A CASE STUDY OF THE CATHOLIC COLLEGE EXPERIENCE FOR RURAL, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

David P. Hill
mr.hill825@gmail.com

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A CASE STUDY OF THE CATHOLIC COLLEGE EXPERIENCE
FOR RURAL, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

David P. Hill

Bachelor of Arts, Wadhams Hall Seminary College, 1988
Master of Arts in Religious Studies, Sacred Heart University, 2014

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership
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A CASE STUDY OF THE CATHOLIC COLLEGE EXPERIENCE
FOR RURAL, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

David P. Hill, Ed.D.
Western Connecticut State University

Abstract

Research is needed on rural, first-generation college students and what supports them in attending and persisting at a private Catholic university. Specifically, this dissertation sought to understand participant experiences for those who attended Gaspar University, a Catholic university in the Northeast. Analysis of qualitative interviews, existing documents, and participant questionnaires identify the aspects of these student’s high school experiences and home life that enabled them to access higher education. The study also sought to identify the factors and experiences that contributed to their persistence in higher education. The conclusions drawn suggest that programs in high schools that set college-going expectations would be beneficial for rural, first-generation students to help them with creating their own personal college aspirations. Specifically, attention should be given to providing students with information not only about college majors but also the size, atmosphere, and support systems that various colleges provide. While in high school, students should also work to increase their executive functioning skills that can help students be successful once they are attending college. Additionally, colleges should offer a strong first-year experience for students that is particularly beneficial for first generation, rural students as this helps them to acclimate to college and provides them with a sense of community. It also provides them with skills and knowledge to
increase their own ability to be successful in college. Lastly, the participants of this study connected to their faith while at their Catholic College and they believed that this advantaged them in a variety of ways.
A CASE STUDY OF THE CATHOLIC COLLEGE EXPERIENCE
FOR RURAL, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

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School of Professional Studies
Department of Education and Educational Psychology
Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership

Doctor of Education Dissertation

A CASE STUDY OF THE CATHOLIC COLLEGE EXPERIENCE
FOR RURAL, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

Presented by

David P. Hill, Ed.D.

Tricia J. Stewart, Ph.D.  Tricia J. Stewart  12/15/2020
Dissertation Committee Chair  Signature  Date

Nicole G. DeRonck, Ph.D., Ed.D.  Nicole G. DeRonck  12/15/2020
Dissertation Committee Member  Signature  Date

Dissertation Committee Member  Signature  Date
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Chapter One: Introduction and Identification of Topic

Higher education in the United States has become more than just a dream for some high school students, the goal of achieving a college degree has become a requirement to achievement in the job market and is seen as a path to a better quality of life (Chan, 2016; Lobo & Burke-Smalley, 2018). In rural America there are 26% fewer adults with a college degree and a smaller number of current high school graduates enrolling in higher education than their urban peers (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). The skills and knowledge gained through participation in higher education also has become necessary to help in alleviating the inequality that exists in American society (Hershbein, Kearney, & Summers, 2015). Education can be viewed as a means to equalize society through the passing on of knowledge and skills that can help an individual be successful thus, they are in the process of becoming a more productive member of society especially among those of lower socio-economic levels (Zhou, 2019). It remains increasingly important that the balancing of the socio-economic groups can help the prevention of the abuse of power that had long been a concern in the United States that those who have money can exert over those without means. Thomas Jefferson understood the power of knowledge and believed that education was a tool that could prevent the abuse of power by those who wield it:

Whereas it appeareth that however certain forms of government are better calculated than others to protect individuals in the free exercise of their natural rights, and are at the same time themselves better guarded against degeneracy, yet experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny; and it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this would be, to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts, which history exhibiteth, that,
possessed thereby of the experience of other ages and countries, they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes. (Thomas Jefferson, 1779, para. 1)

Another institution concerned with power and justice is the Catholic Church and Catholic schools of higher education, as an extension of the Catholic Church have an inherent obligation to actively work towards creating a more just society (Pope John Paul II, 1990). As educators, the role of the Catholic college would then be to assist those who are underserved in higher education including rural and first-generation students. Prior to World War II, approximately 15% of American high school students went on to college, the majority of which came from upper-class families (Hanford, 2011), which would be those families earning over $5,000 a year (United States, 1938). By 2019, that number had dramatically increased to 69% and it includes a wide demographic including every race, creed, and socio-economic level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). There are many reasons for this dramatic increase including the G. I. Bill, changes in the nature of work, expanded opportunities for degree attainment, and shifts in the economy. A more specific reason for earning a college degree includes a desire for an increased income. Nationally, a college graduate can earn an estimated $459,000 (for females) and $628,000 (for males) over their lifetime compared to those who earned a high school degree only (Krueger, Dehry, & Chang, 2019). College graduates also see improved health outcomes “through such diverse mechanisms as healthier behaviors, higher earnings and social status, stronger cognitive skills, greater knowledge about how to avoid health risks, better adherence to medical treatments, and more salubrious social connections” (Krueger et al., 2019, p. 65).

Higher education can be divided into two major divisions, public and private. Public institutions of higher education are those “whose programs and activities are operated by
publicly elected or appointed school officials and which is supported primarily by public funds” (American Council on Education, 2019). Schools in this category would include 4-year State institutions such as Western Connecticut State University to 2-year community colleges that offer associate degrees and vocational training like Housatonic Community College. Private institutions are “controlled by a private individual(s) or by a nongovernmental agency, usually supported primarily by non-public funds, and operated by leaders other than publicly elected or appointed officials” (American Council on Education, 2019) and can be either for profit or non-profit. One type of private higher education that is available to students is a Catholic institution of higher education. Catholic institutions are private, 4-year colleges and universities located across the United States and the world. Offering all degrees and majors, Catholic higher education has much in common with public colleges and universities but differs in its unique Catholic nature. Catholic colleges and universities have been founded by various Religious Orders within the Catholic Church as well as Dioceses across the country. Each Order’s school will have its own Catholic nature based on the Order’s founding principles. For example, Saint Elizabeth University in New Jersey was founded on the principles of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth and have a focus on “the promotion of women as full partners in society” (Steu.edu, 2020). Currently there are 34 different religious orders operating colleges within the United States (Accunet.org, 2020). Catholic higher education has played an important role in the educational system of the United States since the first Catholic university was founded in 1789 at Georgetown (Sanders, 2010). In 2020, the Catholic higher education system in the United States had a student population of almost one million, which represents five percent of the number of students in higher education.
This case study highlights Catholic institutions and rural, first-generation college students who represent 24% of college students in the 2015-2016 academic year (RTI International, 2019). Yet this group of students often face challenges when it comes to finding success at college including a lack of college readiness, lack of family support, struggles with financial considerations, low academic self-esteem, and difficulty adjusting to life at college (Falcon, 2015). In fact, only 20% of first-generation students are likely to earn their degree within eight years of graduating from high school while students from families that have attended college earn a degree in the same period of time at over double the rate—42% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). This is important because it indicates that “first-generation students are not being supported for success adequately once they are in the college environment and/or first-generation students are not receiving clear messages about the demands and expectations of higher education while at the high school level” (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006, p. 545). A problem with this is that the increased period of time spent earning a degree may result in greater student debt. First-generation students also face greater financial barriers in attending college (54% for first-generation students compared to 45% for continuing-generation students) and were more likely to postpone their college enrollment for a year or more (27%) beyond high school compared to continuing-generation students (11%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Broadly understood, first-generation students are those whose parents have not attended college (Saenz & Barrera, 2007). First-generation students may be broken down into sub-groups depending on additional factors. Sub-groups of first-generation students include students who are of a particular race such as African American, Latino, Asian, Native American, or White. Sub-groups may also be defined by income such as poor, middle-class, and wealthy. Geographic
location of the student is also a way to categorize first-generation students who may come from urban, suburban, or rural areas. The focus of this study is on first-generation college students who come from rural areas of the United States. Generally, rural students reflect the racial make-up of the college student population in the United States. However, rural college students in the Northeast United States are predominately White (Parker, Horowitz, Brown, Fry, Cohn, & Igielnik, 2018). Disproportionately, rural students in the Northeast are White. While in the Southeast rural students are disproportionately students of color. Rural students face challenges in attending higher education including higher instances of poverty that can affect the quality of education they receive (Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018), the distances to attend institutions of higher education (Harris, 2019), and lower educational attainment than their urban and suburban peers (Koricich et al., 2018). The expense of higher education is also a concern for students with college aspirations and is a greater concern for rural students who are often impoverished. Rural students also have a considerable amount of student debt “as evidenced by the Fed’s report, individuals with student debt are less likely to remain in rural areas than those without debt. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of the students most burdened by debt leave rural areas within one year after entering repayment” (Morpeth, 2019). The question of what factors and personal characteristics aid rural students in their decision to apply, be accepted to, and attend Catholic Colleges is vital. Additionally, it is important to understand what steps can be taken to increase positive college-going outcomes for rural, first-generation students.

With an increased focus on technology and improved critical thinking skills required for the United States job market, a college education is becoming the norm. In an effort to fill the large number of available jobs (6.6 million as of August 2020 according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), many of which require a college degree, higher education
must recruit and retain as many students as possible. In terms of Catholic higher education, it is incumbent on the educational system to understand how to make college access available and attainable for all students including those from rural areas and are first-generation who are often not considered by those responsible for recruiting and retaining students at the college level. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical Ex Cordie Ecclesiae stated that

The Gospel, interpreted in the social teachings of the Church, is an urgent call to promote “the development of those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic diseases and ignorance; of those who are looking for a wider share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are aiming purposefully at their complete fulfilment.” (section 34)

The implication of this statement for Catholic institutions of higher education is a responsibility to reach out to those students who are in the most need of being lifted out of conditions like poverty. By reaching out to students who come from rural America and first-generation households which are often economically disadvantaged (Hutchins, Meece, Byun, & Farmer 2012) the Catholic university can help these students achieve the academic qualifications necessary for many of the higher paying jobs available in the market. One way Catholic institutions can address this is by acknowledging that first-generation students identified that being a part of a first-generation group helped them to “(a) feel cared for, (b) develop a sense of belonging within both GenOne and the broader university community, (c) prevent stressful situations from becoming overwhelming, (d) remediate distress that materialized, and (e) become resilient when faced with obstacles” (Swanbrow, Becker, Schelbe, Romano, & Spinelli, 2017, p. 1171). Additionally, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds would benefit from higher education programs that embrace their linguistic differences, creating institutional
documents that consider cutting out jargon that privileges middle and upper-class students, and creating class identity centers that can offer support to students based on socio-economic status (Ardoin, 2018). Understanding how rural, first-generation students can be successful in achieving both their college aspiration, attainment, and completion becomes vital to ensure equity both socially and economically.

**Rationale**

There is currently a higher education crisis centralized in rural America. Marcus and Krupnick (2017) found that only 20% of rural adults age 25 and over have college degrees compared with the national average of 45.8%. Similarly, the numbers are equally low for those 18- to 24-year-olds in rural areas with only 29% enrolled in college, compared with 47% of their urban peers (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). One of the explanations for this is that fewer rural White males are convinced that colleges and universities have a role in providing them with the necessary skills for a successful life in their town. Furthermore, only 71% of rural White males believed that higher education helped prepare students in attaining the skills required for success in life, which is lower than urban White males (82%) and suburban White males (84%) who held that belief (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Understanding what encourages and supports rural, first-generation college students are often overlooked in favor of studies on urban, ethnically diverse, and economically disadvantaged students. Social capital and resilience appear to play a role in a students’ choice to attend college and to persist in the completion of a college education (Butler & Muir, 2017; Fuller, 2014; Kannapel & Flory, 2017). Hahn, Willis, Christie, and Matthews (2017) identified a relationship between social capital and resilience indicating that as an individual develops social capital within the community, they also develop potential mitigation factors that may help them be more resilient in the face of some disaster or major stress event.
However, additional research is needed to understand if social capital and resilience are important for rural, first-generation students. An exciting component in this is that Catholic institutions of higher learning have an obligation as Catholics to reach out to underserved populations, including those in poverty. Therefore, it would be a natural fit for Catholic institutions of higher education to actively recruit from rural student populations. Pope St. John Paul II (1990) promulgated Ex Corde Ecclesiae in which the mission of Catholic higher education was outlined:

Every Catholic University, as a university, is an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national, and international community. (paragraph 12)

In practice, this statement requires that all Catholic universities work towards the inclusion and the lifting up of students who may be underserved by other universities. As a matter of principle then, Catholic institutions of higher learning must focus on students who are from rural areas as a part of their overall mission. The long-term consequences of decreased attendance of rural students attending college, including four-year, private institutions, and a lack of Catholic institutions reaching out to them may have long term negative consequences for our society.

Statement of the Problem

College attainment has several significant positive effects on an individual’s life. Trostel (2017) stated that “the present value (at age 19) of lifetime college earnings premium is more than $625,000 ($1,383,000 when not discounted [by economic factors like inflation and dollar valuation])” (p. 9), meaning that the lifetime earnings are that much greater for someone with a college education than for those who only graduate from high school and have not earned a
college degree. Additionally, other benefits related to earning a college education are connected to the quality of life and include improved outcomes in mental health, lower rates of disability, and increased lifespans for those without college educations (Schafer, Wilkinson, & Ferraro, 2013). Since rural areas have lower than expected college attainment, it stands to reason that subsequent generations would also have lower college degree completion unless something proactive can be done to increase rural students’ access to and attendance at colleges and universities. In many instances, high schools in rural America do not have the resources to give students access to career counseling, which is considered one aspect of preparing students for college. Neale-McFall and Owens (2016) conducted a study completed in Pennsylvania that showed that rural schools, on average, received fewer resources to help students with college readiness. Additionally, rural schools averaged $20.17 less spent per student on guidance services each year over a 10-year period than their urban counterparts. Additionally, urban guidance counselors were more experienced than rural counselors and had smaller caseloads, both of which are advantageous for serving students who are economically and socially disadvantaged. Urban guidance counselors spent almost 5.5% more time on individual post-secondary counseling and have a higher expectation of students attending a 4-year college and 25% lower expectation of students attending vocational training than their rural peers (Neale-McFall & Owens, 2016). The responsibility of helping rural students attend college is not just on P-12 school districts; universities also play an important role in the process of recruiting students to attend their schools. “Colleges often go about recruiting rural students in the wrong way, admissions experts say. But they can commit to better practices if they recognize ‘rurality’ is different everywhere” (Seltzer, 2018, para. 1). The way in which rural looks is different depending on the individual location. For example, in areas that are defined as rural by the
United States Census in the Northeast United States there may not be poverty and there is greater exposure to a variety of cultural activities and educational opportunities due to the proximity of major metropolitan areas like New York City and Boston. However, a rural area in Western New York would look and feel very different with a greater likelihood of poverty and lack of access to cultural and educational opportunities. It is clear that admissions personnel at high schools and universities do not understand the specific needs of rural, first-generation students and what can help them attain a college education. Finding ways to help first generation, rural students attend college and successfully graduate is important as it can improve many facets of their long-term socio-economic outcomes.

