

2017

Rurally raised students: displacement for higher education

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Rurally Raised Students: Displacement for Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Few social scientists focus on rural college students. In fact, there is a broader history of institutional erasure of rural experiences and concerns from urban institutions of power (Browne, 2001; Ching & Creed, 1997; CSRA, 2000). Where the rural experience is addressed, it is generalized so much as to invalidate noteworthy findings. Partly, this is because rural identity, or rusticity, is rarely acknowledged as an impactful facet of personal identity. This study gives voice to students who both highly and insignificantly identify with rusticity, exploring their college experiences and the expectations that their rural communities place upon them through Portraiture. Findings indicate that the expectations and obligations felt by rustic and non-rustic college students vary. Those who exhibit collectivist tendencies and self-identify as rustic are more likely to return to their rural Colorado hometown and apply their human capital attainments locally. Implications of this and other findings are discussed.

Keywords: Rural, Higher Education, Identity, Human Capital

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Jerry Reed—You are Loved. Thank you for inspiring me to pursue this research and stand up for myself and my heritage. Thank you for your kind words and informative lessons. You will always and forever be in my heart.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

When I first entered college, I relocated 2,000 miles away from home. This is not unusual for many people in our increasingly global society today—just look at the number of international students enrolled in American academic institutions or the increasing frequency with which Californians and Washingtonians move to be educated on the East Coast (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2016). However, when you grow up in an isolated, low-population density, low-income rural area, like I did, moving for school is as rare as a blood moon. That is to say, it rarely happens. I had high expectations, sheer excitement, and, I would find out quickly, numerous misconceptions about what living in and being educated in a city would be. The part of me that I was most proud of—my identification as a rurally raised person was not appreciated in the city. In everyday conversation, in the scholarship I read for classes, and in the very culture I immersed myself in at my urban school, my rural culture's differences and value were belittled or ignored. I almost left three times because I felt so culturally isolated and rejected. Why would I want to be part of something that doesn't want me? Would other rurally raised students share similar college experiences?

Asking these questions led me to this project. In this study, I engaged with a group of college seniors who had all grown up and attended K-12 schooling in the same isolated, rural community in Southern Colorado. My aim was twofold. With this research, I answer the question(s)

1. **How do students from rural areas experience the transition from these environments to colleges and universities?**

2. **Do rural communities get a return on their youth's investment in human capital?**

What factors lead students to return to their roots after college and what leads them to stay away?

Few social scientists focus on rural college students. In fact, there is a broader history of institutional erasure of rural experiences and concerns from urban institutions of power (Browne, 2001; Ching & Creed, 1997; CSRA, 2000). And while intersectionality studies have flourished, expanding our understanding of the interplay of different facets of identity on the human experience, the rural/urban divide is rarely considered in these conversations. Where the rural experience is addressed, it is generalized so much as to invalidate noteworthy findings. The experiences of rural college students, those from low-population areas of extreme isolation, are conflated with the experiences of others from small communities that border cities or with small cities themselves (Arnold, et al., 2005; Isserman, 2005). This oversampling hides the performance of our truly rural students, those most likely to define themselves by their rural culture and collectivist communities.

It is this self-defining as rural that I find most fascinating. Location and population may make a community “rural” in terms of Census classification data, but defining a person as rural is a totally different thing. It is the culture and community—the collective identity—that makes a person rural. In order to clarify these differences, it is easier to refer to the collectivist identity facet people have when they label themselves as rural as “rusticity” or “rustic” (Ching & Creed, 1997).

It is of absolute importance that we consider rusticity and the social construction of identity when researching rural college student experiences. This study rejects the commonly asserted premise that all rural people are rustic and visa versa. Because their identities differ, it is

possible that their experiences can too. This makes this research on the experiences of rural students all that more important. No one has ever before searched for dichotomies between rustic and non-rustic rural student experience in this way. Such work makes tangible the impact of rusticity on the collegiate experience.

By rejecting the various confluences of rurally raised students' experiences, I aim to complicate the rural/urban narrative. Here, I give voice to both rustic and non-rustic rural students who grew up in Alamosa, Colorado. I also record my own observations of the connected community. Through their stories and my observations, I find evidence that the transition from high school to college challenges their perceptions of self and community. Introduction to the individualistic culture of American colleges and high-population living counters their rustic, collectivist tendencies with alternative ways of viewing the world, which can harm their mental health.

These high-achieving students navigate the contradictions between urban cultural hegemony and their own rusticity as they approach graduation. The rustic students I study overwhelmingly reject the individualism promoted by their institutions and peers and continue to work towards their community-oriented goals.

Additionally, I found that the Alamosa community has invested much social and fiscal capital in furthering their rurally raised students' higher education. These investments aim to foster an appreciation for high-achievement, college attainment, and local belonging, which encourage students to return home after receiving their degrees. These efforts look to be successful, as the majority of self-identifying rustic students feel obliged and plan to stay in the community upon or shortly after completion of their degrees. Non-rustic students, however, who do not consistently exhibit collectivist tendencies connecting them to their community, do not

feel this pressure. They do not express interest in returning locally, though the community has invested in them as well. This indicates that for rustic, but not non-rustic students, the benefits conferred by rural living, such as the cultivation of belonging and various social supports, outweighed the potential draws of urban areas, such as plentiful resources and increased opportunity for highly paid employment.

The organization of the rest of this work is as follows: Chapter two reviews the literature on rusticity and rurally raised college students' experiences. Chapter three outlines my methodology and methods for this work, which relies upon Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1997) *Portraiture*. This methodology and the associated methods build upon a foundational, culturally-relevant, rural epistemology that empowers the stories of my participants, as told in chapter four. Chapter four details my data, sharing vignettes of the seven students I interviewed and observed for this project and their community.

Finally, chapter five further discusses the findings outlined above and situates my conclusions within the broader scholarship on intersectionality, rusticity, and rural human capital. The implications of this work are also considered.

Chapter 2: Prior Research

Situating Rurality

There has not been one solidified definition of what constitutes a rural community in educational literature, nor, more broadly, in governmental policy for over 20 years (Coburn, MacKinney, McBride, Mueller, Slifkin, & Wakefield, 2007; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson, & Shapley, 2007). As of 2007, there are at least 15 definitions in use in the federal government and many more are floated by independent researchers.

Given how much is known about the impact of environment and culture on schooling experiences, the lack of unified understanding about what and who is considered rural is ghastly ineffective and limiting, both for research purposes and for rural communities themselves (Putnam, 1995; Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). It is difficult to make any distinctive claims about “rural” education as a whole for two reasons.

First, because so much scholarship disagrees about who falls under this umbrella category, it can be hard to find enough evidence to support any major claims about rural students’ experiences (Arnold, et al., 2005; Isserman, 2005). Arnold, et al.’s (2007, p. 2) found that those involved in rural research were frequently not on the same page. The researchers’ understandings of rural and the rural experience varied immensely depending on what part of the country they studied, who funded their research, and how they appropriated the term loosely for their own usage. This contributes to our difficulties in generalizing about such communities.

Before 2006, there were three major definitions of rural communities promoted and used by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) alone (Arnold, et al., 2005; NCES, 2003). They capitulated such vastly different depictions of rural that, to this day, no clear

estimation of the number of rurally raised K-12 students actually exists; predictions range from just 1.1 million to over 11.6 million (Arnold, et al., 2005). To put it into perspective, that's the difference between about 2 percent of all US students and nearly 24 percent.

Even at the federal level, various definitions of rural are suggested. The U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget generally cap a rural community's population at either 2,500 or under 20,000 people, respectively. They and others (Bettie, 2003; Lippman, et al., 1996; H.R. 107-171, 2002) have considered communities with anywhere from one to 50,000 people rural or have claimed that any community nonadjacent to an urban center, regardless of population is rural.

Adjacency or distance from an urban hub has, at times, been considered an important (though certainly not universally applied) variable in the classification of rural communities (Coburn, et al., 2007; Arnold, et al., 2005). There are drastic differences between remote and urban-adjacent school districts, from the types of resources they have available to the unique issues that they face (Rural School and Community Trust, 2009). Small, urban-adjacent towns and their people, who can share in the resources and culture of cities, have less in common with remote people than research's hyperfocus on population density would lead one to believe. Thus, urban-adjacent communities with low-population densities should not be considered rural.

To adequately define a rural community, more attention needs to be paid to remoteness and less to relative population size. Many of the difficulties inherent in rural education have more to do with the geographic isolation and the lack of resources these communities have within reach to than to their absolute population size (Brown, 2001; Ching and Creed, 1997; Danbom, 1997; Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014; Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997; Southern Growth Policies Board, 1985). This is exacerbated by the high poverty levels common

to the areas (Browne, 2001; Rural School and Community Trust, 2009; Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997).

Small communities that exist in proximity to urban cores are more likely to benefit from urban systems of capital. Economically, small peripherally located people can be employed in urban businesses. Additionally, their communities also frequently cater to attracting the urban to them. In consequence, these communities are generally wealthier overall, and have more resources at their disposal because of their interactions with urban visitors (United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 2016). These peripheral communities also have greater access to urban social, cultural, and human resources given their closer proximity (CSRA, 2000). They can attend urban colleges without having to move as far away and are more likely on the whole to interact with urban folks, intermingling cultures and connections (Pappano, 2017; USDA, 2016). While they are low in population density, the absence of isolation as a compounding variable allows people from small peripheral communities to benefit from the urban sprawls close by.

It would be naive to believe that the lack of term unification is incidental. Many (Arnold, et. al, 2007; Coburn, et al., 2007; CSRA, 2000; Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997; Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996) consider this lack of consistency a major flaw in how we understand and adequately justify claims made about rural communities. The claim that “rural” is too diverse to define allows nonintervention to be an acceptable response to the issues rural communities face, like a low-educated populous, poor health, and high college drop out rates (Marshall in CSRA, 2000, p. 29). Therefore, defining rural is an issue of power and hegemony.

