattern based on their rural identity was complicated. I found rural complex to isolate because of students' other inputs such as gender, race, family, financial status, and academic preparation (Astin, 1993).

In my research questions, I wrote of barriers and supports to college enrollment. However, many of the students in the study were sophomores or juniors. They talked more about factors influencing them in college rather than leading up to attending college. Students relied on pre-college supports such as family members, GEAR UP, and high school teachers, but those supports were not isolated to their pre-college experience. For example, a former boss supported Jamie to attend college but that same boss continued to encourage Jamie during hard times in her

college experience. Jamie's boss was a factor that influenced college enrollment but also affected Jamie's continuation at college. Amanda's high school teacher influenced her to attend college but she also felt that she could turn to this teacher with academic challenges or for moral support while she was still in college. Participants tended to talk about more recent and relevant experiences in their college journey.

Delimitations

There were several decisions that influenced the findings of this study. First, only students at a flagship university participated in the study. Rural students' experience in an ivy-league institution, a community college, a tribal college, an urban institution, or an art institute could have produced different findings. Distance from family, financial burdens, college type, and the college choice process would alter if attending a different type of institution. By only looking at students at a flagship university, I could not compare how the institution type affected students' journey to college.

Participation in the study was limited to students associated with TRiO. More students could have participated if I expanded the study to all freshman transition classes or opened up the study to the entire student body. Students in TRiO had pre-determined barriers to college such as low-income, first generation, or a learning disability. Expanding the study to a larger population of students could have altered the findings.

Limitations

Out of the 49 students who completed the digital story, only 14 students identified as rural students. While this study is qualitative and the number of participants does not determine the quality of the study, I would have liked to hear more rural students' stories to provide a thicker description of rural students' college experience.

TRiO proved to be an important part of students' stories. However, TRiO staff was present for the majority of the filming of the videos. Their presence could have influenced how positively students portrayed the importance of TRiO. In addition, the digital story was part of a class assignment. TRiO instructors were reviewing students' stories even if staff was not present when students filmed their story.

Because students were being filmed, it is possible that students put a positive spin to their stories. Students had to shorten the telling of their college journeys to create 3-5 minute videos. Students could have presented "curated selves" or portrayed their stories with more positive, simple, or easy journeys to college due to the time limit and how they wanted to portray their story on film.

Students with overlapping identities made it difficult to isolate rurality. Students' experience was affected by many components of their identity. Students were not only rural but oftentimes low SES, first-generation, or non-traditional. Their challenges accessing college were based on many different factors. Rurality, as a barrier or a support, was difficult to determine.

Conclusion

Rural college students had many different components of their identities that affected their college journeys (Renn & Reason, 2013). In my literature review, I came across many conflicting studies about rural students. When completing the literature review, I felt confused and surprised by the contradictory results I found in studies. After completing this study, I better understood the contradictions I saw in literature. I realized that 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.

Although I originally set out to discover barriers and persistence factors for rural students, my data is closely aligned with the research that supports Native American students. Out of the 14 digital stories, 8 of the students identified as Native American. Family problems and health issues, family support, on-campus support, pathway to college, and self-efficacy were all codes that emerged and were prevalent barriers and persistent factors in American Indian persistence literature (Guillory & Wolverson, 2008; HeavyRunner & Celles, 2002; Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, & Nitzarim, 2013).

Despite differences between students' stories, I found common supports that 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. The most common supports mentioned in this study were the help of TRiO staff and the help of C&I 160, as academic and emotional guidance.

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). However, rural students in this study repeatedly highlighted the importance of family in accessing college. Family includes aunts, uncles, grandparents, in-laws, and children.

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. 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 et al., 2013).

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In this study, I set out to find barriers and supports in the study of rural students' college access. After reviewing the literature, students' digital stories, and interview transcriptions, themes of self-motivation, pathways to college, family support, and on-campus support emerged from the data. In this chapter, I tie my findings to previous literature in research. I then write of the limitations of this study, address the research questions, and end with suggestions for future practice and research.

After hearing stories of college students who "made it" to college, I realized that I neglected the concept of self-determination and motivation theories in my preliminary literature review. Many students shared how important their desire to succeed was in leading them to or back to college. They had both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that made college a priority for these students. For many students, they forewent full-time employment or took on debt in addition to the expense of raising a family to make college happen. Motivation theories proved to be an important component of students' stories of college access.

Second, I found the importance of pathway and pipeline support that started from preschool or elementary school. Students in the study talked about their parents' ambivalence or mistrust of receiving a college education. More often, students' parents encouraged them to go to college but their parents had not attended and did not know how to navigate college processes such as applying for admission or financial aid. Students attested to their need for resources and

information from sources beyond family. Additionally, three students mentioned programs like GEAR UP and Upward Bound that provided them support, preparation, and skills to apply to college. Students expressed the need for support about the college process from accurate and dependable sources. In this chapter, I look at information on P-16 or pathways to college as way for rural students to access college. In accordance with promising practices for P-16, in Chapter 5 I examine college visits, early financial aid information, and family support as ways to improve college access for rural students.

Last, every student who participated in this project remarked about the influence of TRiO in making college possible. Students chose to highlight the importance of TRiO as a support system and as a highlight to their college transition. Because of the importance of TRiO in the study, I look at how TRiO staff helps students navigate the way from high school to college. I examine how TRIO increases college completion nationally, but I also consider TRIO's impact in the state of Montana where this study took place. I use college access and completion studies and research conducted by the Office of Public Instruction (OPI), Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE), Montana College Access Network (MCAN), and the national support network of National College Access Network (NCAN).