Significance of the Study

This qualitative research study is noteworthy for educational practice as it has the potential of making a positive contribution to rural school districts. This can be done by increasing rural school districts commitment and understanding of how to engage students in the pursuit of higher education. The study may also make practical contributions to Catholic institutions of higher education in terms of providing information about the activities and services students from rural areas need in order to feel supported. This will help these institutions retain students, which is vital in times of decreasing enrollment at Catholic institutions. This study also fills in the gap within the current research concerning first-generation, rural students who are from improved socio-economic situations compared to those who come from families living in poverty. Understanding the student participants’ success in college attainment and persistence may help to inform practices that can increase the likelihood of increasing the number of rural and first-generation students who complete a higher education degree.
Definition of Key Terms

1. *Case Study* is defined as an empirical study investigating a phenomenon in detail in a true-life context where there is no clear boundary between the phenomenon and the context (Yin, 2009).

2. *Catholic Education* “must be genuine education — formation of the whole person according to high standards of intellectual, moral and physical excellence” (Brumley, 2013, p. 1).

3. *Continuing-generation Student* “are students who enrolled in postsecondary education and who have at least one parent who had some postsecondary education experience” (Redford & Hoyer, 2017, p. 3).

4. *Executive Functioning* “a multifaceted neuropsychological construct consisting of a set of higher-order neurocognitive processes that allow higher organisms to make choices and to engage in purposeful, goal-directed, and future-oriented behavior” (Suchy, 2009, p. 106)

5. *First-Generation College Student* refers to students’ “whose parents have had no college or post-secondary experiences” (Saenz & Barrera, 2007, p. 1).

6. *Lower Class* is understood using a base of a three-person household, the lower class would have an income of less than $30,000 (Rose, 2016).

7. *Middle Class* are those families made up of three people earning a combined income of between $30,000 and $350,000 per year (Rose, 2016).

8. *Resilience* can be defined as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p. 425).
9. *Rural* “is defined as all population, housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or urban cluster. As a result, the rural portion of the United States encompasses a wide variety of settlements, from densely settled small towns and ‘large-lot’ housing subdivisions on the fringes of urban areas, to more sparsely populated and remote areas [less than 1,000 people per square mile]” (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016, p. 3)

10. *Social Capital* is defined as resources including values and trust that individuals make use of in daily life which are identified as intangible (Field, 2008).

11. *Upper Class* is understood as a family of three earning over $350,000 per year (Rose, 2016).

**Overview of the Study**

This dissertation with a focus on the Catholic college-going experiences of rural, first-generation students, follows the typical five-chapter organizational system. Chapter one provides a brief overview of the history of higher education, public and private (Catholic), in the United States and focuses on first-generation, rural students. This chapter also considers the rationale and context of this study including a definition of key terms and a list of the research questions that guide this research. Chapter two is the theoretical framework that includes a focus on social capital theory, resilience theory, executive functioning, rurality, rural education, Catholic higher education, first-generation students, and empirical studies relevant to this dissertation. Chapter three considers the methodology used to conduct this qualitative, case study research. A description of the context within which this study takes place is given including the county where the university was located, a description of the Catholic university that the participants attend, and a comparison to other institutions of higher education in the area.
Chapter three includes the method of collecting data using interviews, follow-up questionnaires, and other existing data, including data found on the Internet. The process of data analysis and coding is also described. Chapter four presents the findings of this study. The use of participant quotes concerning their college-going experiences support the analysis of the interview and questionnaire data. Chapter five continues the discussion of the findings of this study in relation to the research questions and includes implications for P-12 educators and college administrations. Lastly, recommendations for further study are presented.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question in this case study is: In what ways do rural, first-generation college students understand their college-going experience? The researcher seeks to understand this topic by answering the following research questions:

- What factors encouraged rural, first-generation students to attend a private, Catholic college?
- What characteristics of social capital and resilience do rural, first-generation college students possess?
- What are the perceptions of rural, first-generation college students about the challenges and successes they have experienced while attending a private, four-year, Catholic college?
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

In undertaking this qualitative case study, I sought to understand through existing literature what was understood about social capital, resiliency, and executive functioning in relation to rural, first generation college students’ experiences and their successful outcomes in attaining higher education. These theoretical foundations for this study were used to generate the research questions and study design. Other literature bases were also reviewed and are presented here including the vast definitions of rural and rural education and the role of Catholic higher education. Therefore, the areas covered in this theoretical framework include social capital theory, resiliency theory, executive functioning, first generation students, rural life including rural education, and Catholic higher education.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital may be one of the keys to understanding why some students and even some schools perform better than others (Plagens, 2011). Broadly defined, social capital is the sum of resources gained through social interaction. More specifically, the definition of social capital that was used for this study came from Field (2008) who believed you could sum up social capital with the following two words:

…relationships matter. By making connections with one another, and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things they either could not achieve by themselves or could only achieve with great difficulty. People connect through a series of networks and they tend to share common values with other members of these networks; to the extent that these networks constitute a resource, they may be seen as forming a kind of capital. As well as being useful in its immediate context, this stock of capital can often be drawn on in other settings. In general, then, it follows that
the more people you know, and the more you share a common outlook with them, the richer you are in social capital. (p. 1)

Field (2008) described the various groups that an individual has access to and how that access builds as key components of social capital. Using these groups as a foundation and the groups identified by the participants of this study, Figure 1 displays the inter-connected relationships of high school students and the social capital they have access to while in high school. Figure one highlights the way that memberships in groups, both formal and informal increase the access that one has to individuals and thus the ways that social capital grows. One of the earliest writings associated with what came to be known as social capital was from Hanifan (1916) who regarded social capital to be necessary for a person to be successful in society. This success is found through the network of connections that individuals have to meet and exceed the basic needs of socialization.

If he may come into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the sympathy, and the
fellowship of his neighbors. (Hanifan, 1916, pp. 130-131

Figure 1. Social capital sources and relationships of high school students
Thus, the more social capital an individual gains during their life, the more that person has to gain from those relationships and the better the community overall will be. More recently, Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1987) contributed to the initial theoretical development of the concept of social capital in terms of the positive benefits created for individuals through their social ties. However, their interpretations of how social capital relates to social mobility are somewhat different. Bourdieu (1986), for example, viewed social capital as simply a by-product of social reproduction. Coleman, on the other hand, saw social capital as being grounded in more positive interactions that can collectively help children succeed at life. Additionally, as an American sociologist, Coleman (1988) understood social capital in America in terms of relationships between people that are substantially different from relationships centered on economics, culture, and politics. For Coleman (1988), social capital that is fostered within the family revolves around the relationship between children and parents, and was dependent on several factors including family structure, the frequency of conversations about current academic progress, number of siblings, and the parental expectation of attending higher education.

However, when investigating familial social capital more deeply and making use of information gathered through the High School and Beyond survey (1986), Coleman (1988) selected 4,000 participants randomly from both public and private high schools. Coleman (1988) had determined that the lowest high school dropout rate was found in students who fit the category of two parent homes with one child where the mother expects the child to attend an institute of higher education. Coleman (1988) also found that Catholic school students had greater access to positive social capital through the relationships created in that setting. He found that it was not just attending the private, Catholic school but it was also the shared religious community that extended beyond the school into the home and the larger community.
that provided connections to others that could benefit students. Three other studies (Israel & Beaulieu, 2004; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995) that focused on social capital were concerned with structural and process connections. Structure refers to the actual makeup of the family itself, which took into consideration the number of parents in the home, number of siblings, multi-generational homes, and economic conditions. In contrast with structure, process focused on how interactions took place (positive or negative) and how often differing interactions took place (Crosnoe, 2004; Israel et al., 2001; Kim & Schneider, 2005).

Another study that looked at familial structures was Smith et al. (1995) used the data collected from multiple editions of the High School and Beyond (1980) longitudinal study and from 24,000 high school Sophomores, who had follow-up data collected in 1982, 1984, and after graduation in 1986, and identified the importance of familial structure, which they identified as (one or two parents in the home and the number of siblings). This was important because one’s familial structure was determined to be an indicator of how often there were parent-child interactions and how long these interactions took place. Another area that was important in their work that was relevant to my study showed that rural students were the least likely to attend college. Additionally, for rural participants, the effect of one or two parents being in the home was not a significant factor nor were the number of siblings. However, rural parent’s expectations of college attendance were found to be a significant factor as was familial attendance at religious services. The more frequently rural students moved was also shown to have a negative impact on their likelihood of attending college. The work of Israel et al. (2001) added an additional factor to the consideration of social capital for college attendance. They found that the number of older siblings who dropped out of high school or had quit college
negatively impacted the likelihood of younger siblings attending college. Israel et al. (2001) extended the work of Coleman and others by adding specific types of interactions related to schooling between the parent and child such as homework checking, high school program discussion, and television limitations that connected positively to social capital. Their research also looked into community social capital by extending the concept of family capital to include the larger community. The study made use of data from National Educational Longitudinal Study (1988), the School District Data Book, and the Common Core of Data for the same time period (1988). The total number of participants ranged from 8,961 to 11,229 in three different categories (data were adjusted for the discrepancy in final usable data sets).

While looking at homes with multiple children, Israel, Beaulieu, and Hartless’ 2001 research results indicated that students did not achieve as well when multiple children lived in the home or when one or more siblings dropped out of school. This suggests that when families divide their time across multiple children or have children who are either failing or falling behind in school that there are less opportunities for positive social capital interactions. The researchers posit that the reason for this drop in social capital is that parents will tend to focus on the negatives of failing in school or the struggle to help their child keep up rather than engaging in positive dialogue about an educational future (Israel et al., 2001). Additionally, when there are several children the parents are required to split their time among them resulting in fewer personal interactions or ones that are related to future school achievement. Social class is another aspect of the family dynamic that should be considered within the context of social capital. Hunt and Seiver (2018) described social class as more than a designation of income, profession, or educational attainment. Along with other social identities like race and gender, class is a crucial element of how people make
sense of the world, communicate with others, and negotiate complex power relations. (p. 344)

Social class often determines where a family can afford to live, the quality of the school district, and the ability of the parents to provide for the educational needs of children. In terms of preparing students for higher education, Anyon (1980) notes that “scholars in political economy and the sociology of knowledge have recently argued that public schools in complex industrial societies like our own make available different types of educational experience and curriculum knowledge to students in different social classes” (p. 67). Anyon’s (1980) work suggested that social classes are prepared differently for a future that has been predetermined based on social class and that this should be interrupted for the benefit of all. Ultimately the upper social class is prepared for a future of success in managerial roles while working and poor class students are prepared for roles appropriate to their station in life. Similarly, for the students themselves, Fine and Burns (2003) explained that for “poor and working-class youth and young adults, particularly youth of color, ‘opportunities to succeed’ may tear at the fabric of biography, identity, loyalty, and belonging” (p. 850).

In higher education, Rubin (2012) pointed out that “social class differences in social integration may help to explain some of these disadvantages that working-class students experience in higher education institutions” (p. 3). Therefore, social integration is important to success and students who come from a working-class background or from poverty find it more difficult to integrate with students who are from the upper classes. Pittman, McGinty, and Johnson-Busbin (2014) conducted a study concerning how social class can affect student outcomes in rural areas. After controlling for various conditions such as occupation availability, it was found that “students from lower SES backgrounds who attended school in rural areas have
a slightly lower dropout rate from high school” (p. 132) than their urban peers. Unfortunately, this improvement in the high school dropout rate in rural areas does not extend into aspirations of higher education.

Another important aspect of social capital, trust, was explored by Field (2008) who identified social capital in terms of resources “because it involves the expectation of reciprocity and goes beyond any given individual to involve wider networks whose relationships are governed by a high degree of trust and shared values” (p. 23). John Field specializes in socio-economic aspects of lifelong learning and has conducted numerous studies of social capital (Ecclestone & Field, 2003; Field, 2003; Field & Schuller, 1997; Kilpatrick, Field, & Falk, 2003).

As a resource, social capital is used by individuals in daily life to their advantage and can be considered as intangible but is enhanced by an individuals’ social relationships with others. Similarly, Plagens (2011) identified two types of communities in which social capital is acquired “at one extreme lies the anomic community, where individual or ‘privatistic’ interests dominate, and at the other extreme the ‘solidaristic’ community, where the interests of the whole are given great weight” (p. 46). The anomic community is created in smaller groups such as a church or family unit. These communities have connections to one another that allow for the sharing of values that are then re-enforced within that community. For example, a community that holds reading as being important and values reading as an important activity will more likely create opportunities to engage in that activity. The “solidaristic” community has many avenues of connection through clubs and other social groups that expose others to a broader set of accepted values and in this way spread the influence of social capital. By the function of what it means to live in a rural community they have a more “privatistic” nature. In rural areas there are less people and less formal organizations on which to draw to gain social capital. In this way rural
areas are isolated not just by location but in some cases also culturally. In this way, the access to social capital can be limited.

In conjunction with research into the familial nature of social capital, many researchers (Israel & Beaulieu, 2004; Parcel & Dufur, 2001) had also sought to tie in the school system itself as another aspect of importance to understanding the overall effect of social capital. Parcel and Dufur (2001) considered the concept of school as a place where one gains social capital operating in concert with familial social capital. For example, there exists a parallel between the parent child relationship and the student teacher relationship. This commonality would also include the concept earlier discussed regarding the of number of siblings being a factor in the opportunity for parent and child to interact positively for social gains. The number of students in a classroom would also affect the opportunity a teacher has to meaningfully engage with individual students. With a data set of 12,686, Parcel and Dufur (2001) found that a caring teacher had a positive influence on student success. Israel and Beaulieu (2004) continued to refine the nature of the concept of school based social capital by highlighting some important structural attributes including the student body composition and the number of enrolled students. In the process category the number of after school activities a student participated in, access by students to teachers after class time, and participation of parents in the Parent Teacher Association were all found to have positive benefits for participants. Israel and Beaulieu (2004) found that when students had access to social capital through their school, they were less likely to drop out.

**Resiliency Theory**

Resiliency is an interesting phenomenon with many definitions that are still under discussion, exploration, and scrutiny today. Unger and Liebenberg (2011) suggested “resilience
is the qualities of both the individual and the individual’s environment that potentiate positive development” (p. 127). This concept of resilience indicates that there is a collective interaction when negotiating for the resources that an individual needs to have in order to be successful.