This hypothesis is supported Browne (2001) and Isserman’s (2005) promulgation that the government, at both the national and state level, have not adequately addressed rural issues for

almost 40 years. Instead, as suburbs and cities have grown, the experiences of “rural people” have been ignored or minimized as more and more people spend their entire lives in cities and suburbs. As the American way becomes more urban, knowledge centers are urbanized, as are American concerns. In turn, rurality and its associated cultures are dismissed (Ching and Creed, 1997).

Low Income Overlap: Correlation or Causation?

Many rural communities, especially the most isolated ones, are also predominantly low-income. It has been well-documented that low-income students who enter college face barriers in gaining access to and succeeding higher education (Goodman, 2010; Thiele & Gillespie, 2015). Their previous educational experiences are not as oriented towards college-preparation. They often lack the cultural, human, and economic capital of the elite. This capital is necessary for success in institutions, such as colleges (Jischke in CSRA, 2000, p. 94; Thiele & Gillespie, 2015).

In much research, rural communities are described as disconnected, sharing few similarities across location besides poverty. And while these difficulties most certainly affect many rurally raised students who enter colleges, they do not hold true for all of them (Arnold, et al., 2005; Arnold, et al., 2007; Johnson in CSRA, 2000, p. 17). Class is not an equitable place holder for rusticity nor rurality. When community and individual income levels are controlled for, rural students still attend college in lower numbers than either their urban or suburban counterparts (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). Equating rural students with low-income students masks potential differences like this that indicate the rural experience is unique, regardless of class-status (Arnold, et al. 2005; Arnold, et al. 2007).

Defining Rural: A Portrait

For the sake of this work, I define a “rural community” as a territory with 25,000 or fewer residents that is at least 25-35 miles from an urban center. But when I say rural is isolated, I mean that, when you leave town, you *leave society*. For miles upon miles, there will be open fields full of golden corn, abandoned homesteads, waterless desert, or trees lining craggy peaks, where alpine sheep prance from side to side, equanimously making their way up mountainsides no human would dare climb without a tether. Cell phone service between locales is practically non-existent and paying attention to the gas gauge on your car is especially important, because the next fillup station might not be for 30-40 miles.

Comparing truly rural isolated peoples and their experiences to those of suburbs and others on the urban periphery effectively dilutes and hides the distinctive experiences rural people have. There exists in these communities, a not just a metaphorical but a *physical barrier* between these communities and urban resources and knowledge. This means that rural areas are usually last to get modern technology and have limited access to high quality healthcare, for example (CSRA, 2000). Differentiating spatially allows a clearer picture to begin to appear—one that remains somewhat removed from the United States’ quickly globalizing cities and suburbs.

Defining and describing rural has not been an individual effort. Equal consideration was given to my field observations, the voluminous numbers of governmental and policy definitions of rural—through their frequency of use and rationale— and to the understandings of rural peoples themselves. All of my study participants, in addition to other self-defined rural peoples who I spoke to more informally, contributed definitional opinions. This definition is refined enough to give readers unfamiliar with the countryside and remote communities some contextual and spatial understanding of the community I observed here. Instead of overshadowing and

discounting the experiences of rural people through the continued conglomeration of small suburban communities with truly remote areas, this definition disaggregates rural in way that gives this study higher validity. The definition is simultaneously expansive enough to include the experiences of communities, like the one focused on by this study, whose people self-define as rural but are continually discounted by research that focus too narrowly on the smallest farming communities. Including these somewhat larger, but still relatively small, remote communities pays homage to the importance and power this identity holds in many rural people's self-image.

So far, I have addressed the difficulties of defining rural as area, bound to physical location. It can be argued, however, that rural transcends simply describing locations that share certain attributes, like low-population densities and less infrastructure. This is especially true given the importance of social capital in community survival. While my aforementioned definition of rural is necessary to include, it is not all encompassing. A true definition of rural moves past quantification. It addresses the culture and qualities of rural peoples—it is work in identity.

Rusticity and Intersectionality

Work in identity and intersectionality often embraces the idea that those in power get to enforce the hegemony and what knowledge is valuable (Nieto, 2010). By asserting their knowledge, they assert their dominance in society. Academics frequently study how this process operates through the institutions that regulate our society, such as schools. Schools participate both subtly and overtly in conveying the broader social messages about dominance and oppression (Collins, 1993). And yet, rusticity, or rural identity fails to receive adequate attention

in the study of institutional oppression and identity development. “Given the pervasiveness of the rural/urban opposition, and its related significance in the construction of identity, it is remarkable that the that the explosion of scholarly interest in identity politics has generally failed to address the rural/urban axis.” state Ching and Creed (1997, p. 3).

In the pivotal *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*, Ching and Creed (1997) argue that academia, policy, and overwhelmingly, the population fail to recognize the gravity of rusticity in sculpting the identities of the people who live in these areas. This rusticity, they claim, shapes society in these communities in unignorable manners (Ching & Creed, 1997, 4). In addition, because urbanity contains the majority of political, intellectual, and economic institutions and resources in this country (far more than would be expected if they were doled out equitably across urban, suburban, and rural areas), urbanity is an inescapable, yet rarely acknowledged aspect of hegemony (Nieto, 2010; Ching & Creed, 1997). “Rustic” describes any identity whose formation is linked to rurality and the associated culture. Though technological advancements have decreased the impact isolation, and thus the need for alternative systems of capital, has on such communities, this rusticity remains. Not only does it remain, but it resonates starkly, in contrast with the cultures and beliefs of urban America.

Ching and Creed (1997) argue that rusticity is reinforced by the overwhelming and often ignored “urban cultural hegemony” that, in many ways marginalizes the culture and beliefs of rural peoples. This is similar to the conclusions made by Browne (2001), Johnson, and Drabenstott (both in CSRA, 2000). The overwhelming lack of non-agriculturally linked policy initiatives aimed at helping rural peoples and the simultaneous rejection *and* romanticization of rusticity in urban society (Danbom, 1997) substantiate urban cultural hegemony. Rusticity, hence, as an aspect of identity has been neutralized for all but those who claim it.

The contradictory nature of culturally valuable rusticity further explains why these areas often rely on their own systems of social capital, which I will return to shortly. This theory—the maintenance of rural counterculture—shares similarities with Patricia Hill Collins’ (2015) conception of “dichotomous oppositional difference” in the experiences of Black female scholars and how our focus on the differences between socially constructed groups exacerbates these distinctions and magnifies marginalization.

Rural communities are increasingly racially and ethnically diverse (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005, p. 1; Arnold et al., 2007). This is especially true of the most economically immobile communities, such as the one investigated here (USDA, 2017; Marshall in CSRA, 2000). And while white rural peoples gain significant privilege from their race, rusticity maintains that this privilege does not shield rustic people from experiencing marginalization. Additionally, since many rustic people are not white, equating rusticity and whiteness fails to acknowledge the existence of rural people of color.

As for rustic folk, their “very marginalization creates a source of opposition to the hegemonic urban culture” (Danbom, 1997). Indeed, much of rural cultural and social capital continues to be antithetical to urban systems of capital, going so far as to resist capitalism itself (Danbom, 1997; Ching & Creed, 1997). Perhaps this is because, in the current capitalist economy, rural areas are inherently losers because metros are winners (Marshall in CSRA, 2000, p. 29). Thus, it makes sense that rural people reject the hegemonic power of urban capitalism in their practices. My study found evidence of this, such as rural embrace of “do-it-yourself” or “DIY” production instead of consumerism. While I will return to this more later on, for now it is worth noting. It serves as the ultimate sign of the oppositional nature of rusticity.

Accepting the prevalence and inherent significance of rusticity is one of the foremost theories this paper relies upon to formulate conclusions. As someone who both holds a rustic identity and recognizes the drastic epistemological differences between rural and urban culture, I believe, like Ching and Creed (1997) and Danbom (1997), that acknowledging “urban cultural hegemony” and the resulting marginalization felt by many rural peoples is imperative to accurately studying, understanding, and writing about rural experiences.

However, individual aspects of one’s identity never operate in isolation. The way an individual interprets and interacts with society, as well as the way society in turn, interprets and interacts with an individual is shaped by all aspects of their respective identity. It would be unproductive to study rural identity and experience in isolation—it is only one aspect, even if an overlooked one, that contributes to personal identity and the shaping of experience. As such, intersectionality plays an important role in the theoretical framework of this work.

Though it has been around much longer, intersectionality theory has erupted across social science research over the last 30 years, since Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989) coined it for use in Critical Race Theory. Collins (2015) and Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) have both addressed the difficulty of defining intersectionality’s place in academia—it is frequently interpreted as a framework, a methodology, or a lens, and has been integrated into other social science theories and praxes (Cooper, 2015). And yet, it has become so essential to the socially just study in the social sciences, that it must not solely be addressed, it would be ineffective not to utilize it.

Intersectionality has been used by scholars studying such varied, yet powerful, constructs as race, gender, ability, sexuality, age, national origin, and ethnicity, among others (Collins, 2015; Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1989; Connor, 2007). The basic premise is that, in any society,

numerous hegemonic systems operate in tandem, frequently in interactive and overlapping ways (Cooper, 2015). Hence, privilege and oppression simultaneously operate on multiple levels for each individual, making it all that more important to avoid aggregating the experiences of all people who share one or two aspects of their identities. The experience of identity is “dynamic”—always shifting in response to the power exerted on or by an actor and by shifts in the overall hegemonic power strata of the society in which the actor lives (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013; Collins, 2015).

