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# Exploring College Choice Experiences of Rural Students Through Creative Nonfiction

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### Cover Page Footnote

A special thank you to the participants for being willing to learn with me through this project and for being willing to share openly and honestly. Thank you to my mom, professors, and work family for supporting and encouraging me through this project.

# Exploring College Choice Experiences of Rural Students through Creative Nonfiction

*Jenna Gannon*

## Introduction

The process of making the choice to attend college, where to attend, and for what major, is a complex decision for prospective students. I graduated from a rural high school with a class of 44 situated in a small town in Kansas. A college education was always the step I assumed for myself after completing high school. So, I asked, “What was it that set my expectations and experiences apart from my peers who did not pursue a college education, or those who started five or ten years later? Was it my involvement in all those extra-curricular activities that gave me the drive to succeed? Was it because I had already had experiences on college campuses that made me feel like I had a right to go, and that I already belonged? What is it that motivated me to pursue advanced degrees?”

Perna (2006) described in detail the complexity of factors that affect student college choice including four layers, “(1) the individual’s habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context” (p. 116). Although college choice literature thoroughly establishes the four main layers of college choice, it focuses mainly on non-rural populations or does not address the differences between the college aspirations of urban/suburban versus rural students. Contemporary authors argue that it is essential more research is done to consider rural students because their college attendance rates are lower than those of their urban and suburban peers (Ardoin, 2018; Barr, 2018; Longhurst, 2014; Pesko, 2020).

Even within the current literature that explores rural student college choice, most studies are centered in the rural southeast or rural northeast (e.g., Harris, 2013; Hlinka et al., 2015; Wright, 2012). In addition, many studies focusing on rural student college choice utilize a case study design (e.g., Ardoin, 2013; Austin, 2018) showcasing the need for a deeper, more comprehensive look through narrative inquiry. The purpose of this research was to explore how rural students in southeastern and south-central Kansas understand their college choice process including if they should attend, where they should attend, and which major they should choose. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do rural students describe their college choice process?
2. What lived experiences do rural students believe influenced their choice in college major(s)?

Qualitative research, especially narrative inquiry, provides a middle ground where I am not expected to completely remove my identity from my research. Throughout this project, I focused on the unique experiences and perceptions of the participants while weaving in my personal connection to their stories. Pieces of my identity provided me with a personal interest and motivation to examine the college knowledge experiences and rural student college choice in southeastern and south-central Kansas.

I also represented the university as a rural graduate student and over the course of the study was employed by two separate local colleges. For some participants, I may have represented my

institutions and could have been viewed as an outsider. My roles as a university student and college employee, also include being a Christian, white, woman from a rural, working-class family who was the first in her family to earn a bachelor's degree, are intertwined and affected how I conducted research as well as how participants viewed me as a researcher.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Rural students are considered an underserved population in higher education as their attendance rates are much lower than their urban and suburban counterparts (Ardoin, 2018; Barr, 2018; Longhurst, 2014; Pesko, 2020). Thus, it is important to examine their college-going experiences from their point of view, acknowledging that they create their meaning from unique perspectives. This study utilized a well-established college choice model by Perna (2006) focusing on the importance of cultural capital and rural habitus to address the unique needs of rural students.

**College Choice.** The process of making the choice to attend college and where, is a complex decision for prospective students. Perna (2006) described in detail the complexity of factors that affect student college choice including four layers, “(1) the individual’s habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context” (p. 116).

The first layer, an individual’s habitus, focuses on the individual, including demographic characteristics, cultural capital, and social capital. Rural students gain much of their cultural and social capital from parental and school influences (Ardoin, 2018; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Hlinka et al., 2015; Jaeger et al., 2015; Tieken, 2016). Parental support and household characteristics have a major role in the attainment of cultural and social capital and thus rural student college choice (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Researchers found that rural parents tend to weigh in heavily on economic value in their children’s education when considering college choices (Hlinka et al., 2015; Tieken, 2016). Even when valuing education highly, rural parents may be underprepared to help their children navigate the college-going experience (Hlinka et al., 2015). Furthermore, researchers have found that high school counselors and staff support students with cultural and social capital by providing information and encouraging college choices and pathways during high school (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Jaeger et al., 2015).

The second layer, the school and community context, includes the availability of resources in addition to structural supports or barriers. The availability of these academic resources, including college staff responsiveness and supportiveness, are a major factor for rural students making the college choice. Howley et al. (2013) demonstrated that relationships built with college staff, along with access to college information and processes (Jaeger et al., 2015), drastically increase the rate at which rural students choose to attend colleges. Often, rural school districts receive less funding than suburban or urban schools, which could limit the academic programming available to rural students (Byun et al., 2017; Hlinka et al., 2015; Jaeger et al., 2015; Koricich et al., 2018; Tieken, 2016). According to Byun et al. (2017), “being enrolled in a college preparatory program and engaging in postsecondary preparatory activities were significantly related to the increased odds of attending first a two-year college and then a four-year college when compared to attending a two-year college only” (pp. 831-832). Several research studies regarding these pre-

college resources focus on dual-credit or academic-oriented preparatory programs (Byun et al., 2017; Conley, 2005; Frost, 2017; Pesko, 2020), but little research focuses on the extra-curricular experiences of students.

The third layer, higher education context, focuses on the marketing and recruitment, location, and institutional characteristics that affect college choice. Perna (2006) states that, “higher education institutions may be a source of information to students and their families about postsecondary enrollment options” (p. 118). Furthermore, institutional characteristics that reflect the characteristics of the students themselves will affect college selection (Perna, 2006). For rural students, this means seeing themselves in the student populations, as well as particular locations, have a large impact on where and if they decide to pursue post-secondary education (Barr, 2018; Longhurst, 2014; Reeves, 2020). For these reasons, rural students tend to select community colleges over four-year institutions (Day, 2017; Jaeger, et al., 2015; Longhurst, 2014; Wright, 2012).

Finally, the fourth layer, social, economic, and policy context, focuses on economic characteristics and public policy characteristics including unemployment rate at needs-based grant programs (Perna, 2006). Economic factors impact college choice for all students as they consider cost and job opportunities, but rural students and parents must also consider local economies and outmigration of the “best and brightest” from rural towns to urban areas or urbanized-centers (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Sherman & Sage, 2011). According to Koricich et al. (2018) poverty is often thought of as strictly financial, which ignores healthcare, housing, and educational poverty. Not only does outmigration affect the rural college choice through economic factors, it also affects student connection to rural culture. Public policy factors, such as grants, open doors for students to learn more about postsecondary options and resources (Perna, 2006).

While Perna’s (2006) college choice model is well-established, it does not focus on the unique factors that affect rural students, namely how they build cultural capital and the importance of rural habitus. Both cultural capital and habitus theories consider the unique intersection between rural identity and the knowledge/skills needed to make choices regarding college and career decisions; as such, they have been widely used by researchers who have examined rural student college choice (Ardoin, 2018; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Howley et al., 2013; Tieken, 2016; Wright, 2012).

***Cultural Capital.*** Cultural capital is a value or attainment of cultural assets such as education that aids in the securing of continued economic stability that can be passed along to offspring (McDonough, 1997; Swartz, 1997). Specifically, college knowledge includes the knowledge, skills, and values that are required to understand and participate in post-secondary education (Ardoin, 2018). This can include, but is not limited to, knowledge of college jargon, knowledge of educational options, and value of post-secondary degree attainment (Ardoin, 2018). Ardoin (2018) stated that “children in rural and working-class areas are taught information and behaviors that prepare them for blue-collar work; thus, scholars argue, schools perpetuate geographical and social stratification” (p. 11). Thus, it is important to consider how rural students build cultural capital to inform their college choice process.