Unger and Liebenberg (2011) identified four areas or domains in which this interaction takes place: (a) psychological, (b) social, (c) cultural, and (d) physical. While Cabrera and Padilla (2004) have a pragmatic approach that focused on an educational definition in which resilience was defined as student success despite barriers that are cultural, economic, or social, for this qualitative study, resilience was defined as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten et al., 1990, p. 425). Though resilience was identified as essential for the success of students (Abbott-Chapman, 2001; Anasuri & Anthony, 2017; Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Hartley, 2011) there was evidence suggested by Gray (2015) that the ability of college students to be resilient may, in fact, be decreasing, thus creating a greater need to understand this phenomenon.

Resilience, as a point of study, developed from the psychology field over 50 years ago. In its infancy, the study of resiliency attempted to identify risk factors for mental illness. Starting in the early 1990’s a shift in how resiliency was understood began by altering the focus from a predictive perspective to a protective one. Within the shift that took place, researchers would begin to study how resiliency can protect an individual from the stresses that are encountered in life rather than how likely an individual would be to rebound from a stressful event. Research on resiliency continues to focus on understanding the factors that help individuals overcome challenging circumstances (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Ledesma, 2014). The reality of the human experience is that all individuals face adversity at some point in their life. These experiences vary from the very minor, such as the barista forgetting to add milk to your
coffee, to extremely difficult situations, such as the death of a loved one or the loss of a job. The ability to cope with these adverse conditions varies from one person to the next. Research has identified the fact that some children develop an ability to manage difficult situations and others do not successfully develop such skills (Ledesma, 2014). Resiliency is, however, a skill that can be learned by individuals at any time in their life and understanding how resiliency can be learned and developed is vital for society to understand in order to enhance successful and positive outcomes for children (Hartley, 2011). As the demands on students at all levels increase particularly in high school and higher education, it becomes necessary for institutions to develop programs that include resilience development (Gray, 2015; Hartley, 2011). The current body of research indicates that resiliency is integral to success in higher education affecting academic success, mental health, and persistence in academic pursuit (Gray, 2015; Kilbert, Lamis, Collins, Smalley, Warren, Yancey, & Winterowd, 2014). In a study of 605 undergraduate college students Hartley (2011) explored the connections between resilience, mental health, and academic persistence. The findings indicated a significant positive correlation between resilience and overall GPA, achievement, and mental health: “students committed to the challenges of academics had higher cumulative GPA” (Hartley, 2011, p. 601). This suggests that the benefits from being resilient are important in higher education.

One of the early researchers in the area of resiliency was Norman Garmezy who began his work looking at mental health issues, particularly schizophrenia. This work evolved overtime to include at-risk youth and their levels of competence. As the nature of his work continued to evolve, Garmezy (1972) began a collaboration with E. James Anthony, Lois Murphy, Michael Rutter, and Emmy Warner. Their work in observing the healthy development of children who were experiencing adversity gave rise to the term resilience in that context.
In 1976, Garmezy and Masten instituted Project Competence as a longitudinal study of 205 children who were followed into adulthood in an attempt to understand the connection between competency and adversity. This early study found a clear connection between resilient youth and access to greater social capital including positive adult relationships while those who had poor social capital were not as resilient as their peers (Luthar, 2015).

**Protective Factors.** The research on resilience has focused on the ways in which protective and risk factors interact. The protective factors of resilience and the risk factors faced by individuals in relation to resilience are found in Figure 2 (developed from protective factors and risks identified by Brooks and Goldstein, 2001; Masten, 2010; Rutter, 1985). Rutter (1985) defined protective factors as “influences that modify, ameliorate, or alter a person’s response to some environmental hazard that predisposes one to a maladaptive outcome” (p. 600). Protective factors that seem to positively influence the development of psychological resilience have been identified and “over the decades, this list of widely observed promotive or protective factors in the individual, their relationships, and their cultures or communities, has required very little adjustment” (Masten, 2010, p. 29). The protective factors can be understood in terms of external and internal factors and can be considered as assets to children facing risks. Brooks and Goldstein (2001) reported that both protective and risk factors have a cumulative effect, meaning that these factors can build for a child and in the case of protective factors can help a child to be more resilient when faced with risk factors.

**External protective factors.** Family, community, or school are the sources of external protective factors that support an individual. In a review of 18 longitudinal studies, Werner (2013) identified four protective factors that played an important role in early development from...
birth to 10 years of age. These four protective characteristics were: (a) maternal competence (including mothers’ age, education, number of positive interactions with child), (b) the number of emotional support sources available (including extended family), (c) health, and (d) scholastic competence (including IQ and reading test scores). According to Werner (2013) “most of the variance in the quality of adaptation at age 40 was accounted for by earlier predictors of resilience” and “these findings point to the importance of the first decade of life in laying the foundations for resilience” (p. 100). An understanding of these factors and how they may be replicated in education is important for educators to help students build resilience.

**Internal protective factors.** The internal protective factors of resilience are those that are developed within the individual. “Internal elements or characteristics include self-esteem, self-control, self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017, p. 53). Benard (1991) found that resilient children had a personality profile that included high expectations, a belief that life has meaning, and interpersonal problem-solving skills. While Brackenreed (2010) identified internal protective factors “such as higher levels of autonomy, social competence, problem-solving skills, independence, empathy, task orientation, curiosity, peer relations and a sense of purpose and future” (p. 115). These characteristics have all been found to be consistent over several studies including: Brackenreed, (2010), Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, (1984), Masten & Coatsworth, (1998), and Werner & Smith (1992).

**Risk.** In order to understand the nature of risk, Brakenreed (2010) noted that when individuals described “children as being ‘at-risk’ is a means of predicting vulnerability or risk for a wide range of negative outcomes, such as school failure, dropping out of school, poverty, drug abuse, delinquency, crime, violence, unemployment, divorce, ill health and early death” (p. 111).
Figure 2: Resilience with protective and risk variables
Risk can be broadly understood as being threatened by some perceived danger. However, Masten and Barnes (2018) identified risks faced by children in terms of the following categories: trauma, neglect, adverse childhood experiences, poverty, natural disasters, and war. Though adversity, or risk, as a concept has had a negative connotation in much of the research, Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) challenge that notion by suggesting that many positive life events (marriage, starting a new job, or buying a first home) require an individual to adapt in the same way one must adapt to a negative event. Therefore, they contribute the additional concept to resiliency of positive adaptation. In recent research, studies have started to consider the concept of thriving as another construct contributing to resiliency, which can include gained wisdom, personal growth, deepened life meaning, and improved productivity are of which can be measured to suggest one is thriving (Ledesma, 2014; Nishikawa, 2006).

Resilience is a multi-dimensional theoretical construct that includes mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual factors (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2015; Lerner, 2006). Additionally, racial, cultural, social, and biological dimensions have also been identified as belonging to resilience. (Reich, Zautra, & Hall, 2010). The continued development of resilience theory and its many integral components is necessary for the development of programs and structures that will best serve students in the future.

**Executive Functioning**

Executive functioning can be broadly defined in terms of a set of cognitive processes regulated by the frontal lobe of the brain. Executive Functioning for this study was defined as “a multifaceted neuropsychological construct consisting of a set of higher-order neurocognitive processes that allow higher organisms to make choices and to engage in purposeful, goal-directed, and future-oriented behavior” (Suchy, 2009, p. 106). Schmidt, Burge, Visscher, and
Ross (2016) suggested that executive functioning enables an individual to exhibit adaptive behaviors in situations that an individual does not already possess a reference for, that is unique to their lived experience. Skills that have been identified with executive functioning include goal setting, emotional stability, hard work, independence, resource utilization, initiation, inhibition, and faith/spirituality (Baggetta & Alexander, 2016; Lezak, Howeison, Bigler, & Tranel, 2012; Nolty, Rensberger, Bosch, Henning, & Buckwalter, 2018). Though there exists a general agreement to a broader definition of executive functioning, the literature varies widely regarding what makes an accepted working model (Hunter & Sparrow, 2012).

One of the earliest models of executive functioning was identified by Baddeley and Hitch (1974) and was described as the central executive. This was described as a three-part system that included the visuospatial sketchpad (visual information), phonological loop (auditory information), and the central executive. This system allowed an individual to have easy access to important information such as birth days. The central executive was responsible for coordinating the information being received visually and auditorily, thus determining what is important and needs to be kept readily accessible by the brain. Through the study of individuals with damage to their frontal lobe, an understanding of that area of the brain as being responsible for organizing the activity of the intellect and monitoring other cognitive functions. In particular, individuals with frontal lobe damage often have difficulty with goal-oriented tasks (Stuss & Benson, 1986). As executive function research grew, two primary theoretical models were developed. The first model stresses executive function as a unitary construct that can be used to describe all the skills used in higher order thinking (Hunter & Sparrow, 2012). The second theory is based on executive functioning being multidimensional in nature in which the processes involved can be broken down into separate and identifiable processes (Banich, 2009). The
discrepancies in the number of factors involved and how they interact has made studying executive functioning difficult (Elosua, Del Olmo, & Contreras, 2017), although continued research on brain development and its function continue.

Executive functioning has been identified as relating to resilience in individuals. Casey, Finsaas, Carlson, Zelazo, Murphy, Durkin, Lister, & Masten (2014) instituted a program to study the effects that improved executive functioning had on resilience: “We hope to foster resilience in these children by promoting their executive function (EF) skills during the preschool period, which is believed to be an important window of opportunity for growth and change in the neurocognitive processes that support learning and school readiness” (p. 133). After this, Zhang, Zhang, Zhang, and Guo (2019) conducted a study of how resilience and executive functioning affected students perceived stress and adjustment to school. The research found that “the mediation effect contained three paths, the separate mediation effect of executive function, the separate mediation effect of resilience, and the serial mediation effect of executive function and resilience” (Zhang et al., 2019, p. 1). The study by Zhang et al. (2019) indicates that resilience and executive functioning are related and work together to improve the management of external stresses. For rural and first-generation students, the development of solid executive functioning skills in K-12 education may help to develop the resiliency necessary to attain and persevere in higher education.

Rural

Within the context of this study, participants were required to identify themselves as attending high school in a rural area. First used by the Census Bureau in 1874, rural was defined as any population outside of a city or town with a population greater than 8,000 (Whitaker, 1983). Currently, the United States Census Bureau (2020) determines rural as any population
which is not part of an urbanized area, populations of more than 50,000 where the population exceeds 1,000 people per square mile. Put another way, rural has been identified by various government departments based on everything from population to drive times to the nearest identified metropolitan area. One of the issues surrounding the understanding of rural is that rural has been defined within an urban mindset. Rural is seen as those places beyond the urban, location in reference to urban, providing for urban areas (food and recreation), and in relationship to urban in terms of access to services or employment opportunities (Woods, 2016).

Rural America as a region is very often ignored in a nation that is urban centric. Comprising 72% of the land in America only 14% of the population resides there. However, “rural America is a simple term that describes a remarkably diverse collection of people and places” (Johnson & Lichter, 2019, p. 1). Rural America is replete with agricultural areas, industrial complexes situated off of the thousands of miles of rural interstates, areas where natural resources are removed and processed, and mountain and lake recreational areas (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). Along with the vastness of rural areas there are also specific concerns including dwindling populations due to lower rates of childbirth, an aging population, and the movement of younger people to urban areas. Van Dam (2019) considered why headlines in newspapers consistently showed rural areas as being in a decline.

Because the contest between rural and urban America is rigged. Official definitions are regularly updated in such a way that rural counties are continually losing their most successful places to urbanization. When a rural county grows, it transmutes into an urban one [this] skews our view of everything from presidential politics to suicide to deaths caused by alcohol. (Van Dam, 2019, para. 2).
This creates a certain viewpoint of urban residents that rural populations “serve as urban America’s farm team: All their most promising prospects get called up to the big leagues, leaving the low-density margins populated by an ever-shrinking pool of those who couldn’t qualify” (Van Dam, 2019, para. 3). It must again be stated that rural areas across the United States are going to be different based on their location and rural character. Sacks (2018) discussed rural character as “seeing the night sky, working the land, knowing your neighbors, and valuing community” (para. 10) rather than “the absence of what we associate with urban life, from cultural amenities to social diversity” (para. 7) which is how most Americans understand rural. Rural will look different from place to place and different rural communities will face different challenges and have different resources. For example, the rural Northeast looks different from rural Appalachia or the rural Southwest.

**Rural Education.** Existing literature has clearly recognized a distinct difference with rural education due to unique strengths and weaknesses of the rural educational environment (Broomhall & Johnson, 1994; Hardre, 2012; Monk, 2007; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Dewey, & Crowley 2006). A higher prevalence of poverty is one defining feature recognized by researchers of rural areas as being a challenge for education (Hutchins et al., 2012; Roscigno et al. 2006). The poverty experienced in rural America causes “rural school systems to have fewer support staff and services, less revenue, and lower per pupil expenditures” (Nachtigal, 2019, p. 4). Poverty creates a condition in which students start school later in life—without the benefit of pre-school programs, progress more slowly than their economically advantaged peers, attain fewer years of education, and are less likely to attend college (Nachtigal, 2019). Additionally, as a consequence of higher rates of poverty, rural students often begin school with lower reading scores than their suburban counterparts (Clarke, 2014), which can keep students behind all the
way through their K-12 educational experience. In rural schools, race-based achievement gaps still hold true as they do in urban schools (Showalter, Klein, & Johnson, 2017). However, one benefit of rural education can be the smaller class size. Schools in rural areas tend to be smaller in comparison to their urban and suburban counterparts (Provasnik, Kewal-Ramani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007). Rural small schools can benefit students, as these schools tend to have high levels of student-faculty engagement, strong relationships between the school and the local community, and positive learning environments for students (Tieken, 2014).

“Within the school’s small space, people are known” (p. 10) which allows for faculty to use this knowledge to shape “interactions between students and teachers. Teachers are attentive, I hear, anticipating students’ academic struggles and challenges, playing to their strengths” (Tieken, 2014, p. 56). Although, there is no one size fits all approach for rural school districts.

One rural teacher said that placing general school research and theory into rural schools can be like seeing some functional item (a lamp, an appliance, a chair) in a store and liking it there but bringing it home and hating it. Another [teacher] said that bringing home what she learns from professional development and conferences to the rural school involves so many adaptations it’s like trying to cram it into a place where it won’t ever fit. (Hardre, 2012, p. 2)

These two quotes from rural teachers highlights the challenges faced by rural teachers in an America where education policy and theory tend to be a one size fits all model that is urban in nature.