As a researcher, I have grown increasingly concerned about the urban disregard of geographic identity from inclusion in much intersectional research. Class, race, and gender, among other identities, played important roles in the experiences of all of the rural peoples I spoke to in this creation of this project. And yet, many of them felt limited by the assertions made by much of the research on rural education that limited them to these, and other more traditionally considered aspects of identity. They shared an awareness that their experiences were significantly shaped by the intersectionality of their identities *including* their rusticity.

This work strives to begin to rectify this problem by centering the rural experience without downplaying intersectionality. Because I profile people with wholly different identities, some more privileged than others, intersectionality will prove to be an invaluable tool to keep in mind when evaluating the work as a whole, though I do not have the time or space here to fully explore the nuances of the interactions between my participants’ different identity facets.

Social Capital: Survival Insurance

Rural areas frequently have fewer resources to rely on in educating their college-bound youth, from money to pay for schools to accessible information on the application process

(Khattari, et al., 1997; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Because of their lack of resources, these communities frequently create their own, highly integrated systems of social capital, which fill in for the support systems the government and business provide in cities.

Social capital is generally thought of as a community-level quality (Rupasingha, Goetz, & Freshwater, 2006). Briefly, social capital can be characterized as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 1995, p. 19) Rupasingha, Goetz, & Freshwater (2006, p. 85) clarify this definition further, implicating that social capital is the “collective manifestation of behaviors, attitudes, and values of individual members of a community” that bolster collective action.¹

Elsewhere, these systems are provided by the government, but in isolated rural communities, institutional resources must be created through social networks within the community (Browne, 2001; Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson, & Shapley, 2007; CSRA, 2000). Examples of this include volunteer fire departments and public schools that are heavy in parent involvement in an attempt to make up for a lack of staff and technology. While these systems of social support may hold no relevance or value outside of the insular community, they make thriving within a rural community possible.

Since these communities have so few residents and frequently are in the midst of long-term economic decline (CSRA, 2000), their continued existence relies on the constant production of social capital. This is done through the cultivation of rustic collective identity (Vandello & Cohen, 1999). In promoting an insular community, members mark themselves as in-group and promote unification over individual survival. And, really, evidence shows they must if they want to survive (CSRA, 2000; Rupasingha, Goetz, & Freshwater, 2006).

¹ This claim is not theirs alone. Others, like Wollock (2001) and Fukuyama (1995) and Browne (2001) have drawn similar conclusions about the nature of social capital.

Social capital encourages human capital attainment.

One relatively new but important way this mutual dependence manifests is through the increasing promotion of educational attainment (CSRA, 2000). It has been well established that earning a college degree substantially increases one's earnings over the course of a lifetime (Becker, 1994; CollegeBoard, 2016; USDA, 2017). In fact, there's many benefits correlated with higher educational attainment: better physical and emotional health, longer life-expectancies, and greater job and life satisfaction, for example (CollegeBoard, 2016). Such benefits are conferred at the community level, too. There are definite advantages in having a well-educated population. We call the advantages a community incurs as a result of its members' educational pursuance human capital (Jischke in CSRA, 2000, p. 94). Human capital has been successful at invigorating otherwise stagnant or failing rural economies. In many rural communities, human capital increases also improve local community resources, whether because more money is available or because more knowledge is (CSRA, 2000). Jischke (in CSRA, 2000) calculated that increasing local human capital is one of the most effective ways to improve the quality of life for rural communities. It is even more effective than directly economically stimulating the community.

And yet, rural students attend college in low numbers. Rates of attendance for urban and suburban students have grown substantially over the years, but rural attendance remains low (USDA, 2017). With all these potential benefits just out of reach, it makes sense that rural communities should be increasingly guiding their students towards higher education pathways. They continue to foster social capital and community reliance for survival. However, these ideals also convey to students that college, as a pathway for high-achieving students leads not only to individual security and success but also to community benefit. Their social networks encourage children to remain in or return to their hometowns after college and use the skills benefitted to

them to stimulate the economies of their struggling areas (Drabenstott in CSRA, 2000; Putnam, 1995).

Students who previously thrived in their home communities must leave, at least temporarily, in order to achieve economic and social mobility through continued schooling (Arnold, et al., 2005; Drabenstott in CSRA, 2000). Here's where it gets interesting. When rural students leave home, they can no longer rely on their systems of social capital for survival, as they have been taught to do for their entire lives. Locally germane social capital does not necessarily articulate into academic, cultural, and economic resources in the distant cities in the same way it does at home (CSRA, 2000). While lower numbers of rural students enroll in college than students from suburban or urban districts to begin with, high numbers of rural students also drop out of college or transfer, partially in response to their inability to translate rural social capital into urban resources (Hiler & Hatalsky, 2016; Velez, 2014).

Should students make it through higher education, they must then consider next steps. This critical juncture, after exposure to all of the cultural, economic, and social resources that many institutions of higher learning and cities themselves have, requires students to decide whether to return to their home communities or to trek out on their own in urbanized areas. Urbanity offers individuals economic advantages, certainly (CSRA, 2000; USDA, 2017). They offer a higher number and greater variety of employment opportunities. People working in urban and urban adjacent communities also make higher salaries. They have access to more resources and, well, *stuff* overall.

Some scholarship has recorded that a generational trend has appeared in the last twenty years, demonstrating that greater and greater numbers of students are choosing not to return to their rural roots after attaining human capital (Drabenstott in CSRA, 2000; USDA, 2017). This

leaves rural communities in more dire situations than ever. Instead of receiving a return on their social capital investments in students, communities and families are losing many of their most academically successful members. They are not gaining human capital in substantial ways. It is necessary that we investigate this shift. If rural communities want their students to return, they need to understand what is turning them away and what makes them return home.

One of the main aims of this investigation is to augment these claims about the loss of rural community. There is little support for the claims made about local social capital's effects on rural students. Few explanations, other than those expounded above, are offered up to explain why college graduates decide not to return home. Investigating rural college students' experiences will help communities understand how to foster returns, and encourage their students to pursue higher education in meaningful, rusticity-centered ways.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

Portraiture

This research is designed to learn more about the way rurally raised students experience college, in hopes that we may be able to understand the significance of the decision to leave the home community for the opportunity to gain valuable human capital. How do students from rural areas undergo the transition from small communal environments to colleges and universities? Does rusticity impact their experiences? Are there any commonalities tying together who returns? I focus on a group of college seniors. Their colleges differ substantially, however, they still share a large portion of their academic history. All attended K-12 schooling in the same isolated, rural community—Alamosa, Colorado. I used a blend of case study and interviews to gather data. Methodologically, it relied first and foremost upon Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) portraiture.

Dixon, Chapman, & Hill (2005, p. 17) define "portraiture" as a blending of "the aesthetic with the doctrine of social science research." It works against the common contention that science and narrative, rigor and correlation, subjectivity and validity do not belong together (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Instead, the methodology contradicts positivist study by asserting that all human experience is valid and "has meaning in in particular social, cultural, and historical context" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 43). It continues to work against positivist tradition through the constant acknowledgement, and yet controlled presence of the researcher's positionality and subjectivity (ibid., pp. 50-52). I was drawn to portraiture because of its dedication to its subjects. This commitment to research participants manifests itself in a portraiture's efforts to genuinely depict and incorporate participant epistemology and a commitment to documenting success (ibid, p. 9).

Collection Methods/Procedure

In outlining portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) provide a concrete plan for data collection and analysis. Portraiture is best accomplished through the case study of individuals or a community. In an ideal world, the portraitist would be neither an insider nor a total outsider (ibid). Originally, I worried that by returning to the community I grew up in and painting pictures of people that I have known for most, if not all, of my life, I would be too “inside.” Would my connection to the land and the people integrate me too much to conduct legitimate portraiture?

Quickly, however, it became clear that I no longer retained the same in-group membership I had held in my youth. My decision to pursue academia in an urban environment far from home had distanced me from my rural upbringing. This removed me enough to pursue portraiture there without compromising the validity of my methodology.

For this study, I first utilized an online survey to search for participants. The survey assessed fit by asking questions about student’s current enrollments, past academic achievement, and their location. At first, I did not have strict criteria about who I wanted in my respondent group. I thought I would have to search for connections between anyone who was willing to speak with me. Then, almost overnight, fifty people replied to my survey. I realized that I would have to employ more specific qualifications for further participation. At this point, I decided it would make the most sense to make this study more of a case study, surrounding one community. Thus, in choosing my participants, I chose to focus on college seniors who had achieved high academic success at the lone public high school in Alamosa. Of the original 50 respondents, only 14 matched these new, stricter participant requirements. This eliminated 10

respondents from other communities, 24 who were too young, and two who were not interested in further participation.

Of the 14, I interviewed 7. The majority of my data comes from these interviews, as I endeavor to paint clear portraits of the rural student college experience. When possible, I also collected field data. I followed the students to community events, like their siblings' basketball games or family parties. After observations of my interviewees and their families, I took field notes, where, as outlined by portraiture methodology, I extensively documented as much detail as I could remember, straining to be inclusive of even the most minute details. I also documented any informal conversations I had with family, friends, and other locals who spoke with me about rurally raised students' pursuance of higher education.

My observations, though limited in time and availability, were enriched by my rich history with my interviewees, all of whom I had attended middle and high school with. This helped me establish "insider" status, though I, nor most of the subjects I portray here, still live in the Alamosa full-time.

The interviews started with a semi-formal structure, and asked neutral questions about how respondents' high school and college experiences, as well as their present and past relationships with a variety of community players, such as friends, church congregations, and families. I am grateful for all of those who responded to my calls for participants; in order to protect the anonymity of the individuals who graciously let me into their lives, I utilize pseudonyms for everyone written about here.