**Rural Habitus.** Ardoin (2018) states that, “habitus materializes as individuals’ aspirations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, expectations, practices, actions, and appreciations” are often major contributors to individuals’ sense of self and sense of place (p. 28). For rural students, rurality is deeply ingrained and affects the way students perceive the value of a college education. Rural students learn these expectations, aspirations, and values from their environment including parents, adults within their school system, and the economy (Ardoin, 2013; Ardoin, 2018; Hlinka et al., 2015; Huffman, 2011; Sherman & Sage, 2011; Tieken, 2016; Wright, 2012). Since rural students are often from disadvantaged backgrounds as compared to their suburban peers, they do not have the same college expectations or understanding of the college jargon (Ardoin, 2016; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Jaeger, et al., 2015; Koricich et al., 2018; Tieken, 2016; Raikes, et al., 2012). Rural students’ habitus often does not include college-going, and they can feel out of place even considering college attendance (Ardoin, 2018; McDonough et al., 2010). College-going is a major life change for many first-time freshmen, but it is amplified for rural students.

### **Methodological Framework**

Ardoin (2018) noted the importance of utilizing qualitative methods to understand the perspectives of underserved populations including rural students. Current literature on college choice uses a variety of qualitative methods, including case study, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry methods (e.g., Ardoin, 2018; Barr, 2018; Cain, 2019; Harris, 2013; Hodson, 2012; Stone, 2017; Stone 2014). It is imperative that students’ stories are incorporated to best tell the unique stories of each participant. Thus, narrative inquiry is the best fit for this study.

There are many methods to qualitative inquiry including case study, ethnography, and grounded theory, but narrative inquiry sets itself apart by focusing, “on the story as the basic unit of analysis” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 27). In essence, narrative inquiry is used to better understand how people make meaning from their lived experiences. According to Kramp (2004), “narrative is a vital human activity that structures experience and gives it meaning” (p. 104). The field of narrative inquiry has been developed by leading authors and researchers like Clandinin (2007), Polkinghorne (1995), and Kim (2016). This research is most firmly positioned in Kim’s (2016) approach to narrative inquiry.

Because of its flexibility across disciplines and vast methodological options, narrative inquiry has no one “correct” method and is one of the most diverse forms of qualitative research. Each methodological option provides a multitude of possibilities that may be appropriate for a research purpose making it more difficult to decide which route to pursue. One option, creative nonfiction, utilizes facts paired with a fictional writing style and “provides researchers with the opportunity to work with raw data in order to speak to the heart of the readers’ social consciousness, while providing the protection of anonymity to the research participants” (Clough, 2002 as cited by Kim, 2016, p. 140). This extra layer of protection is especially important when working with populations from smaller communities in rural Kansas, where their stories may be easily identifiable even when accounting for names and places.

Creative nonfiction, through an interpretivist lens, also allows for the construction of narratives between the researcher and participants. For rural participants, this collaboration with a rural

researcher also helps to build rapport, establishing greater reliability as the narratives shared will be more truthful and more whole (Kim, 2016). Collaborative construction of stories incorporating the participants' stories and researcher's subjectivity is essential to both creative nonfiction and interpretivism as well as allowing for an open and honest writing process resulting in an engaging narrative that entices the reader and draws them in (Crotty, 2015; Kim, 2016).

## Research Design

Kim's (2016) work, along with current literature regarding rural student college aspirations (e.g., Ardoin, 2013; Ardoin, 2018; Barr, 2018; Longhurst, 2014; Pesko, 2020), influenced the design of this study including participant selection, site selection, and methods.

**Participant Selection.** Narrative inquiry calls for a small sample size to dig into each participants' individual story. Three participants were selected based on their graduation from a rural-serving high school, varying post-secondary attainment levels, and colleges attended. Participants' demographics and family characteristics were also considered. For example, at least one participant was an only child, at least one participant was not first-generation, and at least one participant attended a community college. To be considered for the study, participants were required to meet the following criterion:

- graduated from a rural-serving high school in southeastern or south-central Kansas;
- lived in a rural community through their primary and secondary school career;
- pursued a college education directly after graduating from high school; and,
- graduated with at least a technical certificate by the time of this study.

For the purposes of this study, rural was defined as all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area (anything less than 2,500 people) (US Census Bureau, 2020). Thus, a rural-serving high school was defined as being located within a community of less than 2,500 people. Southeastern Kansas was defined as counties in Kansas including Greenwood, Woodson, Allen, Bourbon, Elk, Wilson, Neosho, Crawford, Chautauqua, Montgomery, Labette, and Cherokee counties. (Kansas Adjutant General's Department, 2020). South-central Kansas was defined as counties in Kansas including Barton, Rice, McPherson, Marion, Pawnee, Stafford, Reno, Harvey, Kiowa, Pratt, Kingman, Sedgwick, Butler, Comanche, Barber, Harper, Sumner, and Cowley counties (Kansas Adjutant General's Department, 2020).

Participants were identified based on previous enrollment and graduation at local, rural-serving high schools. The researcher personally reached out to the possible participants via electronic communication such as text, email, or phone call. Participants were enrolled in the study when they signed the informed consent form. The researcher also used electronic communications to schedule and remind participants of interviews.

**Research Site.** Participants and the researcher were all located in Kansas, and interviews took place online via Zoom. Zoom interviews allowed for more flexibility for the researcher and participants for location and schedule conflicts. The flexibility of Zoom was paramount for this research as the participants and researcher were not within driving distance of each other. Additionally, this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic making remote interviews

essential. Interviews were recorded and transcribed; recordings were deleted after transcription was complete.

**Membership Role.** The researcher for this study could have been viewed as both an insider and outsider to the participants. The researcher's personal familiarity with the hometowns as well as high schools and colleges of the participants allowed for expedited relationship building and more open dialog during interviews. Additionally, the researcher would have met all inclusion criterion for the study thus making it possible for the participants to view her as an insider. Conversely, the researcher may have represented several institutions of higher education to the participants. The colleges where the researcher has attended and worked during her career are familiar to the participants; and thus, the researcher could have been viewed as representing the institutions not the individuals. To help build rapport with participants, the researcher expressed understanding of the unique membership role she held to the participants, and stressed her priority on their stories rather than her connection to various higher education institutions.

**Data Management.** The essence of narrative inquiry is to capture each participants' unique story; to do so one must apply inductive analysis to evaluate transcripts of the interviews to chunk and code for themes as described by Bhattacharya (2017). Inductive analysis is imperative in qualitative research in general, and especially narrative inquiry, because it, "assumes that the researcher is not starting the data analysis with any kind of preestablished testable hypothesis about the data." (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). Instead, the researcher focuses on what the data is saying by separating them into small chunks or codes for further analysis. Then, the researcher takes these codes and begins to cluster them into categories allowing the researcher to look for patterns and identify themes (Bhattacharya, 2017).

It is important to note that data management in inductive analysis is not linear; instead, it is a cyclical, iterative process that allows for flexibility and reflexivity. Bhattacharya (2017) states that inductive analysis allows the researcher to move, "back and forth between various stages and processes" (p. 150). While there is no defined format to inductive analysis Bhattacharya (2017) establishes the following guidelines, which are further supported by Saldaña (2021):

- Read and re-read data;
- Use writing as inquiry through analytic memos;
- Code into manageable units;
- Write about coding process through reflective analytic memos;
- Cluster codes into categories;
- Write about the clustering process;
- Identify patterns in categories to develop themes;
- Write reflexively about themes;
- Discuss process and findings with a peer; and,
- Perform member checks and modify as needed.