Another phenomenon affecting rural students is the influence of place as a unique structure found within rural communities. Rural students grow up with a greater attachment to their communities as a part of their identity development (Alleman & Holly 2013; Howley
Howley (2006) found that rural students possess a “legitimate and conscious commitment to rural life” (p. 63). This commitment is created by the internalization of community values and development of a sense of place for the student that makes it difficult to leave even for economic benefit (Howley, 2006). This creates an environment where aspirations for higher education come into conflict with the sense of belonging in the rural community. Harris (2019) reports that in the state of Montana one in three residents live more than “60 minutes from the nearest college campus” and that “40% of all first-time, full-time freshmen attend institutions fewer than 50 miles from home” (para. 1). Ames, Wintre, Pancer, Pratt, Birnie-Lefcovitch, Polivy, and Adams (2014) found that rural students who went to smaller colleges and lived on campus adjusted better than their peers who attended an urban college during the first 3 months of school. This finding suggests that smaller schools may remind rural students of the place they came from and help them to be retained. Due to the importance of sense of place and the lack of higher education institutions in rural areas rural students are clearly at a disadvantage to their non-rural peers.

**Rural Higher Education Preparedness and Challenges.** Historically, students from rural communities face a number of challenges related to educational attainment, in particular rural populations have experienced lower postsecondary educational attainment compared to their peers in urban/suburban areas (Beaulieu, Israel, & Wimberley, 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007). While Koricich et al. (2018) recognized that progress has been made in health care and economic development within rural America, however, “the availability of quality education at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels has proved to be an enduring challenge” (p. 282). A portion of this inequity is a result of socioeconomic status, and some of this inequality stems from academic preparedness gaps, which in turn are a result of low socioeconomic status.
and reduced career opportunities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Adelman (2006) found that increased rigor within the high school curriculum was one of the most meaningful ways of negating the effect of socioeconomic status on a lack of academic progress. Whereas Brown and Schafft (2011) found that rural high schools had difficulty expanding their course offerings due to smaller enrollment, insufficient funding, and the percentage of low-income students. Further work by Kannapel and Flory (2017) found that rural high school students, though on par with their peers in terms of college readiness academically, there exists an evident lack of opportunities for students to explore potential career options in these communities, which may play a role in a lower number of students attending college. Just as rural students are less likely to attend college, those that do were found to delay entry into college more often than their peers, were more likely to take time off during their college pursuits and were less likely to attend a highly selective college (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015). Mckinney and Novak (2013) found when studying rural students who were attending community colleges that they experienced difficulty in high school accessing the information and obtaining guidance when making their college decisions. Students who enrolled in community colleges often had the most difficulty acquiring the information and guidance they needed to make informed decisions about the college process. “The types of students most likely to enroll in community colleges (i.e., lower income students, ethnic minorities, first-generation college students) often have the most difficulty” (McKinney & Novak, 2013, para. 7) in accessing information about colleges and financial aid. Rivera, Knack, Kavanagh, Thomas, Small, and Ramsdell (2019) note that “it is difficult to staff rural schools due to high turnover rates and teachers tend to have a background in science at a more general level. Teachers in rural communities have fewer professional development opportunities and lack
support services” (p. 414). These types of lacking in resources is significant and will have a negative impact on student readiness for college.

**First-Generation College Students**

First-generation college students are individuals who are the first in their family to enroll in and attend college. Analysis of resources including the National Center for Educational Statistics’ (NCES), National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute’s Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), and the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL), gives researchers a fairly clear picture of the demographics and socioeconomics of first-generation college students. Categories of first-generation students include minorities, but rural students also fall into this category, as do those who come from lower socioeconomic families (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill; Elliot, & Peirce, 2012; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Due to the lack of familial wealth, many first-generation students may use cost as a primary reason for selecting a college. Distance from home is another factor in college choice as first-generation students tend to stay closer to home. For first-generation students’, distance and cost become the driving factors of college choice rather than the quality of the education (Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008). First-generation students are more likely to have financial necessities which require them to work either on or off campus and for more hours, than their peers who may work, which results in them less time for socialization (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Saenz & Barrera, 2007). Hertel (2010) found in a study of 130 first-generation students that they were more likely to be less integrated into college life because they more often lived off campus, had more friends outside of the college, worked more, and joined fewer campus organizations.
First-Generation Students face more challenges while attending college than their continuing-generation peers and being first-generation is often viewed as a predictor of challenges in many areas surrounding college life including academics, finances, socialization, and culture shock (D’Allegro & Kerns, 2010). “Researchers have found that first-generation college students were more than twice as likely to leave a 4-year institution before their second year than students whose parents earned a bachelor’s degree” (Hebert, 2018, p. 96). First-generation students’ critical thinking skills also tend to be lower as are their self-efficacy attributes when compared to non-first-generation peers (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Davis, 2010). Aspelmeier et al. (2012) conducted a study of first-generation students and found that they had a greater negative perception of their academic potential when compared to students who were continuing-generation students. This same study also found that many first-generation students are motivated more by improving the family’s reputation than by academic advancement. This type of family motivation necessitates greater involvement of the families of first-generation students which can be challenging since their parents have no experience of college on which to base advice or empathy when their student faces difficulties. Research has also indicated that first-generation students do not share the same knowledge of how the higher education system works: “enrolling in large numbers, first-generation students depend upon academic advisors and college administrators to navigate the institution” (Longwell-Grice, Zervas Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016, p. 34). This lack of knowledge magnifies their already numerous disadvantages that becomes exasperated by their unwillingness to seek help due to a desire to be self-sufficient (Davis, 2010). This resistance to reaching out for academic support is also found in the class setting where first-generation students are less likely to ask questions and be engaged during class or outside of class with their professors (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Additionally, Allen and
Alleman (2019) have identified a rise in food insecurity among college students and that 36% of students are affected with 22% of those suffering from hunger at 4-year higher education institutions. As many rural, first-generation students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds they may “enter college each year and struggle to afford it once they arrive” and are “forced to choose between paying tuition or other expenses, such as food, shelter, utilities, books, and healthcare, despite holding jobs” (Allen & Alleman, 2019, p. 53). A struggle with hunger will negatively impact the student’s ability to be successful in their academic pursuits.

Research (Hertel, 2010; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Moschetti & Hudley, 2008; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007) has also been done into what has assisted first-generation students to be more successful in their college aspirations. Four conditions have been shown to positively affect student success: (a) expectations, (b) support, (c) assessment, and (d) feedback, and involvement (Tinto, 2012). One of the most important factors include the engagement of the student’s family in the education process. Studies indicate that family support of a first-generation student is a strong motivator for a student with both attending and persisting in college (Bergerson, 2007). Although, this type of support can extend beyond family to include peers and faculty. Wang (2012) interviewed 30 first-generation students who identified that positive faculty engagement was important to their college persistence and achievement, which showed that support from family could be supplemented from other sources. While Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell (2017) interviewed 16 first-generation students and found that “students described themselves as positively changing through activities with persons, objects, and symbols in their environment” (p. 23). Though first-generation students may face challenges in college persistence, including financial, lack of preparation, and disassociation with campus life, there are steps that can be taken at both the high school and college levels to mitigate those
challenges through support and education on the college process. In an effort to better serve first-generation students, Peralta and Klonowski (2017) suggest that higher education should make use of a standardized definition of first-generation student in order for institutions to better serve this demographic of student by recognizing the importance of social capital in their retention and degree attainment rates.

**Catholic Institutions of Higher Education**

Catholic education in its simplest definition “must be genuine education — formation of the whole person according to high standards of intellectual, moral and physical excellence” (Brumley, 2013). In the United States, 1789 marks the beginning of Catholic higher education with the founding of Georgetown University (Sanders, 2010). Bishop John Carroll, the first Bishop of Baltimore, opened the school to address a concern in the paltry number of priests being trained in America (Power, 1972). By 1850 there were 42 Catholic schools opened with a threefold mission of educating clergy, cultivating Catholic values and morality, and creating a foundation for ongoing missionary work (Power, 1958). At that time, like most education, all 42 of these first Catholic institutions were for men only, in this case Catholic men. Leahy (1991) found little financial support existed for these early institutions, including from the Catholic Church itself. This resulted in only 12 of the 42 schools being able to remain open. Between 1850 and 1900, 152 Catholic colleges were opened with 46 of those schools being operational after 10 years. The increased number of schools surviving was most likely due to an increase in the number of Catholics in America (due to the influx of European immigrants) which gave the schools a larger body of prospective students to recruit (Leahy, 1991). As the 19th century was ending, Catholic institutions of higher education began to change due to the opening of seminaries for the training of priests. Bishops, who once were very involved with the
universities, separated themselves from the Catholic universities in favor of the seminaries that were opened (Gleason, 1997). It was because of this, that the existing Catholic colleges began to evolve to serve a new student body, still men, who were looking for a more non-religious education than one would require to be a priest. Therefore, the attempt to match the public universities, forced a broadening of the curriculum of the Catholic colleges and began to include a more scientific approach (Leahy, 1991). In an effort to compete for students, Catholic schools broadened their student populations, by including non-Catholic men, and expanded their course offerings. For instance, in 1887, Saint Louis University began offering a four-year program of academic work. This model strayed from the traditional six-year plan that included three years of academic work and three years of humanities work and fell in line with the programs offered by secular universities (Rudolph, 1990). The attitude of Catholics in America in the 1880’s was that scientific research was contradictory to Catholic teachings (Hutchison, 2001). This attitude led to the founding of the Catholic University in 1887 by the Bishops of the United States and Pope Leo XIII. The Catholic University was to be an institution that would merge faith and science and offered graduate studies in philosophy and theology (Leahy, 1991). In this way, the Catholic University became a research-based institution that was responding to the challenges of the modern era that was becoming the reality of America.

A major challenge for Catholic institutions of higher learning came when higher education accrediting agencies were formed. Late in the 19th century there was a push to standardize curriculum on a national level (Gleason, 1997). However, this did not begin to negatively impact Catholic Colleges until the secular nature of this standardized curriculum was in direct conflict with the central mission of Catholic higher education to ensure that Catholic faith and morals were being taught. In the 1930’s and 40’s Catholic colleges began to broaden
their curriculum and course offerings in an attempt to gain accreditation (Gleason, 1997). Only 40% of Catholic institutions of higher education met the standards of their regional accrediting boards in 1930 (Leahy, 1991). Established in 1934, the Jesuit Educational Association was formed to better coordinate education at their institutions. Graduate studies, academic departments, and new administrative processes would lead to 76% of Catholic schools being accredited in 1938 (Leahy, 1991). World War II has a catalyst for further change in higher education. Most notably the GI Bill, according to Bennett (1996), had “a profound impact on social culture, tearing down assumptions of ethnic, religious and racial superiority” (p. 249). The result of the GI Bill was an increase in colleges and enrollment in those schools. By the 1960s, Catholicism in the United States was growing, and population increased to 42 million by 1960 and was considered to be a mainstream religion (Leahy, 1991). Catholic enrollment in college increased to 45% in the 1960’s causing Catholic colleges to grow to meet the demand, the enrollment at Catholic institutions grew to almost 400,000 students (Leahy, 1991). Matching secular universities, like the University of California at Berkley, became the focus through the unification of curriculum with philosophy and religion (Gleason, 1994). DeLorenzo and O’Malley (2019) found that “the relationship of the college to the church no longer had a canonical character as an apostolic work of a religious community” (p. 123) due to the increase of lay faculty and administration. However, freedom, diversity, and equality were new core American values for traditional Catholics post World War II (Gleason, 1997). Pope John XXIII’s (1963) document, Pacem in Terris, inadvertently changed Catholic higher education in America. With the words “all men of good will” (Pope John XXIII, 1963, section 1) there was seen a call for Catholics to become a part of the world and end their segregation with the rest of the world. This ultimately caused a decrease in Catholic schools (high schools and colleges) as
Catholic families began to send their children to secular universities. This necessitated a change to Catholic college curriculum to include non-Catholic courses in theology (Leahy, 1991). In 1967, in Land O’Lakes Wisconsin, the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU) held a conference to define the very nature of Catholic higher education:

> The Catholic university today must be a university in the full modern sense of the word, with a strong commitment to and concern for academic excellence. To perform its teaching and research functions effectively the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself. To say this is simply to assert that institutional autonomy and academic freedom are essential conditions of life and growth and indeed survival for Catholic universities as for all universities. (IFCU, 1997, p. 119)

The Land O’Lakes document separated the universities from the control of the Catholic hierarchy yet held to the values of Catholicism “the Catholic university of the future will be a true modern university but specifically Catholic in profound and creative ways for the service of society and the people of God” (IFCU, 1997, p. 121). The Land O’Lakes document directed the future focus of Catholic institutions of higher education: “the Catholic university of the future will be a true modern university but specifically Catholic in profound and creative ways for the service of society and the people of God” (IFCU, 1997, p. 121). Ex Corde Ecclesiae promulgated by John Paul II in 1990 was intended to make clear the character and identity of Catholic higher education (Leahy, 1997). This specified that Catholic institutions were required to be explicit in their Catholic identity and to incorporate Catholic theology and morality throughout the institution’s academic, social, and spiritual practices. In Ex Corde Ecclesiae Pope
John Paul II (1990) enumerated the essential characteristics that make Catholic institutions Catholic:

1. A Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such.
2. A continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research.
3. Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church.
4. An institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.

(Section 13)

Pope John Paul II also stated part of the nature of a Catholic university is “to make known its Catholic identity, either in a mission statement or in some other appropriate public document” (1990, Art.2, section 3). However, the issue of expressing a Catholic identity may indeed be a struggle for many Catholic institutions of higher education as Catholic institutions of higher education are in the awkward position of having to balance attracting students from differing religious backgrounds and maintaining their Catholic identity (Sullivan, 2008). According to Ex Corde Ecclesiae, the board of trustees (the majority of whom must be practicing Catholics), the faculty (must have a Catholic majority), and the president (a practicing Catholic) of Catholic institutions of higher education are charged with maintaining the school’s Catholic identity. Demonstrating pride in Catholic identity is another component that helps define a Catholic institution. This may be accomplished through institutional mission statements, service opportunities both locally and around the world, course offerings, class specific learning objectives. Currently, there are 249 Catholic Universities and Colleges in the United States that
provide education to a population of about 950,000 students (Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, 2020). Issues of concern that resonate today for Catholic higher education institutions include the place of a traditional liberal arts program in light of a focus on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) the openness of the school to non-Catholic students, an increasing number of students from affluent families, and the role of the Academy in a 21st century world (McQuillan, Ajmes & Muldoon, 2018). Additionally, smaller Catholic Colleges are closing due to the increased competition of larger schools and the shrinking role that religion has in American culture. Unfortunately, these smaller schools tend to be in more rural areas where there is a need for these schools, but the student population is low, and they cannot survive without a student body (Ross, 2017).