When it came to analyzing the data, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) process informed my analysis. I used an extensive system of inductive and deductive codes, or themes. I also utilized the thorough qualitative procedures and strategies that make portraiture such a

strong, yet unique analytical tool, including Miles and Huberman's (1994, p. 188) "iterative cycles," and Gilligan, Brown, and Rogers' (1989) multiple perspective-taking process, among others (Gietz and LeCompte, 1984; Glaser and Straus, 1996; Jackson, 1989; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Throughout this process, I constantly referred back to my own subjectivity. As a able-bodied, rustic white woman from a middle-class family, I have experienced immense privilege from many aspects of my identity. As a rustic person, my worldview has been significantly shaped by rusticity and the local social capital of the Valley. I love the our hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurants and have chased cows down a mountain with a ranching family. My dad won't let me throw away anything he thinks he can fix, and I am going to be the Maid of Honor in one of my informant's upcoming nuptials because, even though we live 2,000 miles apart, we're still inseparable. Like portraiture and intersectionality, I reject the premise that a researcher has a neutral positionality. I love my community with a passion so deep that I have shed tears at the thought of never returning. I am in no way neutral, nor can I pretend to ever be. Still, throughout this entire process, I have paid particular attention to my privilege, my connection to the land and the people of the San Luis Valley, and how this may shade my view and findings.

Chapter 4: The Land and its People

The Community

The San Luis Valley in dusty, Southern Colorado is the United States' largest high altitude desert. It's a flat respite in the harsh mountains of the area, with some of the darkest night skies in all of North America (Morrin, T., personal communication, June, 2016). You can see the Milky Way drip across the sky on an almost nightly basis. The area has maintained its sense of wilderness, keeping out not only light pollution but much of human impact. Bears, deer, mountain lions, and even wild horses roam the landscape. Eager mountain peaks, coated in snow even late into the summer, stretch more than 14,000 feet up and pocket the area deep within the safety of the mountains.

This protection from wind, snow, and other extreme weather comes at a price, though. Though the sun shines nearly every day of the year upon the residents of the San Luis Valley, they are intensely isolated from the rest of the outside world. Geographically, the Valley is larger than the combined states of Rhode Island and Connecticut, but with a population nearly 100 times smaller (San Luis Valley Resources Development Group, 2010).

Not even 50,000 people have set up camp in the Valley, even as the rest of Colorado has seen a population explosion. Partially, this is because *getting* to the area is challenging. Exiting requires traversing dangerous mountain passes and driving two and a half hours, minimum, just to reach a semi-urban area. The Valley has no shopping mall, consistent cell phone service, not even a private school. The weakness and inconsistency of local Wi-Fi would shock city dwellers whose livelihoods depend on constant access to email.

In the heart of this Valley lies the town of Alamosa, Colorado. The 9,800 or so residents sit, surrounded by barley and potato fields, looking out into the flat stretching in every direction (US Census Bureau, 2016). Two major highways—albeit one lane highways with little traffic—run perpendicularly through town, making the area a hub for truckers and families traveling through to stop for food or to stay the night. It seems that people are always passing through Alamosa. Even those who live in the outlying homesteads that populate the rest of the Valley only come in for a short time. All pass the dusty chico bushes, the square farmhouses, and the herds of dairy cows, rarely staying long enough to catch a glimpse of the rich history and culture of the area.

How Heritage Shapes Collectivism in Alamosa

Alamosa has an interesting and unique culture, flavored by its history and the groups of people who settled there. Starting in the mid 1800s, both the United States and Mexico strove to claim and settle the region which was, at the time, fertile farmland. And though Alamosa and the rest of the Valley lands were technically ceded to the United States in the Mexican Cession of 1848, the area was not heavily settled by either Mexico nor the United States until the early 1850s (History Colorado, 2015). The cession did not stop people of both nationalities from making claims to the land and its resources, however. Mexico proffered “communal land grants” in the Valley to various Mexican and Spanish families (History Colorado, 2015). This system of settling meant that various families shared communal spaces for living, “grazing, hunting, and gathering” (ibid).

Since the Valley was considered American soil after the Mexican Cession, however, American Mormons and Dutch immigrants moved in within less than ten years of the

establishment of the first Mexican settlements in the Valley (Vandello & Cohen, 1999). As early as the 1860s, these two very different groups of settlers began to rely on each other for survival in the harsh landscape. Quickly they began absorbing each other's cultural practices, diffusing into a Valley culture unique from those of Mexico and other Dutch and Mormon settlements in America (Vandello & Cohen, 1999). Some of these original, diffused settlers have descendants in the area today. The community continues to be influenced by its distinctive historic ties to New Mexico and Mexican culture, Catholicism, Mormonism, farming and the earth, and how they intermingle (Gastil, 1975; Paul, 1988; Vandello & Cohen, 1999).

I saw this in action every day in the field. From the food to the religious practices, the rural culture of the Valley reflects this cultural diffusion. For instance, bilingualism in Spanish *and* English are both practically required for anyone who wants to be hired to work in the area's public service sector. Mexican green chile is roasted at the main street farmer's market and sold right alongside locally grown Dutch potatoes. These two ingredients are married together in all the most common local dishes, like bowls of hearty chile stew. It's also just as common for a graduating high school senior to head off on a Mormon mission as it is for them to enroll in college or enter the workforce.

An especially fascinating result of this diffusion is that it allows for widespread claim of the regional culture across race, class, ethnicity, and gender lines. Though differences certainly remain between those with differing identities, most locals claim rusticity as a major facet of their identity. Alamosa's rusticity reflects collectivist rather than individualist cultural values (Vandello & Cohen, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). It's reflected in everything residents do and in the rustic ways they see the world.

Individualist cultures “stress individual autonomy and independence of the self” (Vandello and Cohen, 1999, p. 279). They are not as attached to social ties and see less value in group identity. Individualists are more likely to prioritize their personal pursuits over those of the family or broader community (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995).

The United States, on the whole, is acknowledged to be one of the most individualistic countries in the entire world. Vandello and Cohen (1999, p. 280) even call it the “prototypical individualist culture.” Research also shows that American collegiate education is incredibly individualistic and competitive, probably because it is rooted in this culture (Collins, 1993; Vandello and Cohen, 1999). Additionally, curriculum and pedagogy in American colleges have been increasingly regulated at both the state and national level over the last 50 years (Faitar, 2006; Hofstede, 1997). The colleges my subjects attend are located in the Mountain West and the East Coast, which are considered two of the most individualist regions in the United States (Shorridge, 1993; Vandello & Cohen, 1999). Schools are not ideologically neutral—they both implicitly and explicitly convey social meaning and hierarchy to those that they are supposed to serve (Nieto, 2010). Thus, at both the national and state level, the colleges my subjects attend promote individualistic epistemologies and encourage individualistic tendencies.

Five of my seven interviewees—Quincy, Anna, Kyler, Emma, and Felicia—naturally exhibited collectivist tendencies and self-identified rusticity as an important aspect of their identity, as influenced by their collectivism.² Because of their self-identification, when identifying trends in the data that are relevant to these five students, I refer to them as rustic students. Meanwhile, I refer to August and Cammie as non-rustic students since they did not consistently exhibit collectivist tendencies nor self-identify as rustic.

² I do not mean to imply that each informant exhibited collectivist, rustic identity to the same degree. Some performed their rusticity with more zest; some held themselves more loosely to the tenants of collectivism.

In speaking with rurally raised students, I uncovered how transitioning from rustic collectivity to individualist, urban hegemony-based institutions affects their experiences. Rustic students felt a disconnect between themselves and their non-rustic college peers. They were also more likely than non-rustic students to continue to reflect the tenets of collectivism, instead of individualism, despite their new surroundings. Ultimately, most rustic students desire to return home and felt obligated to utilize their new degree within their community. The non-rustic students however, felt no such pressure from the community, nor did they desire to return home. The rest of this chapter will provide evidence, backing up the above claims.

Expressions of Rusticity through Collectivist Identity

My research identifies collectivist tendencies and epistemology using the factors first evidenced in Vandello and Cohen's (1999, p. 279) work identifying collectivism throughout the United States. Collectivist cultures:

1. Contain "closely linked individuals who define themselves as part of a collective," usually family or another social group (Vandello & Cohen, 1999, p. 279).
2. Hold immense value in group identity. In this case, family and rusticity.
3. See relationships between people as stable, permanent parts of life.
4. Consistently conform to community norms. They perform collectivity through their culture—style of dress, hobbies, and behaviors. For my participants, collectivity is demonstrated in how rusticity is performed. Conversely, it is demonstrated through their rejection of alternative beliefs, as these threaten any sense of unified identity.
5. Prioritize the needs of the collective over their own individual needs and pursuits.

Each of the following sections substantiates these five factors using portraits of my informants and their community. The vignettes illustrate that navigating and conforming to rusticity shapes the pathways of rustic students.

Fostering Human Capital Returns: Community Investment in Student Success.

The Alamosa community raised the main subjects of my study, Anna, Kyler, Emma, Quincy, Cammie, Felicia, and August. The town revels in its student's academic successes. In fact, Alamosa's community values human capital so much that they invest in their students' attainment, both emotionally and fiscally.

Since first grade, Alamosa teachers have labeled my subjects' graduation cohort "the smart class." The label is warranted. All of my subjects were high achievers, topping honor's lists and joining the National Student Honor Society. Their class year saw record numbers of graduates enroll in college. The community praised their successes all along the way.

Looking back, educators described to me the excitement that was passed along from teacher to teacher as these students aged. It was "refreshing and challenging," to get to work with "so many motivated kids at once," says one teacher. "It's like there was something magic in the water the year that they were born" states another. "We knew they'd go off and do great things. I just hope they come back!"

These comments indicate that special attention was focused on these high achieving students because of their academic performance. Once they had been labeled intelligent and capable, the school community saw something of note in them. Their praise grew as the students continued their schooling.