Both Bhattacharya (2017) and Saldaña (2021) stress that the coding process in qualitative research is flexible, and that there is no one way to effectively code. Thus, the process outlined should be used as a guide rather than a manual.

Qualitative research, especially narrative inquiry, results in a large amount of complex data which can become overwhelming without effective data management. This study utilized Zoom

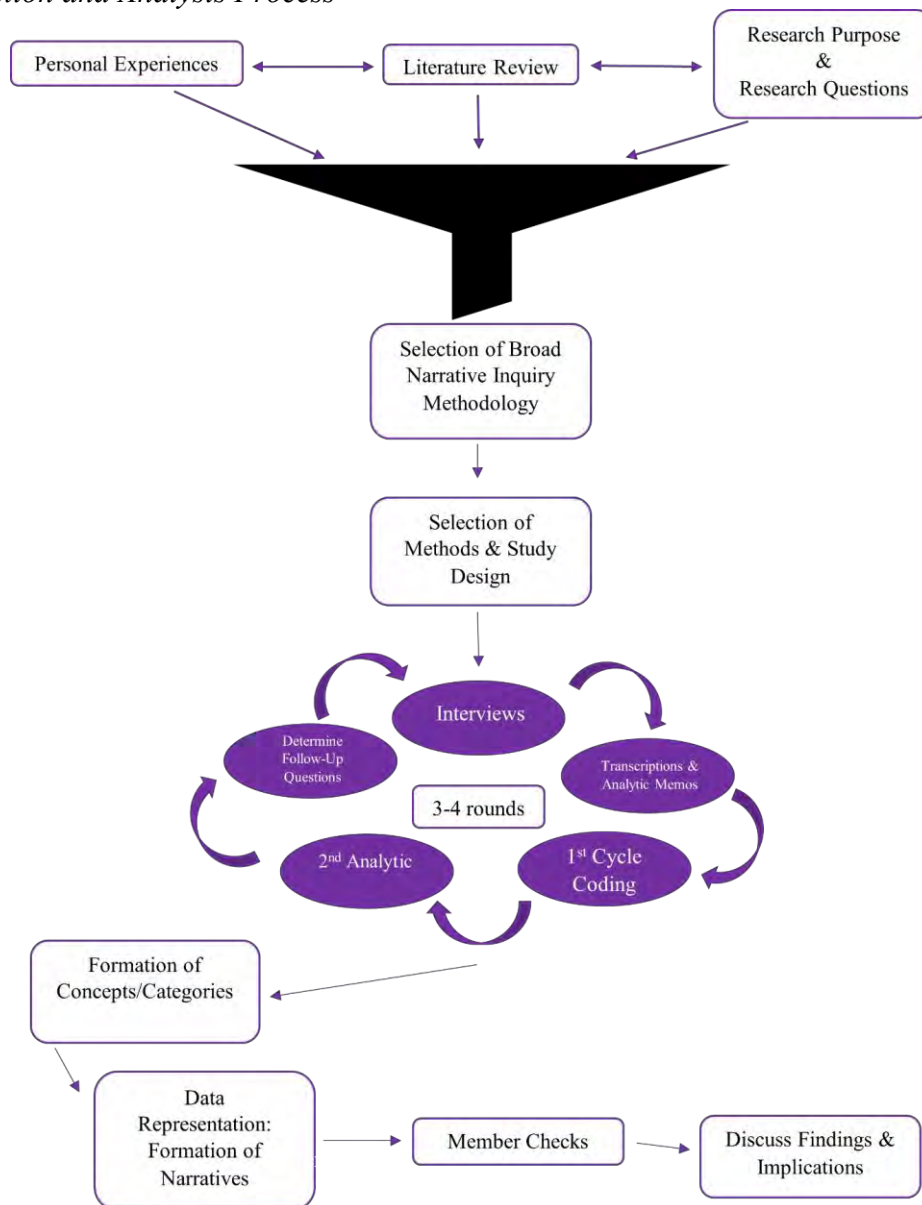


to record interviews which are subsequently transcribed and uploaded into NVivo for coding. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and a number to help the researcher organize the interview transcripts by round and participant.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Since inductive analysis is so flexible, it is important to establish what steps are appropriate and to determine what steps should be used. Due to the cyclical nature of both inductive analysis and narrative inquiry, the data collection model must be flexible but must include the possibility of revisiting similar steps more than once as interviews are conducted with each participant. Figure 1 below details a graphical representation of each step in the data collection process.

**Figure 1**  
*Data Collection and Analysis Process*



**Pre-Coding Process.** Saldaña (2021) described an analytic memo as, “a place to ‘dump your brain’ about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing and thus thinking even more about them” (p. 58). The author goes on to define the difference between field notes and analytic memos pointing out that memos focus on reflecting rather than observing (Saldaña, 2021). There are 15 types of analytic memos described by Saldaña (2021) including descriptive summaries, the researcher’s personal relation to the data, and what the researcher found interesting or surprising. Saldaña (2021) stressed that analytic memo writing is a flexible and reflective process; therefore, this study utilized several types of analytic memos. Before first cycle coding, the researcher reflected on any notes taken during the interview process. This included things that were interesting or surprising, personal connections to the participants’ responses, or ideas about what questions may need to be clarified. This process happened between each round of interviews and first round coding.

**First Cycle Coding.** Bhattacharya (2017) described a thematic narrative analyzed through inductive processes to identify themes in a storyline. Since the essence of narrative inquiry is to capture the point of view of the participants' experiences, this study used an inductive process called initial, or open coding. Saldaña (2021) referenced Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 102) stating that, "initial coding breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examines them, and compares them for similarities and differences." Saldaña (2021) goes on to state that, "initial coding is not necessarily a specific formulaic method. It is a first cycle, open-ended approach to coding the data with some recommended general guidelines" (p. 148).

One of the guidelines provided by Saldaña (2021) is that In Vivo coding is a logical choice for initial coding. In Vivo coding, "refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 137). Furthermore, Saldaña (2021) states that this method is appropriate for first-round initial coding for, "studies that prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (p. 138). Therefore, initial coding utilizing In Vivo methods is appropriate for narrative inquiry which places priority on telling the participants’ unique stories.

**Between Cycle Analysis.** Saldaña (2021) stated that the goal of post-coding transitions is not to continue coding, “but to cycle back to your first coding efforts so you can strategically cycle forward to additional coding and qualitative data analytic methods” (p. 280). After first-round coding was completed for each interview, the researcher wrote analytic memos reflecting on emergent themes and code choices. This provided the researcher with timely reflections on the emergent themes coming about during the first cycle coding process as well as possible questions for clarification moving forward. The researcher then cycled back to the interview step and repeated this process until interviews were completed.

**Second Cycle Coding: Formulating Concepts/Categories.** After interviews were completed, the process moved into second cycle coding. “The primary goal during second cycle coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of first cycle codes” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 297). Although Saldaña (2021) described code mapping as a transition technique between cycles of coding, it is an appropriate second cycle coding method for this study. Narrative inquiry prioritizes the stories of individual participants, making initial coding using In Vivo methods appropriate. Because In Vivo coding can create

several unique but similar codes, code mapping can help researchers organize and make meaning out of their data (Saldaña, 2021). Saldaña (2021) illustrated that code mapping usually has more than one iteration before ironing out logical and organized concepts. Finally, after each iteration of code mapping, the researcher wrote a reflective analytic memo to describe how the process worked and their reflections on what they learned during that process.