**Empirical Studies**

College completion among first-generation students continues to be an issue in the United States where only about 50% of first-generation students complete their degrees (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011). Allan, Garriott, and Keene (2016) studied first-generation students and how social class and classism affected college retention. From a sample of 1,225 participants, 302 participants self-identified as first-generation. The study “found direct relations from social class and FGCS status to life satisfaction, academic satisfaction, and GPA” (p. 493). In this study, relational significance was found for first-generation students who experienced some form of classism and having lower life satisfaction, academic satisfaction, and GPA’s. This study had indicated that experiencing classism may be a partial reason for first-generation students to have lower college completion rates (DeAngelo et al., 2011). First-generation students are more inclined to view their potential and ability to be inferior to their peers making success more challenging (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols 2007).
Mount, Jordan, Briggs, and Galm (2020) considered the relationship of mental fitness skills on resilience and academic achievement of first-generation students and found that from 286 participants, who were evaluated using three diagnostic tools: Test of Performance Strategies, the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale 2, and an Academic Challenge Assessment for which “the cluster analysis revealed four meaningful psychological skill profile groups which we refer to as a ‘weak skills’ group, a ‘strong skills’ group, an ‘emotionally fragile’ group, and a ‘go with the flow’ group” (p. 17). The results showed that those with strong skills also had higher GPAs while those who were identified as emotionally fragile had significantly lower GPAs. This means that higher GPAs correlated to greater emotional control, psych-up ability, goal setting, and positive thinking and lower GPA scores had lower Test of Performance Strategies scores. “In other words, FGCS who display a positive profile on the TOPS-RCS variables may have developed a resilience protective factor which resulted in an inoculating effect against the multiple stressors associated with the FGCS college experience” (p. 21). This result supports the literature about protective factors of resilience and indicates that students can overcome initial life-based deficits (Masten, 2010). An earlier study that was also exploring the mental health of students in connection to family achievement guilt, was Covarrubias, Romero, and Trivelli (2014) who surveyed 255 college students that included 49 first-generation students. First-generation students were found to have higher levels of family achievement guilt that resulted in higher depressive symptoms. In order to better understand the mental health needs of first-generation students, House, Neal, and Kolb (2020) conducted a study of 1355 students that included 356 first-generation students. The data set was taken from Standardized Data Set that was filled out electronically by students prior to receiving mental health care services on campus. Data collected included information “about race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual identity,
history of mental health problems, abuse and trauma history, alcohol and drug use, academic information, first-generation status, perceived social and family support, involvement in campus activities, and financial distress” (p. 160). Students had also been assessed by House et al. (2020) using the Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms-32 (CCAPS-34) that was developed in 2009 and is “used to assess psychological symptoms and distress among college students seeking services at university counseling centers” (p. 160). First-generation students were found to have significantly higher levels of academic distress than their continuing-generation peers. First-generation students were also found to work more hours than their non-first-generation peers and have significantly higher financial stress. Though first-generation students had higher levels of stress, their overall mental health was not significantly different from their non-first-generation peers. However, the study did find that first-generation students often have additional commitments to work and family that limit the time they can dedicate to schoolwork which may lead to lower academic achievement and cause difficulty in experiencing a sense of community and belonging on campus (Sanchez, Esparza, Colon, & Davis, 2010). In a similar study, Antonelli, Jones, Burridge, and Hawkins (2020) sought to understand self-regulated learning for first-generation students for those on campus, from a study that had a large study population, \( n = 914, 288 \) were identified as first-generation students. The study identified the need for institutions of higher education to “include practical strategies that help students manage their time, prioritize tasks, read textbooks and academic writings effectively, take notes in various class formats, and seek help when needed” (Antonelli et al., 2020, p. 81). For these first-generation students, self-regulated learning skills were identified as the area where the most assistance and development were needed when compared to continuing-generation students in order to foster their success.
While many studies look at deficits of both rural and first-generation students, Tillapaugh and McAuliffe (2019) identified the factors that contributed to the success of four high achieving men who were both rural and first-generation college students. One of the study’s participants “highlighted the importance of a student support services program geared toward first-generation and non-traditional students School Sense of Community (SSOC)” (Tillapaugh & McAuliffe, 2019, p. 8) as a reason for his success in college. Having a mentor on campus, family support, and financial support were also identified in this phenomenological study as important to the high achievement of the participants. The sense of community felt within a school by first-generation college students and first-generation citizen students was studied by Williams and Ferrari (2015). The researchers “wanted to explore whether first-generation U.S. citizens and first-generation college students from minority racial groups have a lower SSOC compared to traditional students” (p. 380) and surveyed 3,025 participants with 520 participants identifying as first-generation college students. The findings indicated that first-generation college students did not have lower SSOC scores when compared to their peers. Williams and Ferrari (2015) believe “the dynamics of small class sizes, a largely diverse campus including multiple ethnicities, backgrounds, and students from all geographic areas, and acceptance of views may help to affect the results of this study” (p. 383). With the higher demand for Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and Medicine (STEMM) training in the United States it is also important to note that 99% of those jobs require higher education (Fayer, Lacey, & Watson, 2017). In attempting to understand rural high school students’ perceptions of STEMM and college-going, Rosecrance, Graham, Manring, Cook, Hardin, and Gibbons (2019) surveyed 892 students in 10th and 11th grade in rural Appalachia. The researchers made use of a STEMM career aspiration survey to determine what type of career students were interested in entering, the College-Going
Self-Efficacy test to measure the student’s belief in their ability to prepare for and remain in college, the College Outcome Expectation test to measure student’s beliefs about the value of pursuing higher education, STEMM college major outcome expectations test to measure the students beliefs about the value of choosing a STEMM major, and a Math and science self-efficacy and interest test. Students who were first generation students were significantly less likely to choose a STEMM career (59.6%) when compared to non-first-generation students (68.8%). Young women were also found to have a higher college-going self-efficacy than young men. Rosecrance et al. (2019) found that first-generation students and those who were unsure if they were first-generation had lower math and science self-efficacy and college-going self-efficacy scores when compared to non-first-generation peers. As careers in STEMM related fields grow it is important for first-generation students to develop stronger skills in these areas to be competitive in the job market. Making use of interviews with 24 rural high school students Carrico, Matusovich, and Paretti (2019) sought to understand how career pathways were decided. The rural students from Appalachia were found more likely to be motivated by family and location when determining a career path than their urban peers when based on the cognitive career theory, which holds that an individual’s interest drives career choice.

Protective factors are vital to the development of resilience and can help mediate the effects of risk (Carbonell, Reinherz, & Giaconia, 1998). Karmalker and Vaidya (2017) conducted a study to determine the effects of classical yoga intervention on the resilience of rural students who attended college in urban areas. The Connor and Davidson Resilience scale was used to measure five factors: “personal competence (high standards and tenacity), trust in one's instincts (tolerance of negative affect), strengthening effects of stress, positive acceptance of change and secure relationships, control, and spiritual influences” (p. 431). The participants ($n =$
123) were split into a control and experimental group and given a pre-test of the resilience scale followed by 40 sessions of yoga, after the sessions both groups were given a post-test of the resilience scale. The results showed that the experimental group scored significantly higher on the resilience scale after the treatment. “The result indicates that the experimental group became more competent, and their persistence levels improved as a result of the Yoga Independent” (Karmalker & Vaidya, 2017, p. 432).

In summary, chapter two has considered social capital and resilience theories, as well as the meanings of rural, first-generation, and Catholic higher education. These were used to center and ground the research into the college-going experiences of rural, first-generation students attending Catholic universities.
Chapter 3: Methodology

A qualitative case study was used to understand the experiences of students who are first-generation from rural areas, and who attended a Catholic university. The study sought to understand how these students perceived their lived experiences as high school and college students in relationship to the concepts of social capital, resilience, and executive functioning. The study further sought to understand specific factors that students believed helped them persevere in higher education at a Catholic institution. Specifically, this study looked at students who attended one Catholic university within the Northeast region of the United States which will be referred to as Gaspar University. The individual participants were also given pseudonyms while other identifying details were changed to further maintain their confidentiality. Students were asked to reflect on their high school experience to help identify specific sources of social capital and other types of resources that helped them attend college. Students were also asked about their college experiences to determine areas in which the university assisted in helping the students persist in the higher education environment. The overarching research question that guided this case study was: In what ways do rural, first-generation college students understand their college-going experience? This study also sought to understand the following subordinate research questions:

- What factors encouraged rural, first-generation students to attend a private, Catholic college?
- What characteristics of resilience do rural, first-generation college students possess?
- What are the perceptions of rural, first-generation college students about the challenges and successes they have experienced while attending a private, four-year, Catholic college?
Study Context

Permission was secured from Gaspar University to conduct interviews of students for the 2019-2020 school year for this study. Gaspar is located in the Northeastern United States and resides in Magistrate County (pseudonym). The state that Gaspar University is located in is just over 4,800 square miles and has a population of approximately 3,573,000 million people. According to United States Census (2019) data there are towns in every county of the state that are considered rural and approximately 181,000 people live in these rural areas. Magistrate County extends towards a major metropolitan area and is one of the most diverse counties with a population of 943,332 of which the majority are White (61.5%), the other races and ethnicities include Black/African American (12.7%), Hispanic/Latino (19.4%), Asian (5.8%), American Indian (.5%), and Native Hawaiian (.1%) (United States Census, 2019). The average income in this county is just shy of $93,000, which is well above the National average for the United States. The poverty rate in Magistrate County is 10% which is below the national average (Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National, State, County, and Institutional Various Demographics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Categories</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Student Enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student % White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition (in-state)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid (% of cost covered)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Information that places Gaspar within the broader county, state, and nation is also provided in Table 1. As a Catholic institution, Gaspar University gives a smaller percentage of financial aid to their students than students receive on average nationally.

Gaspar University is an independent Catholic University founded in 1963 by the Most Reverend Walter W. Curtis, who was the Bishop of a Diocese located in the Northeast from 1961 to 1988. Unlike other Catholic institutions of higher education, Gaspar is not grounded in the philosophy of any one of the many orders that founded most Catholic schools in the United States such as the Jesuits or Franciscans. Instead, the mission of Gaspar University according to their website is:

Gaspar University, rooted in the Catholic intellectual tradition and the liberal arts, embraces a vision for social justice and educates students in mind, body, and spirit to prepare them personally and professionally to make a difference in the global community. (Gaspar University, 2020a)

This mission further leads to a set of values that include education in the Catholic tradition of liberal arts, pursuit of truth and knowledge, promotion of the common good, and the recognition of the individual’s inherent dignity and worth (Gaspar University, 2020a). Liberal arts in the Catholic tradition are understood to include “the quadrivium: geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy; and the trivium: grammar, logic, and rhetoric” (O’Reilly, 2011). A liberal arts education is one that is undertaken for its own sake because to know is considered a value. This education would also include theology and philosophy that is Catholic in nature and is used to inform the overall curriculum. The pursuit of truth and knowledge is inherently of value to scholarship and teaching: “the Catholic intellectual tradition and the contemporary university share two underlying convictions: that to be human is to desire to discover truth, and that the
quest for truth is sparked by the expectation that the universe is intelligible” (The Church in the 21st Century Center, 2010, p.8). The promotion of the common good includes the concept of being of service to others. The underlying meaning of serving the common good is to help our fellow humans achieve what they are capable of achieving by making sure that all people have access to the necessities of life which include food, water, education, work that pays a living wage, shelter, and peaceful conditions in which to live. Service becomes an important part of Catholic education because as Jesus Christ served others so too must those who follow Him serve others. Recognition of human dignity is the foundation of morality and ethics, so a culture in Catholic institutions must include this tenet in order to help students build strong moral and ethical characteristics.

Gaspar had a 2019 – 2020 tuition of just over $43,000 a year for undergraduates. Another important consideration is the cost of Room and Board, which is an additional $16,000 over tuition. Financial aid is available and 97% of incoming freshmen receive grants or scholarships and the average financial award package is $26,282 (Collegefactual.com, 2020a). The student demographic of Gaspar University is 71.9% White, 11.8% Hispanic/Latino, 5.0% Black/African American, 2.1% Asian, 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 9% Other/Unknown (collegefactual.com, 2020b) (Table 2). Gaspar has a significantly higher percentage of White students compared to the rest of the country or state, which results in a less diverse educational institution. To provide a context for readers unfamiliar with the Northeast or Catholic universities, additional information is provided. For example, Melchior University, which is also a Catholic university located in Magistrate County, had a student body comprised of 76.3 % White students (Collegefactual.com, 2020c). Other Catholic institutions of higher located near Gaspar University include Balthazar University was 34.5% White (Balthazar University, 2020)
and the Adriel University had a White student population of 55.4% (USJ.edu, 2020). The public institutions of higher education in Magistrate county include the local State University which was 60.2% White (Collegefactual.com, 2020d), and the University of Eden was 28.8% White (Eden University, 2020). While the majority of the colleges and universities in Connecticut have student populations that are predominately White, Gaspar had a higher-than-average White student body when compared to other institutions in Magistrate County or the other regional Catholic institutions.

Table 2

*Institutional student demographics based on race*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gaspar University</th>
<th>Melchior University</th>
<th>Balthazar University</th>
<th>Adriel University</th>
<th>State University</th>
<th>Eden University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>.7%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participants**

Participants for this study (Table 3) self-identified as being White, attended a high school in a rural area, were first-generation college students, and were attending Gaspar University at the time of this study. Due to the closure of all college campuses in the Northeast,
Table 3

**Participant information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Nancy</th>
<th>Sue</th>
<th>Fred</th>
<th>Kevin</th>
<th>Mary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Business</td>
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<td>Pell Grant</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Academic</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Academic</td>
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<td>Choir Grant</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Student Loan</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
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<td>High School</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents attended College</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home community size (People per square mile)</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>400</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

with the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Spring Semester of 2020 the sampling for this study was one of convenience. I made use of social media platforms, including Facebook, in order to secure participants for the study. I made use of Facebook to reach out to people in my community, including those who lived around Magistrate County who may have known students attending Gaspar University. Those who had connections to students at Gaspar University were
asked to forward my contact information to those students, asking them to contact me if they were willing to participate in the study. I also encouraged those students who contacted me to reach out to their friends at Gaspar to help identify additional study participants. The Student Government officers at Gaspar were also asked to advertise the study through their Twitter and any other social media platforms they had access to with their student government connections. From these outreach efforts, I was contacted by 18 students over a two-week period. Of those students who contacted me, five students fulfilled the initial study design criteria ($n = 5$).