Academically, my informants weren't just achieving to meet their family's expectations or individual goals, but for the praise of the community. The town paper frequently covered their

ventures. When one of my respondents achieved national recognition for his AP scores, the town's newspaper wrote a spotlight piece on him (Car, 2010). When the school's academic decathlon team brought home the state-championship title, the team's photo graced the paper's front page (Valley Courier, 2013). Five of my seven informants were on that championship team and smiled brightly for the camera. The city council honored their triumph with a special celebration, and the school put up a permanent plaque on the wall, featuring each of the member's names.

These celebrations weren't rare—they were the normal accolades for meritorious academic achievement. As graduation approached, the paper published an insert featuring every single youth who would be attaining their high school diploma. Their attainment of human capital, in the form of their successful completion of their degree, was praised by the community. Even partial successes, like the widely advertised state championship, gained such high levels of attention that my informants took note. The potential for such praise encouraged them to continue to perform well.

“It was great to be pushed like that.” says Kyler Tanaka. “I mean, high school wasn't *hard* for me. Everybody likes to be celebrated. It was cool to know people cared about what I was doing. It made me work hard when I coulda been lazy.”

This constant praising of high achieving students in the schools, the paper, the local government, and the broader community indicates that their success was worthy of the whole town's attention.

“I remember going shopping once my senior year, right after the Knowledge Bowl championship and the scholarship ceremony” recalls August Hopper. “I *never* go shopping. I'd never met her before but the lady ringing me up knew my name, knew I'd

just graduated...she knew all this stuff. I asked if we'd met before and it turned out she just recognized me from seeing me in the paper all the time. She said reading about us even got her to donate some money for the team next year. It blew my mind! And then it made me wonder, if they know about and care about this stuff, do they expect something from me? I try not to think about it."

Of my seven respondents, six independently brought up instances like these. They talk about feeling like the town was invested in their accomplishments.

Another of my respondents, Emma, articulates this clearly. Like August, the community has shown her that they are fiscally invested in her human capital attainment.

"Paying for college has definitely been a community effort. My parents help, my jobs help, and my grandparents, too. I've also got a local scholarship and a loan from my church, which is interest free...It's gonna suck when I have to pay it all back but it's nice to know that I have that support system. It's *really* generous, and *really* helpful. Yeah, it's been a big blessing."

Emma's situation is not unique. Of my participants, four received money from local institutions, from farms to the hospital, to help pay for school. Quincy hasn't had to pay a single cent out of pocket for school thanks to his farming coalition scholarships. In fact, for his three years of college, his school was paying him to attend, because his scholarships exceeded the tuition.

Alamosa's community clearly uses both social and economic capital to invest in their high achieving students and encourage them to pursue human capital. These instances of celebration, of fiscal support, and attainment praise are tangible representations of such practices. As discussed in chapter two, rural students with college degrees benefit their communities. Investing in rural students ramps up the expectation—a college degree is no longer expected by

just one's self or family. The town clearly hopes for more and values increases in knowledge and skills, as they are in high demand and low supply.

Felicia Reed: A community of closely linked individuals and the emphasis on family.

I've known Felicia since elementary school. In fifth grade, we memorized the entire soundtrack to *High School Musical* and ran around her kitchen singing at the top of our lungs. We snuck ice cream sandwiches out of the freezer and feigned horror when her parents discovered we'd snagged them, chasing us around the kitchen. They'd wrangle us together and enlist our help washing the dinner dishes. Sometimes, we'd go to her grandmother's home instead, where family constantly stopped in and out, bringing food or a child or two (like us) to be supervised.

"I'm very close with them." Felicia says when I ask about her current relationships with her family. "Landon, my parents, my siblings...my nephews, my grandparents—They're the most important people in my life! When I was young, I'd go running with my parents or we'd go get coffee and go for a drive or whatever. And now, it's like the same thing but with even more responsibility. I babysit my nephews and help with church dinners and all that."

Felicia's father is a pastor at a tiny church, whose membership includes at least thirty of their family members. Really, though, much of the congregation is considered extended family by the Reeds. When Felicia married her high school sweetheart three years ago, the entire congregation received invitations, as did several of her elementary and high school teachers, friends from high school and college, and family from outside the Valley. Felicia wore colorful cowgirl boots during the ceremony. She insured everyone else in the wedding party did as well, even her nephew, who was only three at the time. He threw the red and yellow leather digs under her dress

in the middle of the ceremony, but nonetheless, he cowboyed up for the occasion. Felicia's now husband, Landon, had the typical rustic formal on—Stetson cowboy hat, a vest, pearl button down, and a big silver buckle, bearing the family name. Most of the crowd wore similar attire and felt wholly comfortable celebrating the marriage of two nineteen year olds in a barn in the middle of the summer.

Marrying Landon exponentially expanded the size of Felicia's family. Both come from farm and ranch families who have lived in Alamosa for at least the last seventy years. "My favorite part about growing up here is probably my relationships. My friendships, my family...knowing everybody. In the community, there's connections between everyone. So half the people I find out later I'm related to." she says and laughs. And while she laughs, she isn't joking. Her marriage to Landon coincidentally made Emma and Cammie, two of my other respondents and two of Felicia's best friends for the last twelve years, her cousins.

Felicia stayed in Alamosa to attend college. Originally, she'd talked about going to another school, about five hours north of home.

"All I wanted was to go to school to become a teacher. Wherever I could go that would give me a solid foundation was what I was after. That's why I thought about Adams and the University of Northern Colorado, because they're known for their education programs. When Landon and I started dating, it only changed where I wanted to be. Had we not, I probably would have gone and ventured out. If I'd hated it, I could've come back. Landon went to school in Gunnison but moved back home after the first semester. That made me not want to leave. I didn't want him to feel like he had to move with me and I didn't want it to be like...a make or break kind of thing. Had I moved and he didn't move with me, we might've had to break up. Or it could have gotten really serious really

fast had he moved with me. I didn't want to put a strain on that. We had talked about it but we'd only been dating for a year. Granted we got engaged right after, in my freshman year of college but we had time to figure that out without the stress of him having to decide whether or not to move across the state with me."

When making her final decision, Felicia invested in maintaining the continuity of her family over another college that could have provided her more resources and the opportunity to explore. She doesn't regret this decision at all. "This is my dream place to live. I feel comfortable here. I'm scared to leave my family. All of my family is here and my husband's whole family is here. Picking up and leaving all of them sounds terrifying."

Felicia does not fear growing up or becoming independent. She and her husband, though in debt from college loans, are fiscally independent. They pay their own rent and bills and they both work exhaustive hours to make ends meet, while enrolled full-time in school. What she fears is a loss of her support system—a loss of her collectivist familial and community identity.

Her fear is rooted in survival. Alamosa's social capital system has helped her through the toughest of times in a way that I doubt would have been possible had she moved away for school. This has all come from the intertwined community. "It has been challenging at times, for both me and Landon," she says. "He got laid off from the job he had three weeks before we got married. That was pretty crappy. So he started working for his dad full time."

Though he would rather work in a mechanics' shop, Landon has joined his father on the family farm as second in command. Felicia seems genuinely happy that he's at least found a steady gig, especially since money is still tight.

"We have them over for dinner once a week. Same with my parents, too. It's my way of saying thanks, because they still help us out so much. When I need advice, they're willing

to look at an application, a cover letter, or a resume. I'll send it to them and be like, 'Does this sound good?' My mom will email me back and be like, 'You're working hard! I'm so proud of you!' ”

Her parents provide needed support that encourages Felicia to believe in her abilities and continue to work hard, though she must deal with her increasing debts and the stresses of being young and low-income.

“It's probably because of my parents that I decided to push myself to not only take one or two credits a semester. I want to set myself up for success later. When they graduated high school, they had no money and kids—everything right off the bat. When my mom was my age, she had two kids. My brother was just born and my sister was two. I think...too...that they are so passionate about me doing this and doing this now because they saw what the struggles they went through could do. They were constantly living paycheck to paycheck. It was a lot. Stress on my family. It's another reason they're so supportive of what I am doing. If it were my choice, I would have had a kid like three years ago! But I waited. I waited because they were *so* excited. They were like, “You're going to graduate and have a job before you have kids!”

Though it may not be ideally what she wants, knowing her family is there to support her while she pursues her teaching career empowers Felicia to persevere, continuing to work 30 hours a week while taking classes. The social support and expectations of her family push her achievement.

Another way social capital benefits Felicia is through the support programs provided by her father's church. “Around this time last year, we started a financial budget thing at church. We started paying attention to what we were spending. That's helped us tremendously” she says.

The “budget thing” she refers to is an online resource that an accountant in the congregation taught other interested members to use. Money has been tight for Felicia throughout high school and college. The support of the church and both sides of her family has helped her make up for her low-income background as she pursues her bachelor’s degree.

These social capital supports would not have been available to Felicia had she attended college elsewhere where the social capital of her home town does not reach. Perhaps her family have been able to provide her with emotional support and praise—that much is unknown. But certainly, just the threat of losing these connections and resources was enough to convince her to attend college locally. This allows her to maintain the links she values between herself and other community members and to afford college as a rustic, low-income student.

Robert Smee: Value in group identity.

If one person could ever encapsulate love, it was Robert Smee. With his balding head and Alamosa High School sweatshirt, Smee was unmistakable. He taught in the Alamosa School District, inspiring and encouraging thousands of youth in the community over his 30-year career. But Smee not only taught, he sponsored the school’s yearbook, academic decathlon teams, and monthly periodical. At Christmas time, he plopped on a Santa hat and fake white beard and passed books out to children at the elementary school. Then he’d hold free photo shoots for families whose younger than school-age children wanted pictures with Santa, too.