Tying Study Findings to Literature Review

Motivation Theories

In the study, I found that students were self-motivated and exhibited a deep desire to attain a college degree. Instructors of C&I 160 taught students about grit, resiliency, and gave them the resources and support to overcome challenges and meet their goal. From hearing the digital stories and talking with TRiO students, I saw the importance of teaching resiliency to

students. I believe students are more likely to overcome college barriers if they have confidence to do so.

Researchers supported the discovery of students' self-motivation and efficacy as an important support factor in completing college. Students can be taught resiliency (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). 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).

Hollie, Jamie, Lawrence, Chad, and Tara exhibited self-resiliency and determination to get to college and do well. However, students had different motivating factors that moved them to start college such as family, degree, career, and a way to leave a dead end job. Several theories described how students motivate themselves to learn and attain academically (Griffin, 2006). Aspects of self-determination, socio-cognitive, and attribution theories all played a part in students' pursuit to attend college.

In this study, some students mentioned how they liked learning and realized they were good at certain subjects. This realization gave them confidence and encouraged them to study harder, perform higher in classes, and take additional roles like being a Teaching Assistant. Self-determination theory is a motivation theory that looks at how students' motivations affect their learning experience and achievement (Griffin, 2006). Self-determination theory can be understood as a way for students to learn based on their intrinsic motivation to pursue academic

achievement (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Students choose to pursue education because they find satisfaction in the activity of learning and that enjoyment in learning provides greater contentment than the extrinsic forces such as rewards (an A, or a job) or avoiding punishment (bad grade, unemployment, or disappointment of friends or family).

Students in this study exhibited that they could do well based on their own internal motivation and belief in themselves. Several students mentioned that they were determined to meet their goal and that is how they made it through difficult circumstances to attend college. Future goals (being a college graduate) or aspirations (desire to be a pharmacist) led to attending college. These situations exemplify socio-cognitive theory. Socio-cognitive theory directly related to students' goal setting and the belief that they could achieve the goals they set (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Students had a belief in their efficacy in order to succeed in their academic endeavors.

Attribution Theory describes how and what students attribute success or failure to in an academic setting (Weiner, 1984). Students may blame unfamiliar circumstances or situations to things outside of their control or within their control. For instance, a student could attribute a good grade to (a) luck (no control), or (b) lots of studying (has control). Additionally, a student could blame a poor grade on (a) lack of effort (has control), or (b) task was too difficult (no control). How students define success and failure can affect future expectations. For instance, a student in this study attributed a failing semester to a relative dying, not her lack of ability. She was able to pull up her grades the following semester because she did not attribute her failure to her ability but to circumstances outside of her control.

Students like Lawrence, Jamie, and Chad exhibited traits of self-determination and belief that they could attend college and that they would attain a college degree. Despite circumstances

such as health problems, financial insecurity, and family crisis, students still believed that they could graduate from college. Students' attitudes, motivation, and levels of self-confidence impacted performance in academic settings. Motivation theories such as self-determination, socio-cognitive, and attribution helped students overcome difficult circumstances to attend and move through the college experience (Griffin, 2006).

Grit and Resiliency

Because all of the research participants were part of TRiO and participated in the class, C&I 160, I found it relevant that topics such as grit, resilience, and persistence were part of the class curriculum. Teaching students that they can develop grit, passion, and perseverance to reach long-term goals, to overcome challenges, has proven to be successful for students (Duckworth et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2013). Students can learn to overcome challenges to continue in college.

Grit is the ability to pursue long-term goals with perseverance despite challenges. In a study of Black males in a predominately White institution (PWI), Black males who exhibited higher amounts of grit tended to have higher grades in college (Strayhorn, 2013). Despite similar ACT scores, high school grades, and educational aspirations, grittier males performed higher in college. According to Strayhorn's study, teaching grit may be a way for helping underrepresented students find success in college (2013). Similarly, underrepresented students in my study exhibited traits of grit as a way to overcome challenges and continue in college.

Scholars in education have begun to critique the concept of grit for several reasons. First, scholars critiqued the concept of grit because grit researchers do not take into account systemic oppression that affects many underrepresented students. Some students can try to achieve academically but are often stymied by racism and the financial burdens of poverty. Also

problematic, grit research furthers the narrative of White students work hard to succeed while Black and Latino students cannot reach success due to laziness (Thomas, 2014). Scholars also questioned how to teach grit, grit's moral value, and grit lacking weight to address long-term education problems.

Resilience is defined as a dynamic process that enables an individual to adapt to challenges. Resiliency scholars considered shaping the environment whereas grit scholars focused on an individual's capacity for change. Scholars who studied resiliency consider the strengths of students' situations rather than focusing purely on their high-risk factors. In addition, resilience researchers considered external factors such as family and community and how to foster positive aspects of students' lives (Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012).

Recently scholars have found that ethnic culture can be a resilience factor for underrepresented students. Specifically, Stumblingbear-Riddle and Romans looked at the positive aspects of American Indian culture that helps students persevere academically (2012). In their study, they found that self-esteem coupled with support from family and friends were important resilience factors for American Indian students. These results mirrored the results of my study in that students felt that their culture, traditions, and peer support were support factors in college that contributed to persistence.

In conclusion, grit and resiliency may both be important factors in underrepresented students' persistence, but the two concepts are different. Grit is an individual's capacity for persevering through challenging circumstances (Duckworth et al., 2007). Scholars critique grit for not taking into account systemic oppression that can influence students' academic experience (Thomas, 2014). Resiliency is a dynamic process that looks as support factors in students' lives

(Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012). Resiliency scholars look for external factors such as family and school community that help students' persist.