Data Collection

During this study, I employed varying qualitative research techniques including semi-structured interviews, follow-up questionnaires, researcher field notes, and a thorough review of the Gaspar on-line presence. The process of collecting the data and recruiting participants for this study is represented in Figure 3. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Western Connecticut State University IRB (Appendix A) and the Gaspar IRB (Appendix B), and all participants were provided a detailed explanation of the study and had completed a consent form prior to beginning the interview process (Appendix C). All contact with participants occurred through text, e-mail, and a recorded conference phone line because of the constraints that the COVID-19 Pandemic required as accommodations for social distancing in the Northeast.

Interviews. Though the preferred method of conducting interviews would have been in person to "allow the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 1998, p. 74), that was not possible with the closure of Gaspar. Conditions required all interviews to be conducted over the phone and recent literature suggests “the potential of in-depth telephone interviews as a viable option for qualitative research” (Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker, & Korcha, 2015, p. 2). Advantages of
phone interviews include a greater perception of confidentiality, improved safety of the interviewer, and easier access to participants (Cachia & Millward, 2011). Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D) in order to better understand their perspective of the college-going experience. One

Figure 3. Participant recruitment and data collection process
of the advantages of utilizing a researcher created semi-structured interview protocol is that it enables the researcher “to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). In this instance, hearing from first-generation, rural students who are often voices missing from the narrative of higher education, interviews provide an opportunity for their own voices to be heard as “meaning-making is a particularly human process, heavily reliant on language” (Seidman, 2013, p. 18). The interview protocol was validated by my dissertation committee and the Internal Review Boards of Western Connecticut State University and Gaspar University to ensure the safety of the participants and the connection between the research questions and the data collection objectives, all of which support the integrity of this study. The research questions were also mapped onto to the interview questions to ensure that information obtained in the interview would be useful to the study (Table 4).

Participant interviews were conducted using FreeConferenceCall.com that allowed for the recording of the interview in an independent space. Participants were interviewed for approximately 30 to 45 minutes at a time of their choosing to ensure they had ample time to adequately respond to the questions. During the interviews, I was able to take researcher notes. Additionally, after the interview, I immediately processed what took place during the interview in my researcher journal, through a reflexive journaling process that included a “brain dump,” which allowed me to think more deeply about the interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and use this as another form of data for analysis, much like one uses field notes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The recorded interviews were then downloaded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.AI online software. As a process of data cleaning for accuracy, the Otter.AI transcripts were reviewed while listening to the audio files. This allowed me to make sure the transcripts
were accurate and also served as another opportunity to take researcher reflection notes and be closer to the data before coding began.

Table 4

*Research Questions with Data Sources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Interview question</th>
<th>University Documents</th>
<th>Researcher Journal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In what ways do rural, first-generation college students understand their college-going experience?</td>
<td>IQ3, IQ4, IQ7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What factors encouraged rural, first-generation students to attend a private, Catholic college?</td>
<td>IQ2, IQ4, IQ5, IQ6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What characteristics of resilience do rural, first-generation college students possess?</td>
<td>IQ1, IQ2, IQ7, IQ8, IQ10</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the perceptions of rural, first-generation college students about the challenges and successes they have experienced while attending a private, four-year, Catholic college?</td>
<td>IQ7, IQ8, IQ9, IQ10, X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the participants perceived the ways in which their high schools helped to socially and emotionally prepare them for college and the ways in which Gaspar has helped them socially and emotionally to be successful. The questionnaires were emailed to all participants and all of them were returned through email with additional information provided.

**Institutional Documents.** While conducting research I also took the opportunity to investigate the Gaspar University website. During this investigation I created files of any available information concerning programs and opportunities available to students and how easy the information was to access. I also looked into the programs and opportunities to consider how they were marketed to the students and what the stated purposes were in relation to the mission of Gaspar. This yielded a variety of data that focused on the programs offered for first-year students, the resources available for academic assistance, health and wellbeing resources, community building, Catholicity, and clubs and organizations. The on-line resources of Gaspar were broken down into 12 different categories and then analyzed for themes applicable to this study. For example, in one case, the Catholicity of Gaspar was reviewed. The term “Catholic” did not appear on the main page for Gaspar University. However, the website had included information on the community created through the Catholic faith and how the academic program engaged the Catholic tradition of educating the whole person. In addition, the website included information on available service programs that students may elect to participate in that is another important aspect of Catholic education.

**Reflexive journal.** During the interview process, I maintained a reflexive journal to write down observations and notes both during and after the individual interviews and throughout the process of data analysis (Ortlipp, 2008). A researcher should acknowledge any bias that they may bring with them into their research. The use of a reflexive journal to maintain
a record of thoughts, questions, and concerns during the research process is one accepted way to log these identified biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used the reflexive journal during and after interviews and during the online review of Gaspar University’s social media profile to make detailed notes of the experience. The journal became a part of the analysis of data.

Data Analysis

Yin (2009) described five techniques for data analysis, however, the one that is pertinent to this study is explanation building, which has as its goal the explaining of a phenomenon by finding links in the how or why something happened. Explanation building works well with the constant comparative method described by Miles and Huberman (1994) where the strategy is to continually compare the incidents from one data set to that of the others. This analysis that is based on coding of data then will lead to the development of categories that can be refined into themes. While I had different data points for participants in two categories, interviews and questionnaires, any data are referenced by the participant and not at the level of collection to provide a more cohesive experience for the reader.

Interviews. Analysis of the data was a multi-step process. After the interviews had been transcribed using Otter.AI, the data were chunked and coded with one or two words as the first round of coding. For the second cycle of coding or pattern codes (Miles et al., 2014) were developed, which also allowed for analytic memoing, along with a constant comparison approach that required me to return to the earlier interviews when new codes emerged during the process. These codes were then closed coded to identify sub codes and overarching codes (Schulz, 2012). The analysis began with individual participants and the coding of their interviews starting with the most comprehensive interview and working down to the least extensive interview. As themes emerged from one interview into the next and new codes were
identified, I returned to the earlier interviews to determine if those new codes applied. After all of the coding was completed, I worked to create theme categories of like topics and ideas, which evolved through the process of writing (Holliday, 2016). The themes that came out of the rounds of data coding can be found in Table 5.

**Questionnaires.** The responses of the participants to the emailed questionnaire were analyzed in a similar way to the interviews. The most extensive response was read first, the deductive codes and those already generated during the interview coding were used with initial analysis. However, attention was given to look for emergent codes and ideas that were not present in the interview data, which helped expand on the ideas and themes that were already in process. Once again, as the subsequent responses were analyzed when new codes were developed earlier questionnaires were re-examined.

**Institutional documents.** The data files collected through a search of the online presence of Gaspar University were coded. This took place in the same manner as the interviews and questionnaires. However, the codes and themes that emerged were different given the different focus of this analysis, which was a shift from an individual to an institution. After the second round of coding occurred the interview, questionnaire, and document codes were analyzed together to understand and develop more detailed themes and conclusions about the college experience of the participants.

**Researcher journal.** The reflective journal was used during the data collection and analysis stages of this study. The journal acted as a repository for thoughts and questions that arose during the processes mentioned in the sections on interviews, questionnaires, and institutional documents. Additionally, the journal served as one point of triangulation of data and as a means to identify any areas of concern such as identified biases that might have, but did
Table 5

*Themes identified in data analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>RQ#1: In what ways do rural, first-generation college students understand their college-going experience?</th>
<th>RQ#2: What factors encouraged rural, first-generation students to attend a private, Catholic college?</th>
<th>RQ#3: What characteristics of social capital and resilience do rural, first-generation college students possess?</th>
<th>RQ#4: What are the perceptions of rural, first-generation college students about the challenges and successes they have experienced while attending a private, four-year, Catholic college?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

not affect the analysis of the interviews, questionnaires, and documents. It also served as place where I could take notes and refer back to any questions that I had for discussion with my advisor.
In summary of the data analysis procedures, the researcher triangulated across all of the data sources to add a robust final stage of analysis. This included first coding across all of the individual data sources including interviews, questionnaires, institutional documents, and my reflective journal. The data were then analyzed for all sources of data concurrence or ways that data supported larger themes, which can help strengthen the rigor of this research (Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003). Ultimately, as is the case with qualitative analysis, additional understandings came from writing, and re-writing, as the last step of analysis and theme creations that yielded my findings.

**Positionality**

Establishing credibility as a researcher begins by having the academic experiences and training to support the knowledge necessary to conduct research and addressing any information that “may have affected data collection, analysis, and interpretation” (Patton, 2002, p. 566). In my case, this educational underpinning includes both practice and theory surrounding educational research based on my successful completion of the academic work in the Instructional Leadership Program in the Doctor of Education Program at Western Connecticut State University, which serves as the foundational base to my credibility. Here I engaged in coursework on research design, qualitative and quantitative methods, and program evaluation, all, which have helped me think systematically about my own work and utilizing the tools I developed in these courses. In researching the specific area of students attending Catholic College, having had the experience of attending Catholic universities and working in Catholic Education gave me an understanding of that particular setting, which is not shared by many. In consideration of conducting a qualitative study, I am a skilled listener and observer, which comes
from my training in the seminary, and has been further enhanced through practical experiences during my research methods courses.

Additionally, I have spent a significant portion of my career listening to students and colleagues, acting as a sounding board, and being viewed as a person who is a good listener. I was able to channel this skill by making use of the semi-structured interview protocol during the data collection process to ensure consistency across the interviews, while I encouraged “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) from the participants. Another aspect of conducting these interviews was the maintenance of a high ethical standard. As an individual, I maintain the highest ethical practices for myself and translated that into my research. Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2012) suggested the use of data tables to show how the data collected is related to the research questions, which was done, also the choice to include interview protocols, and an explicit discussion of how the data were triangulated as additional methods to be incorporated to achieve a high standard of research in qualitative studies. I have also ensured the confidentiality of the participants by using pseudonyms and blinding any information that I thought might be identifying, which helped secure the integrity of the study and the data collected. Transferability refers to the ability of other researchers to reproduce the results of a particular study. Transferability of this study was achieved through a carefully recorded thick description of research techniques, subjects, and data analysis techniques, and with the development and sharing of data collection protocols. Dependability is concerned with the “process of the study” (Miles & Hubberman, 1994, p. 278) and if it is consistent over time (i.e., is the interview protocol and coding process the same for each interview?). The consistency of the study has been assured through the use of data collection protocols and a reflexive journal that detailed the
methodologies used and decisions made throughout the research period as well as specifying all pertinent information of the experience including biases discovered.

Limitations

This study was limited primarily by the number of participants. Due to the closure of campuses and the transition to online learning in the Northeast in March of 2020 due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, participants for the study were self-identified through a social media campaign. A larger qualitative study may have yielded additional themes that were not found in this data set. Additionally, a larger sample of participants may have included individuals who were less focused on professional majors and provided other perspectives from those interested in the liberal arts. In addition, this study is limited by the fact that all of the participants were from one institution of higher education. Having participants from a number of different institutions that provide a Catholic educational foundation in higher education would be valuable to help identify information that could provide a larger understanding of the college-going experience. Unfortunately, I found that it can be challenging to gain access to Catholic Colleges and Institutions for this type of a study, as three other institutions were unwilling to participate.

Research Timeline

The research took place between the late Fall of 2019 and late Spring of 2020 (Table 6). Requesting additional information from the participants increased the data collection time, as well as extending the data analysis period. However, given the other constraints that came with the COVID-19 Pandemic, this seemed the most prudent course of action.
Table 6

*Dissertation Timeline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obtain IRB Approvals</td>
<td>Applied to WCSU &amp; Gaspar IRB</td>
<td>December 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sought Participants</td>
<td>Social media burst and word of mouth</td>
<td>March 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>Interviews, transcription</td>
<td>March-April 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding of data</td>
<td>Analyzed responses</td>
<td>April 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed research</td>
<td>Write and revise Chapters 1-5</td>
<td>April-December 2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to better understand the individual qualities and experiences that helped rural, first-generation high school students achieve in higher education at a Catholic institution. Specifically, I was also interested in what helped them remain in the program and at the university they attended. In this way there is a focus on admission and retention of rural, first-generation students at a Catholic university. In this respect, admission dealt with what was attractive to students about attending a Catholic university, including their high school experiences. Through the interviews and participant questionnaires, a picture developed of what personal characteristics and other factors these students perceived as being beneficial to their own college-going experience. The themes explored in this chapter include executive functioning, family life, and high school and college experiences. As detailed in chapter three, the participants of this study all self-identified as White, and three were female and two were male. Their educational backgrounds included that three of the participants attended a Catholic high school and two attended their local public high school. Along with the information already provided about them, participant profiles follow, which include a quote that showcases them as individuals. These profiles also serve as additional context for the participants for the rest of this study.

“Nancy”

Nancy was an 18-year-old female, who was in her freshman year at Gaspar University. Okay, so I grew up in (town name), a town in New York, and it's like a smaller town, like a very tight knit community. And it’s more a combination of rural and-suburban type of community [approximately 410 people per square mile]. There's a lot of commuters to New York City, but there's a lot of like farms and hiking trails. And then I went to high
school actually in a town over because I went to a private Catholic High School. And that town the community is very, very much the same way. It's very tight knit like a family, like community, and the community within my high school alone, like for Catholic was very tight, just like a family. (Nancy)

Nancy went on to describe her community as one that was racially diverse and her experience there can be described as more cosmopolitan in nature as she was exposed to a wider variety of cultures than one typically associates with growing up in a rural area. Both of Nancy’s parents lived at home while she was growing up, however her parents were retired and living on a fixed income. Neither of her parents had attended college. Her two siblings were older than she by 9 and 11 years, and they had not attended higher education immediately out of high school. However, both of them earned degrees later in life. One of her sisters moved to Pennsylvania and the other to New Jersey and they returned home infrequently for visits. Therefore, Nancy considered herself an only child while in high school and spent a considerable amount of time at her friends’ homes. She also spent time participating in sports through school. Her family did not spend a great deal of time together, other than going out to dinner occasionally and attending Catholic Mass on Sundays. Nancy chose to attend a Catholic high school located in the next town and described the community there as “very tight knit like a family, like a community,” which was similar to the sense she had about her own community. This town was similar in size and racial diversity as the one where Nancy lived. At the time of this study, Nancy was in the nursing program at Gaspar and she resided on campus. While Nancy felt positive about her experiences at Gaspar, she shared that she was having a difficult time transitioning to the online learning program that Gaspar initiated in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020.
“Sue”

Sue was from Western Massachusetts and was in her freshman year at Gaspar University. She was living on the campus as a residential student. In describing the place where she grew up, Sue said that she:

Lived in a relatively small [approximately 370 people per square mile] rural town in Western Massachusetts. So, it was kind of a very competitive town, both sports wise and academic wise. So that definitely kind of shaped my decision for school and like, basically who I am today. (Sue)

Though her community was small, Sue credits the competitive nature of the community with a major part of her character development. Sue noted that her community around her home was not all that close:

depending on the neighbor, there's definitely some neighbors who were very close to this day, but there's also some not that we don't get along with, we’re just not as close to them. We won't like, go over to each other's houses and have little gatherings like that.