“He was our pillar, our rock” says Felicia. “He showed all of us what it means to support one another.” All of my interviewees had classes and extracurriculars with Smee during high school. His room was a safe haven for them during lunch if they had nowhere else to go. “I could just go there and chill. We’d talk about everything.” says Cammie, sighing.

“He actually cared about me—and told me he did *every day* in a time when I thought nobody gave a fuck” says Quincy. “He pulled me through some real tough times, back when nobody else, no matter how much they cared, could get through to me.”

Throughout his life, Smee’s mantra has been “You are loved.” At the end of every class, every group meeting, every lunch date with friends, he concluded with a hug and looked each person straight in the eye and emphasized “You. You are loved.”

“There were times, growing up, when living in a small town drove me crazy.” Cammie says, reflecting back. “People always talk about what’s happening and who’s doing what. If you had something you wanted to keep a secret, you had to really hide it. For a long time, I hated this. But Smee reminded me that really, their gossip also means they care.” What Cammie says rings true. Smee fostered belonging in a way that no one else I’ve ever met has. Regardless of race, gender, class, sex, language, or ability, he made space for each member of his classroom and the community. And while his students didn’t always follow suit, Smee’s promotion of support, love, and acceptance found a way to seep into the community in unalterable ways, bringing people together.

“Smee went to all my races, even though I know it was hard for him to get out to the track. And he went to all of Kyler’s football games, too,” Anna says. And it’s true, Smee could always be found in an Alamosa High School sweatshirt or a t-shirt from Alamosa’s local National Park. In sponsoring so many activities and supporting all of his students’ events, Smee exemplified togetherness. He guided others with him, bearing his community pride on his apparel and in his heart. There’s value in that. Belonging must be fostered for people, especially adolescent students to perform at their best (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Holt-

Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Maslow, 1954). My subjects' expressions of gratitude and remembrance show how much they value being valued themselves.

It was the little things like these that showed how Smee valued being part of his community. My respondents, though now spread throughout the country, all remember what he taught them about community and helping one another out.

“He was like a second father to me, even though I only spoke with him once or twice a year.” Anna says, tears rolling down her face. “Once he stopped our entire bus on the way to a tournament because a woman on the side of the road had a flat. He made all of us get off and help her change it. It made us all late but I really don't think anybody cared.”

Her fiancé, Kyler, pipes in, laughing, but also tearing up. “Another time he did the same thing, but to buy Girl Scout cookies from some kids at the grocery store!”

In April 2017, Smee died of complications from his diabetes. The whole community was rocked by the event. “Everybody just stopped for a few days” Felicia says. “We didn't know what to do or how to respond. The whole week has been a nightmare.” Over five hundred people, including me, took to Facebook to share memories. His memorial service was held at Alamosa High School's football field, which was so packed, even locals sat in the “away” section to pay their respects. Even in death, he brought the community together.

Later, we found out his doctors had been urging him to relocate to a city, where his diabetes could be adequately treated, for quite some time. “We couldn't see it, but his health had been on the brink for over a year. He never let on.” says August. He'd adamantly refused to move, though he knew it endangered his life. To me, this is the ultimate sign of valuing one's group identity—he preferred to remain where he felt he belonged.

Emma Johnson: Relationships as stable, permanent parts of life.

Emma Johnson's house has always been hectic. Her large, extended family walk in and out at their leisure, taking snacks or hugs away. They never keep the door locked and it's unlikely that they'd hear you if you rang the bell—if you want to come in, you just come in. I stop by for my interview with her on New Year's Eve Day to find the whole family cooking and preparing the house for their annual New Year's Party. They anticipate the entire extended family, some fifty-plus Alamosans, will join them to eat, drink, and ring in the New Year. I was unsurprised that Emma had invited me to interview her whilst she was busy. She freely admits that she "always needs to be doing something" and "can never just sit." The people in her life know this well: "She's constantly crafting detailed, beautiful art everywhere she goes" says her cousin/college roommate, Cammie. "Even in classes, she doodles."

While we talk, Emma enlists my help in setting up. "Dan's coming" she informs me, excitement in her voice. Dan, Emma's boyfriend, also grew up in Alamosa. The two started dating their senior year of high school, after nearly 17 years of friendship. Both had been somewhat hesitant at first. "It was obvious to everybody that we really cared about each other" says Emma. "But I knew I wanted to go to a Christian college, which meant moving away. And Dan knew he was going to stay put for school and then move when his parents did. It was a weird situation." Even so, they decided to give the relationship a shot.

Now, four and a half years later and hundreds of miles apart, they're closer than ever. When Dan graduated from college, his parents moved to South Dakota to retire and he moved with them, finishing his Master's degree online and looking for jobs. Since Emma now attends school away from home too, at a Christian college one state over, the two don't see each other much. They've still maintained a loving, close relationship however. He makes the day-long

drive to visit Emma at school as often as he can.. On long weekends, she treks up to South Dakota, too. “I’m just used to the driving now. Whether I’m visiting family or going to see him, I am driving all the time!” she says.

I ask if she’s nervous that Dan will be interacting with all of her extended family when he arrives for the party. She rolls her eyes. “They love him more than me! He even came down, *while I was at school* to go hunting with my dad and brother. I was like, ‘Hey!’” she exclaims.

Dan regularly attends family functions like these and it’s clear the Johnsons consider him a permanent fixture in the family. They even pressure the two about marriage.

“I made a joke about marriage to my sister the other day and I immediately regretted it” she says. “They give it back to me like 20 more times. I think they push for it, though, because they see how happy we are, that we genuinely get along, and that we love each other. I think that they just -want us to be happy.”

Emma’s relationship with Dan isn’t the only relationship she’s maintained since her move. She’s still extremely close with all of her siblings and her large extended family. This much is clear from how she interacts with them on New Year’s Eve. She chases around her youngest cousins, laughing and hugging them. The youngest is only three, yet he still intimately connects with Emma, giving her hugs and referring to her as Aunt-EEE-Ahh. She’s clearly been around enough to make an impact in his short life.

In addition, Emma has maintained relationships with her closest friends from high school.

“Back then, we had game nights and hung out all the time. I felt like I had a good, solid group of friends. I even had people at college tell me like, ‘I never had that. I didn’t have a group of friends like you did growing up and I don’t keep up with any of them now.

You are so lucky.’ I love that we still get together now, even though it’s been four years.

I will definitely keep up with them for life. They’re people that I love connecting with.”

Emma, like all the rest of my participants, listed her close friends from home as some of the most important people in her life, even four years after graduation. Between her friendships, her family, and her boyfriend, she has maintained nearly all of the significant relationships she had in her life before the college transition. Anna, Kyler, and Felicia have shared this experience. Like Emma, all three had college roommates from Alamosa at one point or another in their college career. And Felicia still speaks to her best friend from high school, Cammie, every day, though Cammie is 500 miles away. Anna and Kyler, though at different colleges and in different cities, have fostered a romance that will culminate in their nuptials next year, after over nine years together. The pair started dating at the age of fifteen.

“It’s not easy.” Emma says. “We work hard and make sacrifices for each other. I know Anna and Kyler, and all the other couples we know in the same boat do too. It takes a lot to stay connected to somebody else when you’re apart.”

Emma’s (and Kyler, Anna, and Felicia’s) relationship maintenance, indicates that, in collectivist rusticity, relationships are meant to last. From their friendships to romantic bonds, their community is not lost simply because they leave it for school. Instead, community and relationships are stable conceptions, cultivated constantly.

Anna Kline and Kyler Tanaka: Conforming to norms and performing rusticity.

Interestingly, the stable conception of relationships in rusticity caused tension for students who tried to apply it in urbanity.

“Not gonna lie, it’s been a lot harder to make friends than I thought it would be.

Especially since we were friends with our friend group since like freakin’ preschool. We

were always, always friends. We never really had to make friends growing up I feel. It was lonely for a long time.” says Emma.

Anna describes feeling like a failure because she does not have as many friends as many of the students at her large university.

“Everyone else has, like a bajillion friends. Part of it is me being so busy all the time. I can’t really hang out with people. It’s been kinda lonely sometimes.”

Though she clearly wants to live up to the social standards of her school, she, like Emma experiences loneliness. In part, this is because of her rustic, collectivist conceptions of relationships.

“I’ve noticed that a lot of people at school consider me a friend, but I don’t consider them a friend. To me, they’re just an acquaintance, someone whom I haven’t invested my time in.” she says.

Kyler, her fiancé pipes in here, nodding and serious. “Yes” he says, “ because their version of friendship is *so* surface based. And shallow!” While Anna and Kyler have made connections in college, they are also turned off by how they perceive non-rustic folk to manipulate relationships. “They only care when there’s a benefit to be gotten” says Anna. “If they *actually* cared about each other, their relationships would exist regardless of what was in it for them.”

The cultural difference Anna and Kyler describe make it tricky for them, as well as the other rustic students, Felicia, Quincy, and Emma, to navigate making new friendships. They were all surprised to find out that urban peoples were not interested in making the intimate connections they have back home. Social norms differ so substantially that, at times, even walking down the street or saying hello to a neighbor reminded them of how unaccepted their rustic practices are in cities.

“It’s not the same.” Kyler claims. “People don’t take their time out of their day to try to get to know you. But I try. My neighbors get like, weirded out when I nod at them from my driveway. I can’t even imagine what they’d do if I tried to start a conversation! They already duck back into their cars really quick.”

Anna could relate. “I was disconnected for a while. It really distressed me, watching people walk down the street and not even bother to make eye contact with me...I’ve stopped trying.”

These differing social norms are just one example of how students performed the rustic facet of their identity. Transitioning to environments that did not share their cultural social norms was discouraging, as Anna notes. It alienated her from the larger school society where the majority of her peers did not share her beliefs or cultural norms.