Pathway and Pipeline Support to College

In this study, 10 students described both academic and financial barriers that made college access difficult. They also expressed misinformation that they received over the years. Some students expressed their parents did not know much about the college process and some stated that their parents were ambivalent about the college process, but all expressed that they wished they knew more about the college process. Many were embarrassed to ask questions and wanted to figure things out on their own, but did not know where to start.

P-12 and higher education fail to serve many students in the system, but P-16 pipelines can help eliminate the barriers of access and college completion for low income and minority students. Pathway and pipeline research can help solve access and transition issues for underrepresented students in postsecondary institution. While diversity enhances the college student experience by increasing student learning, awareness, and how to interact with different types of people; diversity in higher education does not serve the intended purpose if underrepresented minorities cannot succeed at the collegiate level. In order for students to feel included in the higher education system, they must be prepared academically and socially.

As shown in the study, many students struggled to find the information needed to access college. Students like Lena and Hollie who had additional resources like GEAR UP and Upward Bound were able to navigate the college process more readily. P-16 reforms include ways to help students with challenging transitions from middle to high school and high school to college. Reform utilizes a variety of ways to increase college access and success for students. Students

and their families need information to meet college requirements (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003).

National research supported the findings in this study (Chenowith & Galiher, 2004; King, 2012). Research on rural students' college aspirations showed that ACT preparation and college visits have the greatest impacts on college-going rate in rural schools (King, 2012). Research also showed that students and families benefit from financial information about college. In research done in rural West Virginia, misinformation about financial aid and resources was cited as the largest barrier in attending college for rural students (Chenoweth & Galiher, 2004). Promising practices include college visits, early financial aid, high stakes test preparation, and supports for the transition to high school.

Family support. Ten students in this study expressed the importance of family as a support factor in their college journey. As supported by previous research, family plays an important role in the college process for American Indian students (Andrade, 2013; Guillory & Wolverton, 2002, 2008; HeavyRunner & DeCelles). American Indian students are more likely to persist in college if they have the support of their family (Thompson et al., 2013). In Guillory and Wolverton's (2008) study, family was the most frequent persistence factor for Native American students. In line with my study, family was one of the most important support factors and took on many different meanings: siblings, children, aunts and uncles, and grandparents.

According to the National Survey of College and Universities Parent Programs, university administrators have recently increased parent support networks (Savage & Petree, 2009). Two-thirds of parent programs have been developed since the year 2000. However, parent/family offices direct activities towards parents. Most popular programming includes

parent councils, parent orientation, parent newsletters, and a parent/family weekend (Savage & Petree, 2009).

Out of the 15 most prevalent programs provided by parent/family support offices, 9 programs were specifically directed towards parents. Of the most common programming, only parent/family weekends were more inclusive of families and non-traditional students. Family support and education are important and neglected persistence factors for American Indian students (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002).

Six of the 14 students in the study were non-traditional and 8 of the 14 identified as American Indian students. Both adult learners and American Indian students relied on support of family, not just parents, to succeed in college. If administrators want to see an increase in retention for both populations, family support programming needs to increase.

College visits. Students in the study mentioned feeling lost, getting lost, and struggling in the transition from high school to college. Gaining familiarity with the college process and campus was one way to alleviate problems with the college transition. College visits provided information, awareness, and assistance in the college process for students (Bedsworth et al., 2006)

Expectations about the importance of college attendance, information about college requirements, affordability, and peer culture contributed to successful college entry and completion (Bedsworth et al., 2006). As expressed in this study, students were unfamiliar with the process to fill out the FAFSA, had inaccurate information about loans; did not know how to fill out a college application, and whether they could qualify for scholarships. Visiting with a financial aid officer at a college campus can help relay this information to students. Additionally, research showed that students received information too late regarding what to expect for college

life, career options, and what to expect from college classes. Visiting college campuses early on in middle school and also high school can prevent the misinformation some students may receive from other sources.

College visits introduce middle and high school students to the college environment, expose students to the college application process, and inform them about various college options (Tierney, Bailey, Constantine, Finkelstein, & Hurd, 2009). Additionally, academic preparation, ranked most important for college access and completion, encompasses a variety of supports including college visits. College visits can offer an engaging learning experience that can influence low-income students to change their attitudes on college and become more receptive to applying for college (Morgan & Soares, 2010). College visits provide a way for students to experience college life and atmosphere while providing valuable information and experiences for students to attend a postsecondary institution.

Early financial aid. Out of the 14 students in this study, 10 mentioned the financial difficulties of attending college. Students were unfamiliar with how to navigate financial aid and scholarships. Students were burdened with debt and worried about how they would pay off their student debt after graduating from college. As college expenses rise, it is critical to provide accurate information about financial aid, scholarships, and savings plans available (Chan & Cochrane, 2008).

Currently, a gap exists between low-income and high-income students attending and completing college (Calderone, Johnson, & Hare, 2010). Low-income and minority parents tended to overestimate college costs and had inaccurate information about financing postsecondary education (Grotsky & Jones, 2004; Horn, Chen, & Chapman, 2003). The perceived cost of attending college continued to be one of the largest barriers in keeping students

from attending (Calderone et al., 2010). Those who qualified for financial aid were least likely to know about the aid.