## Data Representation

Ethical and accurate data representation is paramount to all research, but especially to creative nonfiction. After the data is collected through the interview process, it is up to the researcher to retell the stories of their participants accurately and in an engaging way through techniques like narrative smoothing. The researcher must engage the reader, not only by telling a good story, but by challenging their perceptions and asking them to develop an empathetic understanding of the experiences told in the narratives. By helping them develop this understanding, the researcher is enabling the reader to recognize the significance of the experiences and the study.

Protection of participants is especially important when working with individuals from small towns and rural communities because their stories can be easily identifiable. It is also essential that the data represented is accurate and factual. This study utilized direct quotes when appropriate but also engaged in fictionalization of the data. This provided the researcher an opportunity to protect participants but also work with raw data. To accomplish this, the findings section is represented in creative vignettes drawn from the interviews. It is essential that the narratives produced come directly from the experiences of the participants without altering the meaning behind the stories being told. For example, a direct excerpt from an interview with Kaylynn discussing an experience with her high school counselor:

*Researcher: So, were there any other factors that encouraged you or pushed you to look into going to college outside of just wanting an opportunity to get out?*

Kaylynn: You know, at the time, I knew I wanted to go to Lilac University from the beginning. Right? But obviously I didn't start out at Lilac University. I went to Sunflower Community College first, but the school counselor basically told me that I was from a rural high school, that if I went to college I would fail.

*Researcher: Really?*

Kaylynn: Yeah, that kids from [my hometown] don't go to college and succeed. Which, now I know part of that is because rural high school does not prepare you for that level of education. I know that now, but at the time I was like, "Oh, you know no, that's like even more motivation for me to like prove you wrong."

*Researcher: So, in that moment that counselor telling you that kind of created a, "Well I'll show you" kind of moment? [Kaylynn nods in agreement]. How did you react?*

Kaylynn: Oh, I was so angry...

The above excerpt could be retold as part of a vignette in the snippet below:

Kaylynn angrily sits down, "I can't believe he just told me that!"

Charlotte and Amy, confused, asked her what she was talking about.

"Mr. Smith. I can't believe he's such a jerk! I just had my meeting with him... I'm SO angry! He just told me that I shouldn't even be worrying about college because it doesn't

matter coming from where we're from. Like, because we're from here we don't have a chance!"

Charlotte, surprised asks, "Wait, what?! How can he say that?! See, this is why I don't trust him... I mean, he got me into my math class at Sunflower. But no way am I even going to pay attention to anything else. I just don't trust him..."

"Well, I'll show him! I belong in college. He doesn't know what he's talking about!"

Kaylynn steams as she attacks the apple she packed for lunch.

The fictionalized vignettes presented below operationalize the data collected and are consistent with creative nonfiction as described in the methodology section above (Bhattacharya, 2017; Kim, 2016). Literature states that the narrative is essential to our meaning-making process as humans; and specifically, creative nonfiction allows a unique opportunity for authors to work directly with raw data without jeopardizing the privacy of their participants (Kim, 2016; Kramp, 2004). The young women in this study shared openly about deeply personal experiences that could have led to their identification; therefore, creative nonfiction was vital to accurately telling their stories without sharing their identities. Without the use of creative nonfiction, the participants would not have felt as comfortable sharing their experiences for fear of being recognized. Not only did creative nonfiction allow for open sharing of the participants, it also allowed the researcher to develop complex and interrelated themes as described in the data collection and analysis section above (Bhattacharya, 2017; Kim, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). Due to the complex and in-depth nature of this study, only a small portion of the data gathered is showcased in the sections to follow.

## **Findings**

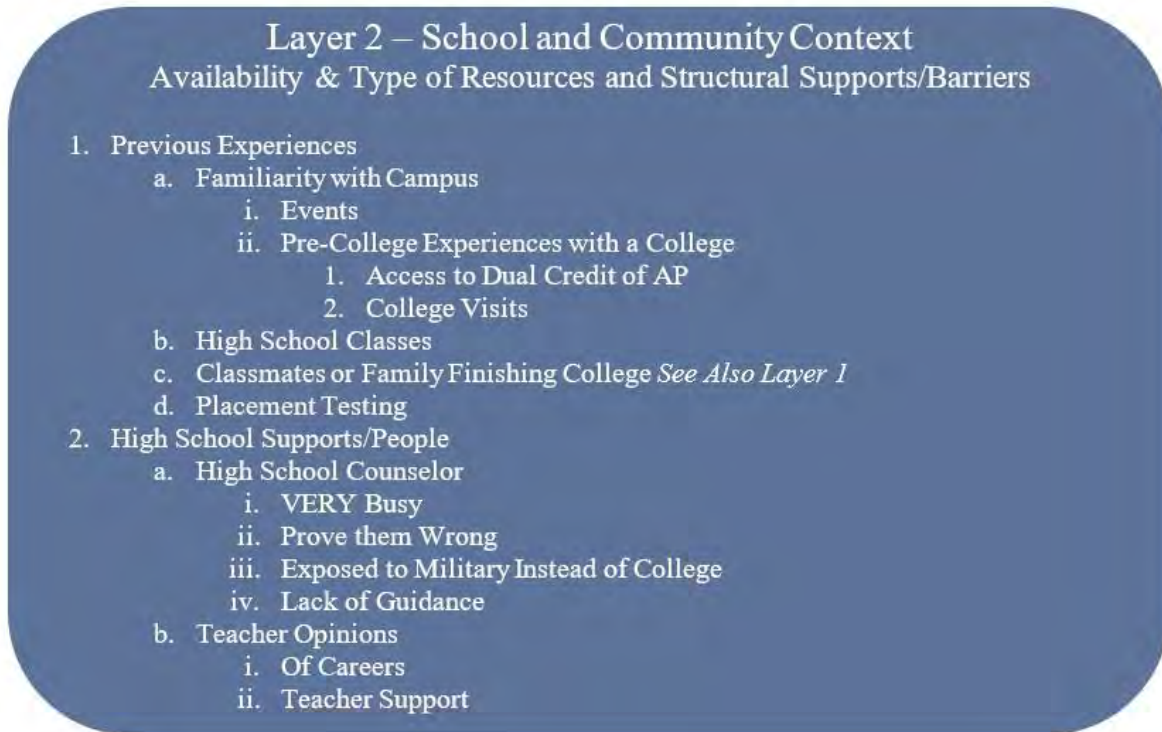
Findings for this study resulted in over 170 codes which were then organized into appropriate categories then compared to four themes or layers as described by Perna (2006). Code mapping (Saldaña, 2021) as described in the methods section resulted in complex relationships between all four layers, interconnecting themes, categories, and codes. Figure 2 below showcases a simplified computer representation only showing Perna's (2006) layers and categories (shown as part of the layer title), along with categories. Perna (2006) defined school and community context as the "availability and type of resources and structural supports and barriers" (p. 117). This study found that there were four main categories that fell into Perna's (2006) layer two: Previous Experiences, High School Supports/People, Academic Concerns, and Life-Changing Moments. Due to the complex nature and volume of the data collected during this research, only the first two categories of layer two are addressed in this report.

**Figure 2**  
*College Choice Model (Perna, 2006)*



To best represent the participants' narratives in an engaging way, the formatting in the next section will stray from APA 7 standards allowing for more flexibility and clarity in writing style. Formatting will return to APA 7 style in the conclusion section. It is important to note, as mentioned in the data representation section, that direct quotations are woven together with literary dialog to provide readers with a smooth and engaging narrative. The findings below address the first two categories in layer two, School and Community Context, of Perna's (2006) college choice model. Figure 3 below showcases the codes found to be in the Previous Experiences and High School Supports/People categories.