But there's no animosity towards any of our neighbors. (Sue)

Sue’s household growing up consisted of both parents and one sibling, who was two years older than she. Her parents did not attend college, although her brother did go to college directly from high school. Both of Sue’s parents were employed. Her father worked in a larger town about 45 minutes away and her mother worked within her community. Sue described her family as being close saying “every weekend we try to do something together as a family, whether it be like, go for a hike, or go out to the movies, or even to the mall to have that one group family activity.”

Sue attended the local public school that she described as having a very “competitive atmosphere,” which corresponds to her experience of the overall community where she grew up.
Sue is pursuing physical therapy at Gaspar University. In a similar way to Nancy, Sue also was concerned with the Corona Virus Pandemic of 2020 during our conversation. Though her concern was not surrounding the challenge of moving to all online courses, Sue noted that through this whole coronavirus thing they [Gaspar University] were not very straightforward. Like they were very wishy washy, none of us have any idea what is going on. And I think that goes for other situations as well. They could be more straightforward and letting us know what's going on. And just tell us exactly how it is, rather than giving us limited information at a time, and therefore rumors just start going around about what's actually happening. But just keeping us informed, I definitely think they could do a better job of and handling situations that difficult situations like this, obviously it is a difficult situation, so I don't blame them for having a difficult time handling it, because this is a situation that no one really has ever seen before in their lifetime. But there's other hard times that the school has faced this year that I think they could have done a better job handling and making sure that the students were okay and that their wellbeing was like the most important thing. (Sue)

“Mary”

During the time of this study, Mary was 19 and in her sophomore year at Gaspar University as an English major. She wanted to become a teacher. The town where Mary was raised sat on a lake in the Northeast and she described the area as being “like a rural-suburban kind of area.” The town was large enough [approximately 400 people per square mile] that it was able to support both a public high school and a private Catholic high school (Grades 7-12), which Mary attended beginning in the 8th grade. Mary grew up with both parents living at home
and she has a twin sister. Neither of Mary’s parents attended college. Her father worked outside the home while her mother worked inside of the home raising the girls. Mary’s family did not do a lot of family-oriented activities together. However, Mary did describe her family as “very supportive of each other.” Unlike Mary, her twin sister attended the local technical school.

Mary believes that in her community, the Catholic school was seen by many people as being a better learning experience: “like if you looked at somebody who went to my school and then who went to the public school, they would take the private kid’s [job] application versus the public” at local stores when hiring. The experience of separating after seven years of attending school together was a significant choice for the twins, which Mary remarked “made me and my sister a lot closer.” Mary’s sister did not choose to attend college after graduating from the technical high school. When reflecting on the school year, unlike Sue and Nancy, Mary did not express the same concern over the ongoing 2020 pandemic. Instead, as someone living on campus, but with a car, one of her concerns with Gaspar was the lack of parking on campus due to the over construction taking place.

It's going to sound funny, but parking because there's no parking on campus. There's actually an Instagram account. It's called like “GU was not a spot” and they take, people do, pictures of cars but they block out the license plate and make fun of them because there's literally no parking on campus. And I love Gaspar, but they're [the administration] expanding it a little too much for my liking. I chose this school because it was small, close knit like a family community. And there used to be this whole field. It was just like what's it called. We'll just call it a field, but it was like all grass and now it's literally Hogwarts. There are so many buildings and everything and just kind of taking off from the beauty of its campus and excitement you know. They want money, they
want more students, so I get it, but I wish they would stop making more projects. Now we're going to have an ice hockey arena, and they're building more dorms, and another food place, and I'm like, “Okay, let's just take a pause, finish one project and keep going” and just kind of like, you know [slow down]. (Mary)

“Fred”

Fred, from the Northeast, was in his sophomore year at Gaspar for business and lived on campus. The town that Fred was originally from was one of the largest in terms of area in the Northeastern region of the United States and having a population of almost 28,000 (U.S. Census, 2019) which equates to approximately 230 people per square mile.

The town I lived in while I was in high school was (name removed). I also attended the local public high school. The town over the years became more upbeat and more city like with many people moving to the town and more and more restaurants and stores being built pretty quickly all over. There were always two sides to my town, the “city” side and the “country-side,” being [one of the] largest towns in [my state] you could follow a very long road like [Route] 7 or 202 for 15 minutes and see a completely different style of living and life and think you are in a different town and reality you aren’t. (Fred)

Both of Fred’s parents lived at home while he was growing up and he had two younger siblings. His parents worked in the area and neither had attended institutions of higher education. His parents were engaged in family activities that often centered around hockey, “activities we did together was attend sporting events, whether it was our own hockey games, being a big hockey family, or going to a professional Rangers or Yankees game” (Fred). Fred played hockey, starting at the age of four, for a local community club and then later for the high school hockey
team. When it comes to affording his private Catholic education, Fred’s parents are paying deposits and fees upfront for him to attend Gaspar University, but he had taken his own student loans out to make-up any shortfalls not covered by scholarships he received for playing hockey and a Federal Pell Grant, which is a needs-based grant based on parental income.

“Kevin”

Kevin, a 19-year-old male, was a sophomore at Gaspar University originally from New York State. Kevin lived in a small town in New York with a population under 28,000 (U.S. Census, 2019). Kevin described the area where he lived by saying: “I definitely, I have no complaints. It was just a very nice area. And I kind of, I fell in love with the community very early.” Kevin described his local community:

We were like one of the first people on our block, and then eventually, I know people--more and more houses on our block. They realized like how nice the community was here. So, the neighbors had more younger kids, [and] new families. Yeah, it was a bunch of younger kids, but I felt like they kind of looked up to me and everything. So, I was almost like a big brother. It's like all these little kids like how we got close to them, right away, just-kind of being there and being almost, something like a big brother. (Kevin)

Both of Kevin’s parents lived in the home while he was growing up and they both worked full-time. His father in a larger nearby city and his mother in the next town over from Kevin’s hometown. Kevin also has two younger siblings. Family life revolved around sports, “we’re all very active in sports …. we would just always be active just playing games” (Kevin). Kevin attended a larger Catholic high school located in a neighboring town, which was about 20 minutes from his home. While he was in high school, Kevin played on the football team and earned a sports scholarship to another college. However, before the start of his freshman year,
Kevin decided to withdraw from the school he planned on attending due to a change in the football coaching staff, which caused him to lose his scholarship there. After this occurred, Kevin applied to Gaspar University, where the coaches wanted him to play football. At the time of this study, Kevin was studying physical therapy for his major and living on campus. In his sophomore year at Gaspar, Kevin was also playing football and was receiving a full sports scholarship.

**Executive Functioning**

During the interview process, participants were asked questions concerning their college-going experiences. Through their answers, six specific areas related to executive functioning were identified as being important to their perceived success within the college-going context at the Catholic university they attended. Executive functioning is “a multifaceted neuropsychological construct consisting of a set of higher-order neurocognitive processes that allow higher organisms to make choices and to engage in purposeful, goal-directed, and future-oriented behavior” (Suchy, 2009, p. 106). In essence, these participants had the necessary skills to go about the business of understanding how to be successful in higher education. They understood the importance of things like prioritizing attending class, self-monitoring their behavior, and had overall organization skills. In order to discuss these in greater detail, these executive functioning skills have been categorized as the following topics: (a) Faith/Spirituality, (b) Goal setting, (c) Independence, (d) Resource utilization, (e) Hard work, and (f) Emotional stability. These six areas can also be linked to theories of resilience, which has become an often referred to theory as to what helps some people overcome adversity. Resilience is the ability to cope when faced with a negative experience or to bounce back quickly (Unger & Liebenberg, 2011).
Faith/Spirituality

Faith or spirituality was a personal characteristic identified as important for a majority of candidates as important for their selection of a higher education institution. This was true for Sue, Mary, Kevin, and Nancy who expressed that their faith and attending a Catholic institution also helped them to persevere at college. Faith/spirituality has been limitedly recognized as an additional component of executive functioning that can improve an individual’s ability to manage negative experiences and increases the likelihood of more positive outcomes (Nolty et al., 2018). Some of the characteristics associated with the ability to manage negative experiences came from the framework that spirituality/faith provides for morality, the practices of prayer and meditation, and the social networking that exists amongst practitioners of similar traditions. Though adherence to some formalized religious practice has been linked to improved mental and physical health as well as increased social support (Koenig, 2012), people attending religious services is dropping in the United States, particularly in the 18 to 24-year-old age group (Pew Research Center, 2014). Considering the research advantages that practicing a religious tradition has, rural and first-generation students would benefit from the positive outcomes associated with participating in faith-based practices. However, rural students and first-generation students are less likely to choose the private college option due to perceived higher cost when compared to the public higher education options. Yet, the public institutions they may choose to attend do not offer a faith or spiritual aspect to their programing because of the separation of church and state found in the Constitution. However, for the participants in this study, attending a faith-based organization was important to their choice to attend a Catholic institution. Sue had identified her family as being “Italian and obviously we’re very Catholic.” The continuation of her faith practices was important for Sue to continue while she was at
Gaspar. Sue believed that choosing to attend Mass every Sunday while at college “would just help me get through the process [of attending college] and kind of lessen the stress.” In contrast, Mary, who had been enrolled in a Catholic high school, said that she “wasn’t super religious growing up,” that her family did not go to Church very often. Her Catholic high school experience was one that she felt the Catholic faith was “pushed on the students” and believed that pushed her away from her own spirituality at the time. However, Mary had been a member of her high school choir that would perform at school functions including religious services. That experience led her to join the Gaspar choir, which helped her to reconnect with her faith and become “stronger” in her own spirituality.

One of the reasons that Catholic college felt like a fit for these students was the emphasis on moral development that is part of the coursework and as a presence on the college campus. Religion was a strong part of Kevin’s life and played a strong role in his overall development. Kevin, who had attended a Catholic high school, said his “whole family is pretty religious” and noted that his grandfather had been a pastor. Kevin believed that attending a Catholic institution of higher education was the natural choice for him and that “State schools just felt wrong for me, I saw more continuity with the private schools.” Kevin felt that a private school with a faith-based program would allow him to continue to develop as a good person and would be a place where his values would be mirrored by the other students attending the school. Nancy had also attended a Catholic high school and would go to Mass on Sundays with her mother. Nancy found that her faith during high school was very important to her:

To me, it is very important because it is a part of history, Jesus Christ walked the earth as a part of history. Being able to talk about that in History class, Religion class, and even
in an English class, to be able to incorporate your faith in education is really important to me. (Nancy)

Nancy had continued to attend Mass weekly at Gaspar and joined the Liturgical Choir to become more involved in the spiritual life of the campus. The participants who believed that faith was important to them found that Gaspar had helped them with continuing or enhancing their faith or spirituality.

Goal Setting

Goal setting was identified by the participants as being a continual factor throughout their high school and college experiences that was importance to their success. The goals identified centered on their academic lives and also touched on their future career choices and social lives.

By their very nature, goals are personal to an individual even though many people may share the same types of general goal, in this case success in college. Goal setting is the ability to identify a specific, measurable goal and then take actions needed to see that goal become realized (Chang, Liang, Chou, & Liao (2018). Without goal setting, an individual cannot move forward in their life, they would become stagnant and fail to grow. The participants of my study had clearly identified goals and had taken actions to see those goals come to fruition within their lives. The participants identified goals they had set for themselves during their high school careers. These goals were focused primarily on being able to attend college after graduation. For example, Mary had a goal of going to college and when she entered eighth grade, she split from her twin sister and choose to attend the Catholic high school to increase her academic understanding and the potential to attend a better university. She had identified the Catholic high school as the best avenue to prepare her academically for attending college saying that “the academics were 10 times harder than the public school” and she made sacrifices to achieve this. Similarly, Fred had
set his sights on playing hockey in college, as he had been an avid player of the sport since the age of four. One of the challenges that Fred faced was that his parents were not convinced of his ability to handle college academically or socially. They told him that they would support him attending college only if he could “keep his grades up and to stay out of trouble” (Fred). With his parents’ clear expectations, Fred’s goal of playing hockey in college included the added responsibility to keep his grades up and maintain good conduct, which are also expectations from higher education institutions for athletic participants. Throughout his high school career, Fred was able to maintain good grades and remain out of trouble, which allowed him to realize his goal of playing hockey at the collegiate level. In this way, Fred was able to build upon the solid habits he developed in high school to his benefit in college.

Another reality for these rural, first-generation students was that to attend college they had to accept student loan debt. In order to attend college and play hockey, Fred also had to accept student loan debt for any tuition and boarding expenses that were not covered by the grants and scholarships awarded to him. The act of accepting student loan debt was identified by all of the participants as being a necessary part of achieving the goal of attending college. While the research has shown that many rural students choose a nonselective college that has a lower cost of attendance, which may be based on a belief that there are inadequate jobs available to them in their home communities that warrant high student loan debt (Byun et al., 2015). However, the participants of this study accepted student loan debt because they believed that they would be able to manage repayment of those loans after graduation. “I know that I will have debt, but the job I get after graduation will pay me enough to repay the loans without much trouble” (Mary) was the sentiment of all the participants. One of the interesting phenomena that goes with these participant’s willingness to accept student loan debt was that they were also
overwhelmingly focused on professional majors that were set to prepare them for specific careers, as opposed to more general liberal arts or science degrees. Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) found that, once in college, most first-generation students “develop their career aspirations based on their confidence in completing college related tasks and the outcomes they expect from receiving a college education” (p. 259). Whereas the participants of this study had identified career choice prior to entering college and they were interested in careers such as being nurses, teachers, and physical therapists.

Though Gaspar University offers a liberal arts curriculum, the participants of this study had chosen professional career majors including business, teaching, physical therapy, and nursing. Many rural students attend college for the purpose of obtaining a degree that has relevance within the job market of their specific community, as they plan to return home after graduation. Additionally, in some rural communities, a college degree is not needed for the available jobs and students therefore do not see a need to earn a college degree. There are some rural students who accept that earning a college degree will mean that they will leave their home community in order to find employment (Alleman & Holly 2013). The professions chosen by the participants of this study could be used anywhere in the country, in any type of community setting. Nancy chose nursing because it “was what she had always wanted to do.” For the other participants, their professions were selected within their areas of interest, but were also ones where they felt confident, they would be able to obtain a job after graduation that would see them financially secure.