Because students in this study qualified for TRiO, many identified as low-income students. All students, but particularly low-income students, are less likely to academically prepare for college if they believe college is not financially feasible (The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008) Currently, the perception of college costs continues to be one of the largest barriers in keeping students from attending (Calderone, Johnson, & Hare, 2010). Starting early with informing students and families about the cost of postsecondary education can affect behavior regarding financial understanding and planning (Perna, 2004).

Ten out of 14 students in this study experienced financial struggles in attending college. More information about receiving financial aid, navigating scholarship opportunities, and understanding the cost of college could have helped students in this study. The benefits of higher education, college expenses, paying for college, and completion of forms and processes are the four broad areas that should be covered for successful early college and financial aid awareness (The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008). Admissions staff, student affairs personnel, and high school counselors can alleviate some of the financial stress of college by providing accurate information.

First, students need to understand the benefits of a postsecondary education to be serious about pursuing the academic and financial challenges that may occur in getting to higher education. Additionally, students need to know about both accurate college expenses and how to navigate financial aid and the process for college scholarships. Last, students need assistance with walking through the FAFSA and understanding the entire financial aid distribution system.

These four areas have historically been barriers to higher education. Covering these areas can help students understand what is needed to get to college successfully.

Transition programs. In this study, students struggled in the transition from high school to college. Students with resources like GEAR UP and Upward Bound navigated the path to college more easily. However, students without additional resources or parents who were familiar with the college process experienced difficulties with applying to college, financial aid, finding scholarships, and academic preparation. Transition programs and seminars can help students adapt to high school and college.

Transition programs help students move between middle school to high school and later from high school to college. Transition programs provide early structured intervention to help students focus on the skills needed to succeed in high school and college (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005). Addressing academic deficiencies as well as personal issues that affect student success can help students continue in school (Fowler & Boylan, 2010).

Transition programs continue to benefit students in moving from high school to college. For first-year students, transition support is important for persistence and academic success. Transition support comes in many forms such as intensive orientation, reading one book together as a common experience for all students, bridge programs, and seminar classes about the changes that happen in college. Transitioning first-year students into college is not a single program or class but a deliberate combination of academic and extracurricular programs designed for student success (National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2006). Although retention is often pegged as the outcome of first-year programs, students' writing, oral communication, civic engagement, and intercultural/global understanding are student learning and developmental outcomes.

Students in this study repeatedly supported the evidence that transition classes aided them in their college journey. According to students' digital stories, C&I 160 provided invaluable support for many students. Transition classes or seminars are often associated with first-year and transition programming. Transition classes have proven to increase retention but student learning and development also occurs (National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2006). Objectives of transition classes include developing a connection to the institution, learning about campus resources and support, developing academic and critical thinking skills, self-exploration and personal development, and improving second-year retention rates. Students in well thought-out transition classes and seminars meet these outcomes (National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2006).

Tierney et al. researched what components make transition programs effective (2005). According to their research, there were nine components to create successful programs. These nine components include: an emphasis on the culture of the student; family engagement; incorporation of peer groups; early, structured intervention—no later than ninth grade—with consistent structure; counselors who exhibit knowledge and are available to students; access to college preparation curricula; little to no emphasis on co-curricular activities; mentoring; and results that can be achieved at a reasonable cost (Tierney et al., 2005). Emphasizing students' cultural backgrounds and working on their intellectual skills proved to be essential for successful transition programs. Working on intellectual skills included academic preparation, talking about college going strategies, self-efficacy, and financial planning.

Out of these essential components of transitioning, TRiO performed well in several measures. For instance, TRiO programs provided students with financial planning. Given the high cost of college, accurate information on financial aid and scholarships help many low-

income students access college (Tierney et al., 2005). In addition, some TRiO programs addressed self-efficacy, working on academic skills, including family, and considering cultural backgrounds as part of their services. TRiO also integrated first-year courses, offered intensive advising, and provided tutoring for students struggling academically, important components in increasing retention and academic success for students.

Support Systems in College

A theme in the study was that students needed on-campus support and support systems in college. For students in this study, they had TRiO resources. Even students who originally scoffed at the idea of extra help realized they benefited from advisors, the transition class, scholarships, book loans, and academic tutoring. Students in this study were able to access college but found that on-campus support was an important persistence factor in keeping them *in* college.

Support services offer students with increased barriers in reaching and completing college a way to succeed in the classroom, navigate financial aid, and adapt to college student life. In this study, students benefited from the support services of TRiO. More students could benefit from TRiO resources in the state of Montana. Here is information about TRiO resources within the state and room for growth.

Federally supported student support services-TRiO. TRiO, federally funded programs that were additions to the Higher Education Act, enable individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds pursue higher education and with support throughout postsecondary education into graduate school. TRiO programs offer a pathway for students who historically struggle with access and completion of a college degree (Dortch, 2012). TRiO programs primarily serve first-

generation and low-income students in addition to students with disabilities, veterans, homeless, and foster youth.

In my study, TRiO served as an important supportive factor in students' lives. In their digital stories, students discussed the importance of the advisors, tutors in academic subjects, and book and technology loans. In addition, students believed that the transition class, C&I 160, helped them gain academic skills as well as learn about resources on campus. Many students in the study were underrepresented students in higher education who statistically struggled to persist in college. Every student expressed the importance of TRiO in their journey to persist. TRiO was the most commonly cited support factor in the study.

Both legislators and some educators have questioned the money spent on TRiO as an effective and efficient use of funds. According to students in this study, federal money on TRiO is well spent. Comments like "I wouldn't still be here [in college] if it wasn't for TRiO" or "TRiO has been the biggest help" begin to tell the importance of TRiO in students' eyes. The value of TRiO in this study has larger implications for support systems in higher education. In the following section, I show how TRiO has not only made an impact in students' stories but also in completion and retention rates across the state.