**Figure 3**  
*School and Community Context (Perna, 2006)*



**Walnut, Kansas: Population 1,000.** It's an unseasonably warm, spring day in Walnut, Kansas, a shrinking town of around 1,000 people. Walking down Main Street you'll see the post office and bank, and down the block the diner that Kaylynn's parents own. There's rarely an empty seat in the Walnut Diner, except Sundays, of course, when it's closed. Amy's dad is perched at the counter in his usual spot, grabbing lunch while he's in town to pick up feed. He strikes up a casual conversation about the drought with the waitress that comes to refill his drink. It's been a few years since his eldest daughter went off to college at Lavender University, but he'd bet that they were in the same class...

"You were in Alexandra's class, right?"

"Yessir, we were on the track team together!" She says with a smile.

"I thought so. Now, this is baby number three? How long before she's here?"

"Oh, not too much longer. She's a strong one!"

Amy's dad chuckles and finishes his last bite leaving an extra \$10 under his plate before he goes.

***You're Cute Enough; Don't Worry About College.*** Nearing the end of their junior year at Walnut High, Charlotte, Amy, and Kaylynn meet at their normal lunchroom table. This was the week that they are all supposed to meet with Mr. Smith, their high school counselor, about their college plans.

Kaylynn flings her lunchbox on the table, "I can't believe he just told me that!"

Charlotte and Amy, confused, ask her what she is talking about.

“Mr. Smith. I can’t believe he’s such a jerk! I just had my meeting with him... I’m SO angry! He just told me that I shouldn’t even be worrying about college because it doesn’t matter coming from where we’re from. Like, because we’re from here we don’t have a chance!”

Charlotte, surprised asks, “Wait, what?! How can he say that?! See, this is why I don’t trust him... I mean, he got me into my math class at Sunflower. But no way am I even going to pay attention to anything else. I just don’t trust him...”

“Well, I’ll show him! I belong in college. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about!”

Kaylynn steams as she attacks the apple she packed for lunch.

“Of course, you belong in college! You’re so passionate about psychiatry; who do we go to when we need to talk through stuff?” Charlotte encourages with a definitive bite of her yogurt. “You know, I’m still not sure why you guys didn’t sign up for college classes. Since I’m in it this semester, I won’t have to take college algebra my freshman year. And it was a lot cheaper!”

Kaylynn reminds Charlotte that she was told that the only two options available were canceled because there weren’t enough people.

Under her breath Amy whispers, “Some of us weren’t even told that...”

Charlotte, realizing Amy hasn’t said much, “Hey Amy, how did your meeting go? Didn’t you talk with Mr. Smith during homeroom?”

Amy is focuses on her sandwich, “Oh, it was fine...”

Kaylynn pushes, “What happened?”

“Oh, not really anything...it was fine. We just talked about my options.” Amy avoids eye contact, still focusing on her sandwich.

Charlotte and Kaylynn urge in unison, “Tell us.”

Hesitantly, Amy sighs, “You know how much he loves to dote over Ashley...”

Charlotte, seated across the table leans in, “Did he really compare you to your little sister again?”

It’s obvious that Amy is hurt, embarrassed even. She gazes down the hall towards Mr. Smith’s office and tries to ignore the salt of emotion building up in her eyes.

“Guys, Ashley is really smart, it makes sense that he would compare us... I know I’ll never be her, it’s just I thought I was smart enough for college too.”

“Hold on! He really told you that you’re not smart enough for college?!” Kaylynn is enraged.

Amy shrugs, “Not in so many words. He told me that I was good at school, but not ‘Ashley good.’ Like, I don’t have to worry about it though. Mr. Smith told me that I’ll get by without being that good. Like, I should focus on my looks because I’m cute enough not to worry about being great at school.”

Amy pulls her hood up and shrinks into her sweatshirt to try and hide, tears visibly streaming down her face. Her two best friends surround her on either side offering a comforting embrace as their eyes meet in disbelief. They both know that they should tell someone, but Amy will never have that, so they sit together in silence until the bell rings, and they head back to their respective classes.

***I Don’t Go There for Advice, Just to Enroll.*** On the way back to biology, Charlotte stops by the office to chat with her mom, the school secretary.

“Hey momma, how’s your day?”

“Oh, hi sweetie,” Charlotte’s mom looks up from the stack of files on her desk. “It’s been pretty busy...just trying to wrap things up before the end of the year. How was lunch?”

“It was okay. I got to eat with Amy and Kaylynn so that was nice...”

The phone rings and Charlotte’s mom answers, holding up her finger asking her not to leave.

After a minute Charlotte’s mom completes the call and regains eye contact with her middle child.

“So how were they? Did they get signed up for the trip to tour Tulip State’s labs next week?”

Looking at the ground, Charlotte seems far away, “They’re okay. They both had their visits with Mr. Smith today. Did you know that they were told that there weren’t enough people to take college classes this semester?”

Her mom shakes her head no. Charlotte ponders for a second. “And no, they’re not touring Tulip. I think that’s just for Ms. Greene’s biology course. They’re not in it with me.”

“Oh yes. I keep forgetting that this one isn’t a whole class trip. I think those will start for you in the fall. You should ask Mr. Smith when you have your meeting.”

Quietly, Charlotte reminds her mom that she doesn’t really like going to Mr. Smith at all, let alone for advice.

“I’ll ask, but I wanted to talk to you about some stuff before I talk to him.”

The lunch warning bell makes them both jump.

“Okay, hun. We’ll talk tonight at dinner after you get home from practice. Now, give your momma a hug and get back to class before you get detention.”

At that, Charlotte squeezes her mom tight and scurries down the hall, slipping into the biology room door as Ms. Greene pulls it shut.

The next day during her teacher’s aide period, Charlotte meets with Mr. Smith. As she walks down the hall to his office, she reviews the notes from her chat with her mom last night over dinner. She thinks to herself, “*Okay. I’m taking English I and English II next year. And I want to do speech this summer. I need to make sure I get the paperwork to sign up for college credit. I wonder if there are any other courses I can take for dual credit. I also need to ask about a visit to Lilac University and the scholarship thing I saw for Tulip State. He probably won’t know anything, but I’ll try...*” Charlotte knocks softly on Mr. Smith’s door.

“Hey, Charlotte! Come on in! It looked like practice was going well last night. How do you think the softball team will do this week?”

Mr. Smith has always been more interested sports than school counseling. Charlotte guessed that made sense; he was the head baseball coach.

“Oh, I think we’ll do just fine. It’s going to be a close one, but we’ve been working really hard.”

Although Charlotte loves talking sports, she was on a mission, pitching at a 2A school was not going to get her noticed by a D1 college. She opens her notebook and starts to explain what all she wants to do for dual credit during her senior year.

“Yep. Here’s the paperwork for the English classes. We do also have a few other options for next year. Take this handout to your dad and talk it over with him. Bring the paperwork back with his signature and the tuition. We have the books, so you’ll just get that at the beginning of class.”

“That sounds great. Now, how do I sign up for speech this summer?”



“You’ll want to sign up directly through Sunflower Community College; we don’t help set up those summer classes. Since you’re already taking dual credit this semester through SCC, you can just go visit them in town to enroll.”

“Okay, but when do I have to sign up?” Charlotte hopes for a little guidance.

“I don’t know, hun, you’ll have to ask the people at SCC.” Mr. Smith leans back to refresh the game score on his computer. “Alright, is that all for today?”

“No sir. Just a few more quick questions...” Charlotte, under her breath, adds, “If you have the time.”

“Yeah, shoot! We’ve got this in the clutch.” Mr. Smith says as he watches the replay of whatever pro team he’s obsessed with.

“I heard something from one of the teachers about a group visit to Lilac University in the fall for the senior class. How do I sign up for that?”