In addition, Kyler and Anna describe how they “dress more freely” and casually than their urban peers, adorning rustic fashion, such as t-shirts, jeans, and boots daily. “I’m more comfortable with what I look like than a lot of the women I’ve met at school seem to be.” Anna says. “I don’t have to put on make-up just to go to breakfast or the gym or something. It doesn’t make sense! It’s a waste!”

“People have so much stuff.” Kyler adds, nodding. “And they’re constantly replacing it. It’s a definite waste.” Instead of consumerism, rusticity promotes elements of “Do-It-Yourself” (DIY) culture and a focus on sustainability. Kyler and his brother enjoy working on their old, Harley motorcycles, for example. Each and every one of the rurally raised students I spoke to who left school, regardless of rusticity, spoke about urban consumerism like this. Another example: August’s family tries to maintain and repair what they already have before they buy new things.

“In a city there’s more consumerism. And that’s *the* answer to your problems.” he says. “You don’t have something you buy it. If something’s broken, you pay to fix it. Or even if something’s broken, you buy a new one, *just to have the newer one*. Here, I come home, and the dryer is broken, so my dad has pulled it apart and is messing around with it. If he fixes it, it’ll probably last another five years, at least.”

Anna sees this consumerism as further evidence that individualism makes her urban peers selfish, and she rejects it, favoring rusticity’s “fix it” culture instead. “I’m just *so* frustrated sometimes.” she sighs. “It’s like all the people I go to school with are in it for themselves. Their only end goal is to get a job, make money, and *buy more stuff*.” Her tone clarifies that she does not aspire to that. “I want to help people” she says.

With graduation looming, Kyler and Anna have both been searching for jobs. Anna is also on a waitlist for graduate school. She’s stuck, unsure whether she’ll be enrolling in the fall or not. Realistically, they are both acting in the same ways as the urban and suburban students Anna critiques. They’re trying to transition to the job market and utilize their degrees. The difference, as she explains, is at the level of motivation and community expectation.

“Do you think that the broader community in Alamosa have expectations for what you do after you graduate, or not really?” I ask.

Anna and Kyler look surprised I’ve even asked the question. “Oh yeah,” says Anna “and the expectation would be to leave the Valley, learn some stuff, and come back.”

Kyler jumps in at this point. “Come back and apply it” he emphasizes.

“I think I have proof of that” Anna states. “A local health organization sent me a letter that said if I come back to the Valley then all my student loans are forgiven. Which is crazy. That was definitely like a ‘Come back! We need providers here!’ Because we do. They’re not wrong.”

Anna's testament elucidates what's often ignored when urban hegemony tries to analyze rustic pursuits—Alamosa's norms emphasize a collectivist epistemology. This places certain expectations on rustic students that are invisible when analyzed by the outside world. Each of the rustic students spoke about about the expectations of their community. They know that the larger community wants them to return and be involved locally, bringing back their human capital resources. "It's definitely part of the expectation of attending college, and it's one I think we both have for ourselves." Kyler continues.

"I definitely do." Anna says.

Anna's major is physical therapy, a path she says she's chosen because it allows her to pursue her interests *and* benefit her community.

"As an physical therapist, I could specialize. I could do kids or older adults or I could even be a specialized hand therapist, which would be kinda fun. *But* I don't really want to do that because I want to come back to the Valley where I would be it. I would treat everyone as opposed to if I lived in Denver, I would have to specialize in order to have anyone come to me. But if I came back here, I could really help more people than just one specific population, which is what I want to do."

Kyler, too, chose his educational pathway not only because he enjoys his field but because of how he hopes can benefit Alamosa.

"I chose my degree because I want to do something greater for the Valley. It comes back to that community thing that I was talking about. Urban people don't—urban communities don't get that same feeling that we get. I watched my father, my neighbor's farm struggle with water resources. That's why I went to college. They were like, 'What do you want to do?' And I thought about it, and I was like, 'I want to be a hydroelectric

engineer.’ Because it’s not about what benefits *me*. It’s really about what benefits my community.”

Both Anna and Kyler express the understanding that, while their actions may appear to be the same on the surface—go to college, find a job—their motivations differ substantially from their non-rustic peers. Their pursuance of human capital partially completes rusticity’s social contract. The duo see themselves as responsible for bolstering the Alamosa community. It also fulfils the social norms of sustainability at the local level (where they are the resource) and maintaining intimate relationships, because they return to their community.

Leaving for college has also taught them that common cultural aspects of their rusticity are not universally shared. As Emma and Anna’s loneliness attests, this, at times, this causes discontent. Kyler contextualizes the cultural dissonance he has experienced in pursuit of human capital:

“Every time I’m down here, I’m super happy.” Kyler says. “But at school, I realized I’m not happy. This is largely because of the that things that I gave up, stuff from here in the Valley, in order to have the experience that I had up there. I was really depressed for a long time. I’m still dealing with it. I’m a lot better about it now than I used to be. But sometimes, it’s hard for me to deal with school.”

Anna reaches out for Kyler’s hand as he he admits this. His vulnerability resonates so deeply within us that we stop the interview, sitting for a few moments in silence. Cultural dissonance, at any level, can be disconcerting. I know, because I’ve experienced it, too. Eventually, Anna says “It’ll be better when we’re done and we can come home.”

Quincy Tanaka: Prioritizing collective needs over individual pursuits

Quincy has always carried himself quietly and calmly. No matter what was happening on the inside, his outer layer conveyed no emotional insecurity. In his Hooey hat and jeans, pockets shoved deep into his front pocket of his hoodie, he looks like the quintessential millennial farm boy. All he's missing are the cowboy boots.

"Last year, I started work as a volunteer firefighter," he tells me. He's showing me a picture of himself in full firefighting gear on his phone. Helmet drawn tightly over his eyes, he's climbing a staircase with a huge tan hose trailing behind him. As he tells me about it, I note that the Facebook action-shot has garnered comments like, "That was a great day, bud." and "So proud of you!" from family and friends. I can see the pride in his eyes, though he doesn't mention the comments.

"I love it," he says when I inquire more. "I'd like to start being *more* part of the community, actually. Like joining local co-op boards. Still, I'm not a big limelight guy. I like to help people out but make sure that I don't get all the credit, if there's credit to be given out."

Quincy comes from a firmly established local farm family. He's a fourth generation barley farmer who spent many summer afternoons bailing grain, alone in the middle of miles of flat, dry field. His Japanese and rustic heritages add to his community-oriented mindset.

"I have to make sure I am still honorable and not imposing on others" he says. "Around here, you do what you can to make life easier for everybody. Family is number one. You have to try your damndest to do the very best that you can."

It's this mentality, along with the "familial pressure" he feels from his parents, siblings, and grandparents that make Quincy work hard.

“My family...Japanese families have really high expectations. My grandmother was big on this back in high school, when she was still alive. I would joke with her and tell her, ‘I’m not going to college. I’m just gonna dig ditches for the rest of my life.’ And she used to bust my butt for it!”

For the last four years, he’s been working towards a degree in agriculture. It’s something that he knew he wanted to do years ago.

“As far as it goes with my education, I really wanted to be able to expand my knowledge of agriculture enough to where I could assume a leadership position both in the family farm and...well, maybe a government position later on down the line. A big goal is to step in so that my family is able to see more of my parents, my father. Because we really don’t get to see him a whole lot right now. He’s always working.” he admits.

Like Anna and Kyler, Quincy’s goals reflect his desire to contribute to and belong in his community. Not once throughout our various conversations did he mention a goal that did not center local involvement. “The farm is a way of life that I really want” he says. “I like trying to be a good student of the land and help feed the population.”

Quincy chose to enroll in college locally. He has spent the last four years studying at Adams, which he chose over institutions well-known for the agriculture programs, like Texas A&M University. Just *why* he made this decision is a question that he admits he gets asked frequently, especially by family.

Though it is never acknowledged out loud, the Alamosa community, including Quincy’s family, seem unsure of how to read his decision to stay. He shrugs.

“I felt like I had an obligation to stay. And I don’t say this to a lot of people, but my brother going to college away, and me seeing that his tuition is going to be far greater

than mine, made me worry about my parents, financially. I don't like to put a lot of stress on people. And so I took it upon myself to help out my parents as much as I could by attending a local university while still getting the education I wanted. Besides, I am a homebody. Family matters a lot to me. Being away...the thought of me having to travel like four plus hours to get anywhere really gave me a hard time.

His response surprises me. "So your parents didn't ask you to or expect you to stay?" I ask, double checking.

"No, not at all. I mean, they love me and support me no matter what, but I could tell they wanted me to get out for a bit. Both my parents were like, 'You need to get out and go do! Go to these schools and explore.' They wanted me to evolve myself, I guess. And even though they kept saying that, I still...put it on myself that it was up to me to stay back and take care of everything while my brother was at school."

Even though his family wants him to prioritize his own academic pursuits and give him the chance to explore and grow, Quincy stays. The obligation that he puts "on himself" warrants action that prioritizes his family's collective needs over his own desires.

"Have I envisioned myself doing other things? Ehhh...you could say I have. I'm more willing to accept the fact that I want to take care of our heritage that way my siblings are able to do more. To achieve more in life, I guess. Although farming is my goal. And is my main goal." he says.

Quincy holds himself personally responsible for the survival of his family and their business. All the goals he articulates "help out" the family farm, his parents, and even his siblings. I believe that his prioritization of perceived family needs over his own are rooted in his rustic, collectivist identity.

“I feel this deep sense of belonging to this place. When I leave, I miss this place so much. I miss the community and I miss knowing what people are doing and how everybody is doing. I guess it’s that I want to still have my deep connections with my family and my friends.” he says, affirming his connection to the land and its people.