Montana TRiO—completion and retention. After comparing 13 TRiO 2-year and 4-year universities to 8 non-TRiO colleges and universities within the state on various different measures, TRiO schools have higher rates of graduation and slighter higher rates of retention than their non-TRiO counterparts. In this search, I included all public and private 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities in the state.

Because Montana's population of youth in poverty rests well above the national average (20%), many college students qualify for financial aid (Pruitt, 2010). In this analysis of IPEDs

data, approximately 90% of students in colleges with and without TRiO programs were receiving state, federal, or institutional aid. Despite students coming from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, TRiO schools had a 5-point higher graduation rate than their non-TRiO peers (35.8 versus 30.2) in 2013. Additionally, in 2013 TRiO schools had a 57.8 retention rate whereas non-TRiO schools had 56.7. In support of TRiO's internal analysis, Montana students were more likely to attend and graduate with TRiO's support.

Montana percent of enrollment in TRiO. Forty percent of Montana youth classify as low-income (Pruitt, 2010) and low-income students face additional barriers in completing college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Low-income students may need additional support to navigate the college process. As shown in Table 3, up to 76% of full time students at Montana postsecondary institutions use TRiO services. The number of students that classify as low-income and first generation, both potential barriers to college completion, confirms the need for support.

As shown in Table 3, the percentage of full-time students in TRiO is particularly high for the tribal colleges, Salish Kootenai (33%), Blackfeet (44%), Fort Peck (76%), and Chief Dull Knife (70%). Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are instrumental in providing access to higher education and offering students support while preserving native traditions and culture and TRiO helps to provide support to students who hope to attend TCUs. Tribal colleges contribute to both the educational attainment and economic development in tribal regions. TRiO can help students succeed in college and ultimately help with complex challenges such as poverty and lack of economic opportunity that face students in rural tribal communities.

As shown in Table 4, TRiO exists in the majority of Montana's postsecondary institutions. Due to the increase in students' college completion with the aid of TRiO, more

institutions and students in the state could benefit from TRiO resources. In addition, institutions that have Student Support Services could benefit from some of the other programs that TRiO offers.

Table 3

Percent of Students Enrolled in TRiO Student Support Services

<u>Institution name</u>	<u>FT enrollment</u>	<u>% in TRiO</u>
The University of Montana	9446	4%
Montana Tech of the University of Montana	1661	7%
Montana State University-Billings	3162	8%
The University of Montana-Western	1196	13%
Helena College University of Montana	670	21%
Montana State University-Northern	917	26%
Rocky Mountain College	947	26%
Flathead Valley Community College	1082	32%
Salish Kootenai College	696	33%
University of Great Falls	665	34%
Blackfeet Community College	382	44%
Dawson Community College	227	61%
Chief Dull Knife College	128	70%
Fort Peck Community College	228	76%
TOTAL	21,407	13.6%
<i>Note: Based off full-time enrollment with Montana universities that have Student Support Services</i>		

Table 4

Comparison of TRiO and Non-TRiO: Graduation Rates, Retention Rates, and Aid, 2013

<u>Institution name</u>	<u>Graduation rate, total cohort</u>	<u>Full-time retention rate,</u>	<u>Percent receiving any financial aid</u>	<u>Average amount of aid</u>
TRiO Universities				
Dawson Community College	35	53	90	4807
Chief Dull Knife College	39	48	88	6277
Montana State University-Billings	48	59	90	4901
Fort Peck Community College	6	44	95	4267
Helena College University of Montana	30	53	89	4469
Montana Tech of the University of Montana	49	69	89	5702
The University of Montana	47	73	89	5772
Montana State University-Northern	37	59	88	4804
The University of Montana-Western	37	69	87	7153
Rocky Mountain College	40	68	100	15494
Blackfeet Community College	15	57	85	8057
University of Great Falls	30	69	97	14197
Salish Kootenai College	53	31	97	1443
TOTAL AVERAGE	35.84	57.84	91.07	6718.69
Non-TRiO Universities				
Highlands College of Montana Tech	28	52	91	5001
Aaniih Nakoda College	42	54	92	3608
Great Falls College Montana State University	17	51	93	5032
Little Big Horn College	16	53	87	4478
Miles Community College	40	59	92	4104
Montana State University	49	76	87	5472
Stone Child College	20	52	83	4301
TOTAL AVERAGE	30.28	56.71	89.28	4570.85

According to the data in Tables 4 and 5, schools with TRiO resources have higher graduation rates. MSU-Billings and Montana Tech have Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services (Table 4). Both institutions, MSU-Billings (48%) and Montana Tech (49%), have two of the highest graduation rates in the state. The institutions graduation rates rank 2nd and 3rd out of 23 postsecondary institutions in the state. Despite having almost 90% of their students with federal aid, both institutions still boast high graduation and retention rates in comparison to other institutions. The University of Montana (47%) and Salish Kootenai College (53%) have both Upward Bound and Student Support Services and their graduation rates are also some of the highest in the state.

According to these data (Tables 4 and 5), universities with additional arms of TRiO have higher graduation rates. MSU Billings and Montana Tech are the only universities with all three of these TRiO programs. The University of Montana and Salish Kootenai College have both Upward Bound and Student Support Services. Together, these four universities have the top four graduation rates in the state. The only non-TRiO university to share such high graduation rates is Montana State University with 49%. Out of the top five graduation rates, TRiO universities have four of the highest. More universities could benefit from the addition of Upward Bound and Talent Search. In addition, universities that do not have Student Support Services could serve more underrepresented students by adding TRiO resources.