“Oh, that... Welp, not enough people were interested so it got cancelled. If you want to visit you can take a day off from school and go with your dad. Anything else?”

“One last question,” Charlotte sighs, “I heard from a friend on my traveling team that there’s this really big scholarship thing for Tulip State. Do you have any more info about it?”

“Sorry kiddo, I haven’t heard about that. But I betcha it’s on their website if you Google it. Alrighty, well it’s time for my next meeting. Don’t forget to get your dad to sign off on those papers.”

Mr. Smith pushes her out the door; no one is waiting to see him.

During the next passing period, the three friends steal a moment to chat at their lockers. Kaylynn sarcastically asks,

“So how was *your* meeting with Mr. Smith?”

Charlotte sticks out her tongue, “It could have gone worse...” She looks at Amy to make sure she’s okay with the subject and continues, “I got to ask some questions, but he was rushing me out because his precious game was on.”

Kaylynn rolls her eyes, “I wish, just once, they’d let you pitch against his *special* little baseball boys!” Amy and Charlotte laugh. “Yeah right, like they’d ever let us even scrimmage them. They know we’d cream them!” Amy needed to laugh after yesterday, they all did.

“Oh! By the way, I heard about a scholarship thing at Tulip. I’m gonna look it up this weekend and figure out what it’s all about. You two want the info I find?”

Kaylynn and Amy both shrug. “Nah, I think I’m good. I don’t really want to go to Tulip, I’m going to Lilac.” Kaylynn grins.

“I’m good too... Tulip just doesn’t sound right for me.” Adds Amy pensively.

“Okay. Before I forget, I won’t be here for lunch on Tuesday. I have that trip to tour the labs at Tulip with Ms. Greene’s class.”

“Oh! Yeah, that’s the day that Mr. Taylor’s business friend is coming to accounting. He’s buying us pizza and talking to us about what it’s like to be a CPA.” Kaylynn’s stomach growls as she mentions the pizza sending the girls into a giggle fit.

“You want to be a CPA?”

“No, I just want the pizza! And Mr. Taylor’s friend is CUTE.” The girls laugh so hard their eyes begin to water. As they catch their breath, Kaylynn asks, “Amy, don’t you have regionals Tuesday, too?”

“Oh yeah! I won’t be here at all that day.”

With that, the warning bell for last period rings and the girls wave to each other as they head their separate ways.

**Here Batter, Batter, Batter... SWING!** It’s a warm Friday evening in Walnut, and Mulberry High is down two runs to three. It’s the bottom of the ninth and their best hitter is at the plate. Charlotte steadies her mind before winding up, she used to play with this girl on her last traveling team. “*She’s good, but I’ve got this.*”

Charlotte takes a deep breath and lets it rip.

“Strike one!” Hollers the ump. Charlotte glances at her coach, taking the signal, she flings her second pitch.

“Ball one!” “*Shoot!*” Charlotte centers herself on the mound.

“Striiiiike twwooo!”

“*Yes! One more and we’re going on to regionals. No pressure, Char, you’ve got this.*” Charlotte looks up at her family, “*There’s Mom and Dad...*” She waves small, by her side, “*Cami is still in her practice clothes, she’ll be a freshman and a darn good outfielder next year. It’s going to be great to play together again. Amy and Kaylynn are here too. They painted their faces! What a bunch of weirdos!*” Charlotte meets eyes with her friends, smiles, and winks, “*I’ve got this.*”

Charlotte closes her eyes and lets her arm fly.

“Strike three! You’re outta here!”

Walnut advances to regionals! Her teammates tackle her on the mound laughing and cheering so loudly it drowns out the cheerful honks from the baseball and track teams in the parking lot. As Charlotte frees herself from the pile, her little sister, Cami, rushes up.

“Char! They were here! To see you!”

“Yeah, I know Amy and Kaylynn were here. Did you see those weirdos’ faces?”

“No! The scouts! From Sunflower and Goldenrod and Coneflower!”

“What?! You’re kidding!”

“No! As soon as you struck her out, they all started taking notes! They’re gone now, but they were SO interested in you!” Cami squeals.

Elated, Charlotte walks arm-in-arm with her sister back to the locker room before going home.

**We Want You... To Think About the Military Instead of College!** It’s Saturday morning after the big game, and the girls gather at Amy’s for their weekly study session. Kaylynn opens the box of donuts she picked up on the way out to the ranch as they settle in at the table on Amy’s back deck. The girls chatter, licking the frosting from their fingers before opening their textbooks.

Kaylynn swallows, “So, after the game last night, I was talking to my cousin. She went to a big high school in the city, and we were talking about college stuff. She told me they took the ACT once their junior year. Have y’all heard anything about that?”

Amy, her mouth half full, “No...” she swallows, “But didn’t we take something this fall?”

The girls think for a moment.

“The ASVAB? Does that sound like a thing?” Kaylynn and Amy nod as if it sounds familiar.

Amy remembers, “Yeah! Mine had something about what I would be good at or something? And like what would fit my personality? Am I thinking of the right thing?”

The girls discuss what they remember from their results as they finish their breakfast. Charlotte pulls out her laptop, her friends nudging her and giggling seeing that she has a picture of her boyfriend as her background.

“Shut up!” Charlotte blushes with a huge grin. “Let’s look this stupid test up and see why good ol’ Mr. Smith made us do it instead of the ACT.”

Amy and Kaylynn join Charlotte to see what their *favorite* counselor has gotten them into.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. No wonder I’ve been getting so many military things in the mail. He’s trying to ship us all off into the armed forces!”

Kaylynn pushes herself away from the table. “What the heck?!”

Amy, confused, “Charlotte, you were told you had to take it too, right?”

Charlotte nods, “Yeah, like I thought it was some state testing thing, like we used to have to do.”

Amy ponders for a moment, “Maybe I should think about it... at least I’d get to continue running.”

Kaylynn puts her hand on Amy’s shoulder, “Amy, if that’s what you really want, we’d support you...”

Charlotte nods, “But, you’re going to have to convince us that’s what you really want. We both know you were wanting to go on a track scholarship. You’re going to medal in your 400 at state. That’s like a guaranteed scholarship right there if you just keep it up next year. Which you’re going to do.”

“Don’t jinx it! I still have to do well at regionals next week!” Amy playfully pushes

Charlotte lightening the mood. “Okaaay, no army for me.”

The girls return to their studies, even more determined to prove Mr. Smith wrong.

***Maybe I Could be an Accountant.*** Kaylynn sits in her accounting class with Mr. Taylor. He’s on the phone with his buddy who got held up at the pizza joint the next town over. Kaylynn checks her phone under her desk. *Nothing from Amy yet about how her events have gone.* She opens a snap from Charlotte and giggles; she has the filter on that makes her look like a puppy with a caption: “We’re almost at Tulip! So excited!” Kaylynn quickly sends back one of herself with funny makeup, “I want my pizzzzaaa” and slides her phone back into her bag. Just then, Mr. Taylor’s buddy busts in with a stack of pizza boxes.

“Helloooo Walnut High!”

The class of about 15 students, all cheer as he sits their much-anticipated lunch down. Mr. Taylor makes the girls get theirs first and the boys all groan in complaint. After everyone has filled their plate, Mr. Taylor introduces his friend who begins to tell the class about what it’s like to be an accountant.

*Okay, this sounds pretty interesting... Man, he’s cute... Focus!* Kaylynn thinks to herself as she wishes her two best friends were here with her. The CPA goes on, tells the class what an accounting major is like and talks about where he went to college.

“I started off at Sunflower, got my associates, and transferred to the university before sitting for my exam.”

He goes on to talk about the exam a while.