Quincy’s story serves as a powerful example of how rustic culture, can differentiate the goals and experiences of rurally raised college students from those of many American college students, who are portrayed as pursuing individual goals. Ultimately, he does what’s best for his community and his family, not himself.

Return on Investment: Correspondence with Rustic Identity

Quincy indicates that he intends to remain in Alamosa and use the human capital he has gained to benefit his home and his family. Thus, the community will get at least some return on all the social and fiscal capital they invested in him, as discussed earlier. Though I do not have the space to discuss it in depth here, Felicia’s desire to remain in the Valley and teach elementary school indicates that she too, will provide a return on investment for the community.

“A lot of people that I went to church with used to see me teaching in Sunday School and be like, ‘Yeah. Whatever.’ But now that I’m applying for jobs here, they’ve realized I’m serious about it. It’s not that I just love little kids. I have a passion for teaching and a passion for the Valley. I’ve had this dream since I was in first grade. Now they know I’m serious about it and they see me more as an adult, as someone worth talking to about serious issues, not just... ‘Hi, how’s your family?’ pleasantries.”

Felicia believes that since she is about to be a full contributing member of the community’s economic and educational systems, her community is suddenly treating her as a knowledgeable

resource. As a teacher, she would utilize her human capital attainments to benefit the collective. Her reflection demonstrates that the community does see her as a return on investment. They have transitioned into treating her more like “an adult” or a “resource”—more like human capital.

Clearly, Alamosa’s social and economic investments in Felicia and Quincy have had the desired effect. They will both provide human capital resources for the community. But what about the students who left Alamosa for college? Certainly Anna and Kyler made it clear that they plan to return and provide services for the community. My other three respondents however, currently have no plans to return to Alamosa, regardless of the town’s investments in them or the community’s expectations.

Emma was the only rustic student who does not want to return to Alamosa, though she knows her family wants her to. In her large, extended family, youth go to college or trade school and then come back and raise their families at “home base.”

“Most of my extended family, cousins and stuff, chose to go somewhere else for college. Not many have chosen to stick around. But then, a number of them have also come *back*. So my desires have been similar in that most of them have wanted to get away; but they’re different in that a lot of them have come back already, either for family purposes, in a sense, or for financial reasons. Some of them just hated being that far away and came back. Apparently, I’m the one who’s gone the *furthest* away.” Emma says, and laughs.

This established pattern puts a lot of pressure on Emma to return, even though she’d rather travel the world. She’s planning on moving to Denmark after she graduates to teach and create art abroad for a few months.

“I feel like it’s a lot of pressure, because *we all are here*. But...I’m not so keen on coming back, at least not right away. I could see 10-15 years, *maybe* coming back after having done things”. She laughs and continues. “I want to experience life! Experience places other than the Valley! That’s gotten me labeled as the family wanderer, which I am totally okay with. There are things in life that I want to see outside. I want *to learn*. When I come back, I don’t want to be stuck in the same. I don’t want to be the same person I’ve always been here. I want to be someone who has something to offer the community, someone who actually *wants* to be here, who’s not stuck here. And for me anyway, that means getting out of here for a while. Using that time to figure out what it really is that I want in life and how home really feels.”

Emma’s plans for after school certainly reflect her desires. She’s planned an entire itinerary while in Europe that includes some of the most famous art museums in the world. She will undoubtedly be able to learn and explore while she’s there.

Similarly to the other rustic students, Emma describes wanting to have something to offer the community if she returns. Right now, because she’s so antsy to see the world and learn about everything she can, she doesn’t see herself as a worthy resource for her community. First she needs to learn and get her exploration totally out of her system.

Her boyfriend Dan’s move to South Dakota has probably also instigated some conflict in her desires. Because the relationships she wishes to maintain are far apart, when she returns from Denmark, she has to make a choice about whether to return to her family or try and settle down in the same place as Dan. Where Felicia, Quincy, Anna, and Kyler have consolidated community in Alamosa, Dan’s move, in concert with her free-spirit nature, have unsettled Emma. Perhaps she will return, perhaps not.

Either way, Emma will provide at least a partial return on investment for the community. So much of her family lives in Alamosa that she guarantees she will “visit constantly,” bringing her artist’s human capital with her when she comes. She still highly identifies with her community and her rusticity, and I think it is likely she will be a valuable local resource, even if not a full time resident. Upon her many returns, she will share her art and knowledge with the community, as she has always done. “I mean, I hope I’ll be successful, that way I’ll have something to bring back and share.” she says.

Thus, all of the rustic students in this study will likely provide at least partial returns on the community’s emotional and financial investments in them. All the rustic students want to support their community through their human capital achievements. Even Emma wishes to have “something to offer the community.”

Cammie and August, however do not identify with rusticity. While they both speak fondly of their childhoods, growing up in such a tight-knit community, neither seems interested in moving back.

“Everyone seemed to be really close with friends, which is good. I think that’s something that’s because you’re in a small town, and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed getting to see people all the time and getting to know them really well.” says August. “But sometimes I need things that you can only get in a city. And to find work on a movie, I’ve got to be in a city. Alamosa...is not a city.”

August cites access to resources and industries that Alamosa lacks as the main reason he will not return. Though Cammie desires to work in a different industry, she shares August’s sentiments about wanting to be somewhere else because she wants access to urban resources.

“I don’t regret growing up in the Valley because I would have hated growing up in Denver. I enjoy that I grew up in a small community. All my teachers knew my name and our classrooms were small. But... I love to shop and I love going to malls and seeing all the trends change. I might hate it, but for now, that’s the dream.”

Because they do not identify as collectivist nor rustic, it is unsurprising that Cammie and August prioritize their own preferences and career goals. They both come from upper-middle class families whose history is not rooted locally. Cammie’s family is mostly in the Midwest, and August has family all over the country. As white economically stable students whose families had raised them more along the lines of individualism, they do not share the rustic students’ community orientation. It is unlikely, then, that Alamosa’s community will receive a return on its’ investment in them. They will not return with human capital.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

The Alamosa community's social and fiscal investments in their high-achieving students, coupled with the areas' collectivist culture, encourages rural students to pursue human capital. Such a system is noteworthy because it obliges some of the community's highest-achieving college students to return home and apply their knowledge and skills locally. What's more, it leads them to desire fulfilling these obligations. In a community as low in population as Alamosa, every student counts. Every potential community member and every potential resource matters in ensuring collective survival.

Should human capital prove to be as worthy an investment as Jischke (in CSRA, 2000) portrays it to be, the Alamosa community will have achieved significant gains through the students profiled here. While the two non-rustic students I interviewed did not have any interest in returning to Alamosa, all five of the rustic students expressed at least a limited degree of interest. Four of these five rustic students adamantly want to "help their community," which they all indicate they will do by using their human capital locally. Of course, this assumes that all of these students will stick to their guns, and actually do as they desire, which, realistically, may or may not happen. Follow up research investigating the degree to which rustic youth fulfilled the expectation that they return home with human capital will prove valuable in the continued investigation of rustic student experience.

My results indicate that for rustic students, the benefits of local social capital and community outweigh the potential draws of urban areas, such as plentiful resources and increased opportunity for highly paid employment. Mainly, this seems to occur because the students crave identity continuity. In colleges governed at the national and state levels through

tenets of individualism and urban hegemony, rustic culture is devalued. The social norms, style, and even collegiate motivations of the rustic students I spoke to differ so drastically from those of their urban counterparts that they experience rejection, cultural dissonance, and loneliness in urbanity. These findings support Ching and Creed's (1997) assertion that rusticity is not tied to place, and that the rural-urban divide should be considered a legitimate facet of identity, altering how people view the world and experience marginalization.

Further supporting Ching and Creed's theory on rusticity, the results of this study directly contradict the commonly held belief that all rural and rustic people are one in the same. As the different beliefs and motivations of non-rustic and rustic students in this study confirm, their differing identities correlate with their differing experiences.

Rusticity is a complicated identity facet, experienced in nuanced ways by high-achieving rural students. As I am the first scholar (that I know of) to apply rusticity to work in the field of educational research, I have no way of knowing whether the experiences embodied here relate to those of other rustic college students throughout the country. Thus, additional research on the rural experience should be undertaken that can build up this area of study and help legitimize rusticity in identity-based scholarship.

In Alamosa, rusticity is formed in collectivist heritage and the community's reliance on social capital for resources and actuating belonging. This viewpoint aligns with the limited previous research in collective, social identity in rural college students (CSRA, 2000; Vandello & Cohen, 1999). However, the idea that rural communities are unable to attract back their locally raised students after they have left for school, as asserted by the USDA (2017) and CSRA (2000), is not supported by my findings. In fact, quite the opposite seems to be true, at least in the case of rustic, rurally raised graduates. This, in part, may be because both of these institutions

prioritize rural definitions based in locale quantification, not in identity. Again, more scholarship needs to be done on the rural experience and rusticity in order to adequately situate Alamosa and the experiences of my respondents in the wider world of rural human capital.

The urban hegemony's prioritization of consuming and generating money and other resources is, of course, best accomplished in cities. This systematically minimizes and erases the benefits of living in rural communities, such as the intimate relationships and intricate social capital systems they foster.

Moving forward, it is critical that scholars and policymakers acknowledge rusticity as a facet of identity that is marginalized by those in urbanity and their capitalist culture. What's more, my work indicates that some rustic college students may be experiencing the painfulness of cultural dissonance, loneliness, and depression. Such a finding should not be taken lightly. Colleges and universities should make sure that mental health resources are available to their rustic students in attempts to mediate their rural/urban dissonance. Lastly, other rural communities hoping to entice their students to return after attaining college degrees should heed to the somewhat obvious findings of this research: students who highly identify with local rural culture are more likely to return than students who do not.

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