Table 5

Montana Postsecondary Institutions and TRiO participation

<u>Institution name</u>	<u>Upward Bound</u>	<u>Talent Search</u>	<u>Student Support Services</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
*Blackfeet Community College			X	1
*Chief Dull Knife College			X	1
*Dawson Community College			X	1
*Flathead Valley Community College			X	1
*Fort Peck Community College			X	1
*Helena College University of Montana			X	1
*Montana State University-Billings	X	X	X	3
*Montana State University-Northern			X	1
*Montana Tech of the University of Montana	X	X	X	3
*Rocky Mountain College			X	1
*Salish Kootenai College	X		X	2
*The University of Montana	X		X	2
*The University of Montana-Western			X	1
*University of Great Falls			X	1
Aaniih Nakoda College				0
Carroll College				0
Great Falls College Montana State University				0
Highlands College of Montana Tech				0
Little Big Horn College				0
Miles Community College				0
Montana Bible College				0
Montana State University				0
Stone Child College				0

Addressing Research Questions

How do rural college students situate their experiences as rural citizens in relation to their experiences in college access and success to higher education?

In their digital stories, students brought up common issues in the literature on rural students in college. Rural students had varying experiences about being from a rural community as well as accessing college. Some students experienced geographic isolation and the desire to get out of their rural community as a reason to pursue a college degree. For instance, Taylor and Lawrence wanted to leave their hometowns to attain a college degree and financial success.

However, other students, like Lena and Jamie, expressed a desire to go back to their rural community as a reason for pursuing their college degree. They wanted a college degree so that they could come back and help their home community. In line with Jones (1994), they felt close to community and family and wanted to succeed in college so that they could come back to help in their rural communities after college.

What were the barriers to college enrollment to a 4-year flagship university in both their home and college community?

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. A traditional student, Jewel, struggled to transition to find her way around campus and find community.

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. In their digital stories, students shared about lack of

academic preparation in small schools, and geographic isolation before entering college, but rural status did not seem to be an overarching barrier in the study.

What were the supports to college enrollment to a 4-year flagship university in both their home and college community?

Despite barriers varying in the study, there were common supports that helped all rural students in the study. 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 Study Jams. 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 C&I 160 or the TRiO program. Students mentioned TRiO's academic advising, C&I 160, academic tutoring, book loans, and financial information as essential support factors in their college journey. Other common supports were family, pathway programs such as GEAR UP or Upward Bound, and learning about resiliency and grit as ways to overcome challenges to succeed in higher education.

Suggestions for Future Research and Practice

Suggestions for Future Research

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. Research needs to be done on rural, low-income students who have not been introduced to these resources. TRiO students recognized their privilege in receiving help. Students in the study mentioned that they knew students who were in similar circumstances (low-income, first-generation, and adult learners) but struggling because they were unaware of the resources that existed. I did not capture this population in my research.

On the other hand, I began to interview high achieving rural students who were part of an honors program. These students had different college experiences and challenges than students in TRiO. Researchers could study high-achieving rural students. Their barriers and supports could look different from the population in my research study.

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.

Digital stories proved to be an interactive and dynamic way to engage participants. Although there were some issues for students using technology or feeling uncomfortable behind a camera, I feel that future researchers would benefit from using this way to connect with students. Students shared openly and were able to use their creativity in expressing their message.

As a researcher, I was able to incorporate research into a class setting and not rely on students' participation outside of class. Because students who are non-traditional and first-generation students are significantly less likely to participate in an academic commitment outside of the classroom environment (Pascarella et al., 2004), digital stories are a way for researchers to engage this population in a classroom setting. From using digital stories, I was able to hear more stories and gain access to instructors' class time. Conducting interviews or focus groups would not have allowed me class time to access research participants.

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.

Future researchers could benefit from defining the identity they hope to research for the research participants. For instance, if I defined rural to students who were in the study, they may have been able to address that component of their identity more clearly. Instead, I asked them about their home community and barriers/supports that came from being from that area. Defining the part of the identity you hope to research whether it is gender, first-generation, income, or minority to name some examples, could be way to gain information about one component of students' increasingly complex identities. Researchers need to be specific with research participants about that component of their identity.

The link between students' experience in high school and their transition in college needs further study. More research is needed to compare and understand the relationships between institutions, students, state and federal partners. Information is needed on how these partners work together. Perspectives from students, teachers, administrators, and higher education professionals can help in creating smoother transitions and better-prepared students.

Researchers could also benefit from conducting more qualitative studies on the experience of students in TRiO Student Services. Every student in the study expressed the importance of TRiO as a support and persistence factor in their college journeys. In order to

maintain and increase funding for these types of support services, more research needs to support their worth for underrepresented students aiming to complete college.

Suggestions for Future Practice

Most importantly, I saw the relevance of TRiO and support services for students who statistically lag behind in college attendance and graduation. Every student in the study expressed the importance of TRiO in helping them continue in college. In a political climate of cutting resources, policy makers need to recognize the value of TRiO in helping underrepresented students to complete college. My study showed that students recognize and value the resources that TRiO provides to help students persist in college.

Second, I saw the value of transition programs for underrepresented students to succeed in persisting in college. Transition classes or first-year seminars help students develop academic skills; provide an orientation to campus resources; and self-exploration or personal development (National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2006). By participating in first year seminars, students are more likely to persist and improve academic performance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

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. From my research, university administrators and student affairs professionals need to increase the support to families. For example, offering childcare for student parents for little or no cost allows students with families to participate in postsecondary (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).