“I wouldn’t have known about accounting as a major or profession if it hadn’t been for a teacher like my friend, Mr. Taylor, here. And starting off at the community college gave me a really nice start. The courses transferred and it was nice to start off in classes not much bigger than the ones I had in high school, kind of like your class here. By the time I

transferred, I was in my junior year and the classes were a lot smaller than the freshman and sophomore ones. It's worth considering."

*Huh, I guess if psychiatry doesn't work out, I could do accounting,* Kaylynn muses. *I'm pretty decent at it, and it makes good money... No. It's going to work out... but maybe I can do a class or two in college.* The bell rings and everyone thanks Mr. Taylor's friend as they hustle out the door.

Kaylynn checks her phone as she walks to her locker before the next class. She has a group text from Amy, "I GOT THIRD IN THE 400! I'M GOING TO STATE!"

Kaylynn hastily types back, "SO PROUD OF YOU! KNEW YOU COULD DO IT!"

Charlotte's bubble pops up, "WOOOHOO! GOOD JOB!"

"Thank you both for believing in me and getting me out of my funk! You guys are the best! Celebration at the diner tonight?"

"Sure! See you after practice!"

"I'm in! I'll tell Mom to save us a table! See you later!"

Kaylynn slips her phone into her pocket as she grabs her math book. She has Amy's mom in class next period, so she eagerly rushes to class so they can chat about the good news before the bell rings.

***Mini Explosions, and Are Those Real People?*** Charlotte slides her phone into her purse as she leaves the chemistry lab at Tulip with her group from Ms. Greene's class. She chats with a classmate, Tyler, who happens to be Kaylynn's crush,

"Well, that was interesting. I'm ready for the biology labs next though!"

"Yeah! I can't believe they let us blow stuff up!" Tyler adds enthusiastically. Charlotte laughs to herself, *Such a boy reaction.*

"Okay class, next is the cadaver lab before our last stop in plant biology!"

Ms. Greene is walking backwards, using her best tour guide voice as they follow her friend from the STEM department at Tulip.

The class enters the room, their noses burn from the smell of formaldehyde in the air. One kid rushes out, "I'm gonna hurl!" Kaylynn's crush whispers to Charlotte, "Are those real people?!"

"Okay class," Ms. Green announces, "if anyone needs to, you're welcome to wait in the hall, but I *strongly* encourage you to stick around for this. I'm going to step out to make sure they're okay. Please be polite to our wonderful guide."

Ms. Greene slips out of the lab closing the door lightly as she looks for the sick student.

Ms. Greene's friend from Tulip State moves to the front of the room between two rows of tables on either side. The students can see figures on the metal tables under each of the sheets.

"Okay class, this is our cadaver lab. These folks decided that they wanted to help out our students by donating themselves to science. I'm going to pull back one of the sheets so you can see what our students are working on in their anatomy labs."

She pulls back the sheet revealing a partial dissected individual. The students see internal organs, tissues, and bones. A few kids start to turn green but stay in the room.

"Students in this section are currently learning about the cardiovascular system. Does anyone here think that they might want to be a doctor?"

Charlotte and two of her classmates raise their hands cautiously, afraid that they're going to be asked to touch or cut something...

"That's great! If any of you decide to pursue medical school, you'll have to study in a lab like this at some point."

She replaces the sheet and walks over to another table showing the class one more station.

"This class is learning about the musculoskeletal system. Most of the students in this section are thinking about studying physical therapy in graduate school. Is anyone considering being a PT?" No one raises their hand.

"Okay, can anyone tell me what a PT does?"

"They help people recover from injuries?" Charlotte asks.

"Yes! Physical Therapists work with patients to help them recover or rebuild strength, most of the time after some type of injury or surgery. Very good! Okay, I think it's time for us to move on to the plant bio lab down the hall. Everyone, follow me."

The class exits the lab, most of them letting out a sigh of relief, Charlotte isn't sure if they're happier to get away from the smell or the bodies. *Okay, that was actually pretty interesting once you get past how weird it is*, she thinks to herself as her classmates freak out about how gross it was.

***A Celebration Dinner and a Very Dark Profession.*** Kaylynn is the first to arrive at the diner. She hugs her mom and waives to her dad in the kitchen. Amy and Charlotte find her at a booth near the back as she jumps up to hug Amy.

"You did amazing! We're so proud of you!" Kaylynn exclaims as she squeezes Amy a little too hard.

"Thank you! I'm so excited that I get to go to state! I really didn't think I'd medal, but I set a PR too!"

"See, you should listen to us! We know how amazing you are." Charlotte nudges her as she grabs a roll from the basket.

The girls chat, asking Amy all kinds of questions about her other events. Depending on how the other regional meets went, she will probably go to state for at least two, if not three events.

After a while, Amy is ready to get the attention off her,

"Okay, so how was the lab tour?"

Charlotte puts down her fork and looks around to see who all is close enough to hear,

"You guys have to promise you won't think this is weird..." Her best friends assure her that they won't. "Okay, the chem and plant bio labs were fun, but we also got to go see the human bio lab."

Amy and Kaylynn are a bit confused.

"Like, *human* biology," Charlotte emphasizes.

Charlotte lets that sink in for a second before they catch on to what she means.

"Different classes were studying different parts, and it was SO interesting. Like it was really weird, but really cool at the same time! Promise you guys don't think I'm a weirdo?!"

Amy shakes her head, "Of course not. You want to be a surgeon, so you should probably be okay with nasty stuff like organs and bones!" Kaylynn and Amy both giggle a bit, but Charlotte knows they understand.

“So, if you get an offer from one of those community colleges next year, how will that work with pre-med?” Kaylynn wonders as she takes a bite of her burger.

“I’m not sure I want to go to a community college. I’ll have the dual credit stuff done, and I just don’t know how that works with the scholarship thing I found for Tulip. I think I’m going to focus on applying there and Lilac in the fall.”

“So, you’re not going to play college ball?” Amy chews on her green beans.

“I mean, I’m not counting it out. I just need to see where I can get the best scholarships.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Hopefully I can figure out something for running. Kaylynn, how was the accounting thing today?”

“Oh! It was good! Pizza was great!” the girls giggle. “Actually, accounting seems really interesting, I think I’m going to sign up for the next class in the fall. Maybe take a few classes in college.” The girls discuss their plans for the fall a bit; they’re supposed to turn in their enrollment stuff by the end of the week.

Kaylynn ponders for a moment, “So... I had a really weird conversation with my theatre director today. She was asking what I was hoping to do after senior year, so I told her I wanted to go to Lilac for psychology then to grad school so I can be a psychiatrist.”

“Right, that’s kinda always been your plan.” Charlotte takes a bite of their shared pie.

“Ever since I got to go up to that game with my cousin, I’ve just felt like Lilac is where I need to be. That sounds funny, but there’s just something about it; it’s where I belong. Anyways, she told me that psychiatry was too dark for me. Like, I was too happy of a person to pursue that, and she didn’t want to see me become a dark person.”

“What? What does that even mean?”

“Yeah, I’m not really sure. I’d want my therapist to be happy and encouraging. Either way, I’m not changing my mind. I’m going to study psychology at Lilac, then I’ll become a psychiatrist.” Kaylynn states definitively.

The girls finish their desert and return to their respective homes for the evening. Over the next few weeks their lives will be so busy that they won’t have much time to think about their college choices. Amy and Charlotte will compete in their sports, and Kaylynn’s spring play is set for the week before prom. After that, finals, and the senior class will graduate before summer break. The summer will present some opportunities for the girls to explore their options as well as enjoy time together before their last year of high school.