Students could benefit from higher education professionals' collaboration and communication with K-12 professionals to offer students, particularly underrepresented students, a clear 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. All of these partners contribute to creating successful P-16 councils and pathways. By communicating and collaborating, stakeholders and practitioners can work together to advocate for reform and resources that benefit both K-12 and higher education (Venezia et al., 2003).

Last, students need support programs to include family structures beyond parent support. As student populations continue to diversify (Renn & Reason, 2013), practitioners need to consider the needs of adult learners and minority students who value the support of extended family. According to the Family Education Model developed for the success of American Indian students, recommendations include working with families to familiarize formal/informal resources, working flexibly 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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APPENDIX A
CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent Form

Participants: Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Primary Investigator

Anna-Margaret Yarbrough
College of Education
Department of Educational Leadership,
Policy, and Technology Studies
Area: Higher Education

The University of Alabama
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102 Rose Administration Building
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Anna.m.yarbrough@gmail.com

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Please read this document and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to participate in this study.

This study is being conducted by a doctoral student in Higher Education Administration at The University of Alabama.

Background Information:

This study is designed to consider the pathways for rural students entering college. I will be looking at barriers and supports for rural students to access college.

Procedure:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following: Participate by allowing your class work, i.e. your digital story, to be used to better understand the experience of a college student and your time thus far at the University. This information is being used for research purposes about the college experience. Your identity will be kept private.

What will I be asked to do in this study?

You will have to do no additional work but you have the opportunity for your class work (i.e. your digital story) to be used in research to better understand the college journey. You will not be graded any differently on assignments and your participation is completely voluntary.

What is this study about?

Students' unique pathways and experiences in college.

Why is this study important—What good will the results do?

The findings may improve supports for college students. By learning about your college journeys, as a researcher I will gain information about the supports needed to help students get to college and succeed.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?

You have been identified because you are part of the TRiO program at the University.

How many other people will be in this study?

Every student in C & I 160 has the opportunity to participate.

How much time will I spend being in this study?

The only time is the length of time it takes you to complete assignments/video. 2-6 hours is the estimate of time of the assignment.

Will being in this study cost me anything?

No.

Will I be compensated for being in this study?

No.

What are the alternatives to being in this study?

The only alternative is not to participate.

What are my rights as a participant?

Being in this study is totally voluntary. It is your free choice. You may choose not to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. Not participating or stopping participation will have no effect on your relationships with the University of Montana.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board is a committee that looks out for the ethical treatment of people in research studies. They may review the study records if they wish. This is to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

Risks of Being in the Study:

The study may have the following risk: There is minimal risk if you are involved in this study. If you had a difficult experience that you share during your digital story, you may experience heightened anxiety, stress, or sadness when sharing that experience.

Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study may have the following benefit: While there are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study, you may find it encouraging that the research may have the opportunity to help future students to have a more successful college experience based on your feedback and participation.

Confidentiality:

Measures of confidentiality will include reasonable steps to ensure that the only persons with access to research records are the primary researchers, Institutional Review Board (IRB) professionals and other persons or agencies required by law. Such steps include using pseudonyms chosen by each participant in place of participant names and storing all research material in a locked safe at the residence of the primary researcher. Upon completion of the primary researcher's dissertation, all research material will remain in a private folder that is password protected.

Contacts and Questions:

Anna-Margaret Yarbrough, a doctoral student in Higher Education Administration at The University of Alabama. My advisor's name is Claire Major, a professor of Higher Education Administration.

If you have questions about this study, you may contact the researchers at amyarbrough@crimson.ua.edu or cmajor@bamaed.ua.edu

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer at the University of Alabama, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

You may also ask questions, make a suggestion, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html. After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online there, or you

may ask Anna-Margaret Yarbrough. You may also e-mail the IRB Outreach Office at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

Statement of Consent:

Please check the statements below to indicate your consent to participate in this study:

- I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.
- I understand that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study.
- I have received a copy of this document to save for my records.

- Yes, I agree to let my digital story be used for research purposes only.
- Yes, I agree to let my digital story be used for research, educational, or promotional purposes.
- I do not agree for my story to be used for research or promotional purposes.

Print: _____
Printed name of participant

Signature of Participant

Signature of Primary Researcher



Permission to Re-Contact Study Participants

Should the researcher need clarification on statements made by study participants in their digital story, it may be necessary for the researcher to re-contact you for clarification purposes. Your permission is necessary before the primary researcher can contact you. Please indicate below whether or not you give the researcher permission to re-contact you.

- Yes, I give permission to the researcher to contact me should she feels that I could contribute by giving a 45 minute to an hour interview.

Email: _____

- No, I do not give permission to the researcher to contact me again after I have completed my digital story.

APPENDIX B
DIGITAL STORIES ASSIGNMENT

Digital Stories Assignment

Project Aim

In this project, you will (1) look at your personal opportunities and barriers to a four-year college and (2) explore your family background, peer culture, and school preparation that affected college access.

To receive full credit for this assignment, answer the following questions:

- What were the barriers to college enrollment in both your home and college community?
- What were the supports (family, school, friends, counselor, motivation) to help you get to college from your home community?

How?

To answer these research questions, describe the unique situations and challenges that contribute to getting to college via digital storytelling, the use of computer-based tools to create narratives. Use photos, stories, video clips, newspaper articles, and other pieces of media or family history to create a digital answer to this question. Stories will vary in time to create. Estimate is between 2 to 6 hours based on students' technological ability. A technological presentation will help you figure out what tools are available to help you create your story.