## **Discussion**

The above findings section showcases some of the stories shared by Amy, Charlotte, and Kaylynn during the interview process. This study found that there were four main categories that fell into Perna’s (2006) layer two: Previous Experiences, High School Supports/People, Academic Concerns, and Life-Changing Moments. Due to the complex nature and volume of the data collected during this research, only the first two categories of layer two are addressed in this report.

**Previous Experiences.** All three participants discussed previous school experiences as shaping their college decisions. Two participants specifically mentioned familiarity with college campuses while telling their stories. Familiarity with college campuses speak directly to Perna’s

(2006) availability/type of resources along with structural supports or barriers. For example, access to dual credit or advanced placement courses, college visits, or events on college campuses all represent types of resources and supports. The participants described these instances as influential in their college choice process and served as a way for them to build college-going cultural capital when it otherwise would not have been accessible.

***Familiarity with Campus.*** Two participants specifically discussed their access, or lack of access, to dual credit courses with their local community colleges. Both participants expressed that their experiences with the dual credit process impacted their understanding of college and what they chose to do directly after high school. For Charlotte, her completion of dual credit courses during high school contributed to her view of the purpose of community colleges and shaped her choice to go directly to a four-year college directly after high school graduation.

Furthermore, all three participants discussed experience with or lack of experience with events on college campuses or college visits. Kaylynn was able to attend athletic events at a local college which she believed inspired her to attend that school. She discussed that exposure to the college campus, explaining that it made her feel at home on campus and that it was just “the right place” for her. Kaylynn graduated from this specific institution after transferring from her local community college. Charlotte also described her visit to the cadaver lab as a strong influence on her college choice process. She shared that it not only opened her eyes to the options that were available to her for majors and professions, but also to the college campus itself. Charlotte eventually chose to attend this institution directly after high school. Lastly, Amy briefly discussed college visits, but said that they had no real impact on her choices because of other factors.

***High School Classes.*** Both Charlotte and Kaylynn discussed specific high school classes that influenced their college choice process. For Charlotte, a high school class led to opportunities to familiarize herself with college campuses like the visit to the cadaver lab. In contrast, Kaylynn’s experiences with accounting in high school led her to temporarily choose that major when attending her community college as a default until she could pursue her preferred choices.

***Classmates or Family Finishing College.*** While this category was directly tied with layer one it also fits within previous experiences because the participants discussed their families’ and classmates’ experiences with colleges as shaping their choices.

***Placement Testing.*** Charlotte specifically remembered placement testing experiences that directly affected her college choice process. For example, her class was required to take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) in lieu of the ACT or SAT. During the interview process Charlotte expressed frustration and confusion while talking about this experience, even years later. Although she took it upon herself to prepare for and take the ACT, she believed that this colored her view of the importance of testing to colleges as well as how it affected her access to scholarship opportunities.

***High School Supports/People.*** For many rural students, counselors and teachers serve as the most practical way to build college knowledge (Ardoin, 2018). High school supports and people are directly tied to the previous experiences discussed above because those supports often

created the opportunities that the participants described as important to their college choice process. All three participants discussed in detail their experiences with their high school counselors, while two participants specifically discussed at least one teacher that directly impacted their college choice.

***High School Counselor.*** As previously mentioned, all three participants discussed experiences with their counselor at length, showcasing how important the relationship between counselors and students is, especially for rural students. The findings section above describes in detail true statements and events that each participant experienced when speaking with their high school counselor. Amy was told by her counselor that she was too cute to have to worry about being as good as her little sister at school. She shared that this had a large impact on her mental and physical health in the years to come, affecting her confidence in both her intelligence as well as her body image. Because of that experience, she did not explore her college options as thoroughly as the other participants' nor her sister's.

Kaylynn also had unfortunate experiences with her counselor who told her that students from their school did not belong in college. Luckily, this did not discourage her, but instead motivated her to prove them wrong, and eventually she did. Kaylynn expressed frustration and anger in the moments surrounding the conversation with her counselor as well as with his support of dual credit options.

Lastly, while Charlotte had better experiences in comparison, she still did not find the supportive and informative relationship she sought. Like the other participants she discussed how busy and distracted her counselor was. In contrast to the other participants, she was not actively discouraged by her counselor, but she was left to her own devices to figure out college, her major, and career information. Instead of encouraging students to explore all options, Charlotte's counselor favored the military over college for her entire class, showcased by requiring them to take the ASVAB and inviting the military to recruit at the school instead of local colleges.

***Teacher Opinions.*** Charlotte and Kaylynn both shared experiences with high school teachers that directly impacted their access to college-going cultural capital as well as their college choice process. Charlotte specifically discussed visiting the cadaver lab at a local college and the support of her biology teacher as growing her college knowledge and cultural capital, encouraging her to pursue her four-year degree. Conversely, Kaylynn discussed an instance where her instructor actively discouraged her from pursuing a dream because they did not feel like she had the right personality. It was not in Kaylynn's character to let that discouragement prevent her from pursuing her dream eventually, but it shaped her goals and how she approached her college choice process.

## **Conclusion**

This study utilized Perna's (2006) college choice model to address the research questions of (1) how rural students describe their college choice process, and (2) the lived experiences that rural students believe influenced their choice in college major(s). The study found that the college choice process is just as complex for rural students, but the factors that influence the layers of their college choices differ from their urban and suburban counterparts. For rural students,



previous experiences and high school supports/people have a large impact on their choice process as evidenced by the detail and time each participant took recalling their specific experiences. While this report only addressed two categories in Perna's (2006) School and Community Context layer, the participants' stories express how important these factors were to them.

This study considered a uniquely rural, and uniquely Kansan point of view setting it apart from previous research in the field. Furthermore, the narrative nature of this project promoted its strengths, providing an in-depth look at personal experiences while allowing for maximum anonymity for the participants who might be easily identified in their hometowns. Additionally, it should be considered a strength that the researcher could be viewed as an insider, encouraging the participants to be open and honest about their experiences. While this project had its strengths, it was also limited by the small sample size, which along with the research design of this study, should not be viewed as generalizable. Instead, this study should be used as a glimpse into the experiences of a very specific, underserved population. Due to the in-depth and complex nature of narrative data, the stories of three participants also provided more data than can be represented in one report. While this work paints a picture of the importance of the experiences that rural students have in high school, it does not examine the whole story. Going forward, more work needs to be done to examine the other factors that influence rural student college choice.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), "about 60 million people, or one in five Americans, live in rural America." Rural students attend college at much lower rates than their urban and suburban counterparts (Ardoin, 2018; Barr, 2018; Longhurst, 2014; Pesko, 2020) and thus it is even more important in a time of decreased college enrollment, that their unique perspectives and needs are considered. This research has major implications for both secondary and post-secondary institutions. Secondary schools must be aware of how their current policies and resources either encourage or discourage their students from pursuing college as a legitimate option. As evidenced by the participants, the conversations that teachers and counselors have with their students have a lasting impact on their perceptions of themselves but also their educational and career trajectories. Furthermore, this research indicates that colleges must consider the unique needs of their rural students rather than focusing on where they can recruit the largest number of students. Students from communities like those of the the participants in this study, do not get the same attention as larger schools just down the road. It is important for rural students to feel welcome and invited to participate in higher education. Without interaction from colleges, rural students may not see college as a viable option, no matter their aspirations or abilities.

Future research should examine all four layers of the college choice process according to Perna (2006) but should also explore other models of college choice with similar populations. While much of the research previously conducted looking at rural students focused on the U.S. rural northeast and southeast, more work is needed in the plains states as well as the west. The findings from this study can help inform both college and high school faculty and staff of their influence on rural students' college choice process. Words matter. Actions matter. Even long after students leave your school.

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