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling weaves audio, photos, video, and voice to tell a story about the participants' life (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2010). Digital stories are short movies, generally **three to five minutes**, telling a story of participants' lives. Digital storytelling is commonly used for community health initiatives, youth empowerment, youth literacy, mental health, technology literacy, and learning/teaching a foreign language (Yuksel, Robin, & McNeil, 2011).

Student Benefits

You will benefit by creating digital stories through improved:

- Writing and presentation skills
- Language skills-includes listening, speaking, and narrative skills (both written and oral)
- Higher level thinking- problem solving, motivation for learning, metacognitive skills of learning, empathy, self- evaluation, analysis and synthesis, creativity, finding one's own voice, and critical thinking skills.
- Technological skills- improved understanding of how to create a movie, integrate voice, and use of cameras, video, and computer programs such as iMovie and Movie Maker.

Digital stories can help meet the objectives of C&I 160.

- By developing skills and strategies for success in higher education.

Contact information:

Anna-Margaret Yarbrough
334-399-5701
anna.m.yarbrough@gmail.com

APPENDIX C

DIGITAL STORIES OUTLINE FOR STUDENTS IN C&I 160

Introduction

- Where are you from?
- What are you planning to study?

Why UM?

- location, size, quality of education, certain programs offered, friends, family?

What have the challenges been?

- feeling isolated, not academically prepared, missing friends/family, distance from home, feeling lost, financial, balancing work/school, etc.

What have been some of the supports in the transition to UM?

- residence hall, club or organization, friends/family, feel academically prepared, TRiO, an advisor, scholarship, work-study, etc.

What have you learned/what recommendations would you give about your transition to UM?

- get involved, meet with your advisor, try new organizations, UM needs more....to help students feel welcomed, etc.

APPENDIX D

DIGITAL STORY PROMPTS FOR STUDENTS IN C&I 160

PROMPTS FOR VIDEO

- Where did you grow up in Montana? How long did you live there? Which high school did you attend?
- What was it like growing up in your town? Advantages (What did you like about it?)?
- Disadvantages (What did you not like about it?)?
- What do you think about the job opportunities back home in your community?
- What do they think of college?
- Why and when did you decide to go to college?
- Why did you choose The University of Montana? Have you attended another college?
- If you had not gone to college, what would you be doing now?
- What has been your favorite aspect of college? Least favorite?
- What have been some of your struggles in college? (specific examples? A class? Working and school?)
- Who has been most supportive during your college career? How have they supported you?
- Did your parents encourage you to attend college? Why did they want you to attend or not?
- What has enabled you to succeed in college?
- What are your plans after college? Career? Family?
- Would you like to move back to where you grew up? Why or why not?

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS WHO OPTED TO BE INTERVIEWED

Student Interview Protocol

Where did you grow up in Montana? How long did you live there? Which high school did you attend?

What was it like growing up in a small town? Advantages (What did you like about it)?

Disadvantages (What did you not like about it)?

What do you think about the job opportunities back home in your community?

Where do you currently live?

How often do you see your family? Your high school friends?

What are most of your good friends from high school doing? What do they think of college?

Do you think you need a college degree to get a good job? Do you need one to be considered “successful?”

In where you are from in Montana, do you think residents have different expectations of what women and men should do? Education? Work? Marriage? Do you yourself have different expectations?

Why and when did you decide to go to college? Why did you choose The University of Montana? Have you attended another college?

Did you consider doing other things besides college? If so, what?

If you had not gone to college, what would you be doing now?

What has been your favorite aspect of college? Least favorite?

What have been some of your struggles in college? (specific examples? A class? Working and school?)

Who has been most supportive during your college career? How have they supported you? “Are there any adults who are not your relatives whom you can talk to about your problems or worries? Who are they?” (Elder & Conger, 2000, p. 264).

Did your parents encourage you to attend college? Why did they want you to attend or not? What kinds of activities have you been involved in during college?

Have you worked? If so, where and how many hours per week?

Please describe for me your typical weekend activities.

What kind of financial aid do you have? If you have loans, how do you plan to repay them? Has your family helped you pay for college?

Growing up did you know many people with college degrees? Who were they? What are your parents' educational backgrounds? Mother? Father?

Did they grow up here? What are their occupations?

Are (or were) they involved in community organizations?

Did you go to church growing up? Is religion important to you and your family? Why or why not?

Have you had friends drop out of college? Why do you think they dropped out?

What has enabled you to succeed in college?

What are your plans after college? Career? Family?

Would you like to move back to where you grew up? Why or why not?

Are there values and beliefs you learned growing up that have been challenged in college? What are they and why? Have you changed any of your values/beliefs?

There are a lot of stereotypes about being from a rural area. What are some that come to mind? What do you think about these stereotypes?

APPENDIX F
CERTIFICATION FOR IRB APPROVAL

Office for Research
Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA
R E S E A R C H

July 7, 2015

Anna-Margaret Yarbrough
College of Education
The University of Alabama
Box 870302

Re: IRB # 15-OR-214, "Engaging Rural Students through Digital Stories:
Supports and Barriers to Higher Education"

Dear Ms. Yarbrough:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval
for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part
46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 6 as outlined
below:

*(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made
for research purposes.*

Your application will expire on July 5, 2016. If your research will continue
beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal
Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the
Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be
initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent
immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete
the Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to
obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this
proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.