Another important consideration for being successful in college was the importance of having friends who shared the same types of goals and experiences. Kevin expressed that he had set a goal to go to college and in high school knew that he needed to be surrounded by like-
minded friends: “I really, I made sure I surrounded myself with good people because I just say how you know, you are who you surround yourself with” (Kevin). This group of friends helped to keep him focused on his college aspirations. As Kevin indicated, “[they helped me to] push myself and be like the best version of me I could be.” In much the same way, through middle and high school, Sue had the clear goal of going to college saying, “I always knew I wanted to go to college.” The local Catholic high school was also identified by Nancy as “the best path to attain college.” Sue and Nancy both shared that the schools they attended had strong support among their peers for attending college. Sue had spoken of her friend group in high school saying that “everyone knew from the start that college was the next step” and Nancy had said, “every one of my friends are in college now.” The participants all shared a goal of attending college after high school and in setting this goal they took the actions necessary to be accepted into a Catholic institution of higher education.

The participants’ goal setting activities went beyond that of merely being accepted into college, as goal setting can have both short- and long-term aspects. The achievement of short-term goals helps an individual to continue to strive for the long-term goal. The participants had set future oriented goals that revolved around career choice which are more long term in nature. They also had ideas as to the activities they wanted to participate in, and other personal goals they wanted to achieve while at Gaspar. Kevin knew that he wanted to be a good person and be successful, so he set a goal to only be around people who would be good for him and that would help him be the best version of himself. This personal short-term goal has long reaching consequences for what he sees as his future. Kevin felt that being a good person would help him in realizing his goal of becoming a physical therapist and in having long term happiness in his life. Students in high school are encouraged in their junior and senior years to consider future
careers that they may want and the colleges they may want to attend in order to prepare for these careers. During high school, Mary had set her own career goal: “towards the end of senior year, I decided I really loved English and I wanted to be a teacher.” This goal would later affect her college choice and be one of the things that brought her to Gaspar. The importance of goal setting beyond college was also a personal attribute expressed in Sue’s interview: “I expect to have a career that will be able to provide me with a lot of money and extra to be able to pay back loans.” A clear belief of Sue’s was that college would afford her a better life that would allow her to pay back loans that she secured to help pay for college. There was clearly conviction in Sue’s tone of voice when she spoke about this particular goal of a future career. In a similar way to Sue, Nancy also believed that she “will have a set job when I graduate.” Nancy’s professional goal setting centered on her desire to enter the field of nursing. She clearly believed that that the goal of a nursing career would be an advantage for her. This goal can be tied back to her choice of attending a Catholic high school, which she recognized as giving her the best opportunity to reach her nursing goal.

Though career goals were maintained as important for the participants once they entered college, as was evident by the participants all having declared a career oriented major. Other important goals germane to their starting college focused on personal traits and socialization. When speaking with Mary, her personal determination to be successful as a student at Gaspar was evident, “I knew what I wanted, and I got into Gaspar, which was my dream school.” Mary had talked about a friend who graduated two years before her from high school who had attended Gaspar University: “when my friend would come home to visit, she would talk about how much she loved Gaspar, that she like loved everything about it.” This connection drew Mary to want to go to Gaspar because her friend’s experience “made the school [Gaspar] seem like the place I
could really feel like I belong.” While Mary had achieved the goal of attending the school of her choice, she also identified the need to create a better sense of balance in her life: “making myself happy and at the same time knowing what’s important in that moment and in the long run,” shows that goal creation and achievement can be an ongoing process that does not necessarily have a definitive resolution. In conversation, Mary had referred to herself as a “people pleaser” and was concerned about managing her friends’ expectations for her to participate in social activities while at the same time she had her own expectations for completing her academic work. Mary had wanted to manage these different aspects of her life, a goal Mary said she was “still struggling with” at the time of this study. Students entering college are often faced with developing time management skills and learning to balance the different activities that pull on their time. The benefit of good time management is that it can reduce the amount of stress a student is under while also improving academic outcomes (Stevens, Hartung, Shelton, LaCount, & Heaney, 2018). Sue and Kevin had referred to this as “growing up” in that they were now fully responsible for what they did. There was no longer a need to seek permission to participate in social activities and no longer did they have a safety net of parents to remind them to complete academic assignments. The ability to set goals can aid in developing the time management skills needed to navigate the multiple demands on a college student’s time.

One aspect that comes with entering college is the need to develop new friendships and find new social circles that provide a sense of community. As the participants were moving away from their previous social circles and supports, they knew during high school, they recognized the need to establish new social networks for support at Gaspar. Fred’s closest friend was expected to attend Gaspar but chose a different school: “but last second, the deadline day, he switched and then I got nervous because I didn’t know what to do.” Fred was clearly
counting on the support and familiarity on another friend as an incoming freshman. When this was not to be, Fred created a goal of finding a new friend group, which he eventually did: “second semester is really where I found my people and began to have fun.” In much the same way as Fred, Sue shared a similar type of apprehension regarding the making of new friends. “I had never been in a situation where I had to make new friends.” Sue could recognize her own concerns and that it was important for her to make new friends. Sue created new friendships that she described as “being closer to them than people I have known my whole life.” One of the important aspects of living on campus is that it helps one with the transition from high school to college. Living in a residence hall also facilitates the development of community, as one lives and studies with people who are experiencing the same life changes. Another facet of the college experience that supports community development is involvement in sports, Kevin found that football gave him an instant set of new friends through the team. However, even though Kevin played football and he maintained a 3.7 GPA, he felt that he needed to continually “go out and prove myself” to the rest of the football team. This feeling created a great deal of pressure for Kevin, however he felt “like I am starting to get used to like that level of pressure.” For Kevin, making new friends was not the paramount issue, instead there was a need to gain respect and to prove himself to those that had already been accepted in the football program. In this way, the complexity of a new life in college included more than just academics for participants, the emphasis on relationship building was also important.

**Independence**

Independence is the ability of an individual to make decisions and take actions to affect change within ones’ own sphere of influence (Demetriou et al., 2017). Independence is another important factor of executive functioning, as it gives an individual a sense of autonomy that is
necessary for setting goals, utilizing resources and developing a sense of self. Within the American context, independence is often seen as a rite of passage for teens once they turn 18 and the time in which they are able to exert greater control in their lives. Students who move into a college setting after high school often see the experience as their first real opportunity to live independently from their parents. For many rural and first-generation students, living away from home is often an obstacle due to the increased cost of room and board in a residence hall and a desire to not be separated from their families (Howley, 2006). The participants of this study had all chosen to live away from home and were residing on campus at Gaspar University. Having “never really been away from home for an extended period of time,” living on campus was Sue’s real first opportunity to develop her sense of independence and be “totally responsible for” exercising choices. When Kevin was asked about what more the college could do for students, he responded that “their (Gaspar University) job is to tell you everything they have to offer for you and its really kind of up to you, this is the point where you start becoming an adult.” This statement matches Sue’s understanding of the college experience as a place to exercise your independence.

An underlying aspect of independence revolves around responsibility that comes with accepting the consequences for choices that are made. The participants of my study demonstrated through the explanation of their experiences a sense of responsibility in their decision making during their college-going experiences. In selecting a private Catholic school, Kevin became responsible for a greater financial burden than he would have created attending a public college. Additionally, Fred was very clear in his interview that he had made the decision to attend college and that he willingly had taken out student loans to make his college aspirations a reality. Along with this choice, Fred accepted the responsibility that he would eventually have
to repay those loans. The exercise of healthy independence includes the acceptance of the consequences that arise from the choices one makes.

The ability to manage one’s time is another aspect of independence that was shared by some of the participants during the interviews as important for their success at Gaspar. The ability to manage one’s time has been shown to improve academic success and lower overall stress levels of students (Hebert, 2018). During high school, Kevin related that often he was working on homework “until 1 or 2 in the morning because of games and practices.” Once he began college, Kevin was better able to utilize the college schedule more effectively, making use of the down time between classes to “go back to my room to study or take a nap.” Kevin recognized the freedom and independence within the college experience as an opportunity to utilize and grow his time management skills, which allowed him to make the best use of his unstructured time. Mary and Nancy had also noted that they used their time effectively while at Gaspar, managing the demands of academics and their social lives. Nancy had developed a strong sense of independence during her high school years. With her parents being retired and her sisters having moved out of the house, Nancy identified herself as “more of an independent child, being the youngest.” Nancy felt that while in high school she was left to “just do my own thing” while at the same time she felt a sense of responsibility to do well to make her parents proud. The participants’ sense of independence which had been developed through their high school experience, was further fostered at Gaspar, which helped them to be successful.

**Resource Utilization**

The ability to identify and utilize available resources (including social, financial, and educational) was another category of executive functioning pinpointed during the analysis of the interviews as a means of successful persistence in higher education. The ability to discover and
make use of resources was found to be a protective factor of resilience and can help to limit the negative effects of stressful or traumatic experiences. Many rural and first-generation students come from lower socio-economic families (Falcon, 2015; Nachtigal, 2019) and would have had less access to resources during high school creating fewer opportunities for them to practice resource utilization. The participants of this study did not come from family situations that were impoverished, even though a majority were first generation students, they had identified resources and how they made use of them during their college-going experiences. More specifically, the participants spoke about the resources that they recognized as helping them realize their college aspirations that came from their high school experiences. These resources included the support of school counselors, college visits, and college fairs.

The school counselor is often tasked with assisting students in navigating the college application process, helping students with career identification, and completing financial aid forms. However, in many rural school districts, the school counselor lacks the needed resources to assist students effectively in developing and realizing their college aspirations (Neale-McFall & Owens, 2016). Sue shared that she “went to meetings offered by the school counselor” that focused on completing college applications and financial aid. Beyond these group meetings, Sue reflected that she did not have a close relationship with her school counselor. That experience was similar to Fred who had really only gone to the school counselor “to go over a list of potential colleges” to which he would eventually apply. Mary did not make use of her school’s counselor either: “I only remember meeting with them towards the end [of high school] when we were talking about college and they made suggestions about where to apply, but I didn’t really listen” because Mary had known that she wanted to attend Gaspar University. For Sue, Fred, and Mary, the school counselor was identified as a resource of which they had made limited use.
Although these three participants did not extensively utilize this valuable resource, Sue, Fred, and Mary understood that the school counselor was available and that they could have utilized this resource if needed.

While three of the participants had limited need to interact with the school counselors at their high schools, the experiences of Kevin and Nancy were significantly different in that both of these participants engaged heavily with their high school counselors. For example, Kevin developed a very supportive relationship with his school counselor. He described her as being very encouraging, telling him “to push more” if he was not doing well in a class or he did poorly on a test. The school counselor was a vital resource in helping Kevin to register for SAT testing and completing his college applications and financial aid forms. For Kevin, the school counselor was clearly identified as a necessary resource that he utilized effectively in pursuit of his college-going aspirations. Nancy also communicated that she had a very close relationship with her school counselor who acted as “a guiding force” while filling out the common application for college. Through developing a closer relationship with their school counselors, Kevin and Nancy leveraged a critical resource for higher education possible for their own greater good. In this way, they made it easier for themselves while simultaneously creating a beneficial relationship that may have influenced the school counselors to spend a greater amount of time and energy in assisting them.

Making use of the opportunity of going on college visits is important for high school students to not only have a better understanding of what a university campus is like, but it may also improve the likelihood of them being accepted to the college according to Jaschik (2017). For rural students, distance can often be a factor that prohibits the visiting of college campuses. The exception to this can be if there are local community colleges. In her own effort to decide
which campus was best suited to her, Sue went back to her top three choices and visited each three times. Sue stated that “as soon as I went back to Gaspar, I fell in love with that even more.” Similar to Sue, Mary also spoke about her own visit to the campus of Gaspar and the campus tour she had taken. While on the tour, Mary discovered that Gaspar offers a grant for participating in the choir, an activity which she “had participated in while in high school.” As demonstrated in this instance, the accessing and utilization of one resource often creates an opportunity to access additional resources. For Mary, the utilization of the college visit led to the grant, which lowered her overall college costs through her participating in chorus, an activity she enjoyed. Fred and Nancy had also visited the Gaspar Campus during their senior year of high school. Nancy noted that when she visited the Gaspar campus, she “got the same feeling I got when I walked on campus [at Gaspar] that I got when I went to visit my high school for the first time.” Nancy described the “feeling” as a sense of being at “home or a part of a close-knit community.” The ability to visit the Gaspar campus allowed the participants to make a connection that they felt helped reduced the stress that often develops when going someplace new. For many students who do not have the resources to make a college visit, their only contact with a college may take place through college fairs hosted by their high school and the literature and mailers sent to them. The contrast between an on campus visit and a college fair is great, as Nancy and Fred recalled their high schools hosting college fairs though they did not feel that the experience was particularly helpful.

Within the context of their college experiences, the participants also shared ways in which they had utilized differing resources available to them, all of which assisted them by reducing the anxiety and stress that is related to academic life at institutions of higher education. One resource identified was that of the faculty on the college campus. Research involving rural
and first-generation students has found that they are less likely to ask questions and seek the help of their professors during office hours than their urban or suburban peers (Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2009). However, Sue and Nancy both made use of office hours for obtaining assistance from their professors. By working with their professors, Sue and Nancy were able to reduce their academic anxiety related to college level assignments by asking questions and obtaining clarification on presented material. Many colleges offer other types of academic support resources that assist students with academics including tutoring, assistance in writing, and researching practices. Making use of the student learning center at Gaspar during her freshman year was one way that Mary had made use of campus resources. Specifically, Mary had difficulty in one of her math courses and found herself behind and failing. She understood that she could either seek help at the learning center or “drop the course and take it later on,” but she would still need to take it because of the requirements for her major. By accessing the tutoring services available to her, Mary was able to pass the math course. Though they had been aware of the variety of academic supports available on the campus. The ability to recognize the services available at Gaspar for academic support and being comfortable enough to seek them out show a level of maturity and understanding of how to successfully navigate college.

Taking part in social activities is another important area for students through which they can develop a sense of community and support. For rural and first-generation students, like the participants in this study, whose support systems are either distant or who are lacking in college experience, socialization becomes an important aspect of the college experience. The joining of groups assists in creating necessary support systems for these more vulnerable students who have an increased risk of not being retained as college students. Taking the opportunity to join social activities and various groups of like-minded individuals, was a way that the participants of this
study were able to create new support systems that would help them to manage the stressors that they experienced. One important activity that Nancy had taken part in was the Gaspar Choir. This group allowed her to connect with individuals who would become important for her emotional support. With the closure of the Gaspar campus in March of 2020 due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Nancy, like all of the students, was required to return to her home to complete the semester online. Nancy recalled reaching out to her Gaspar friends for help:

I was like, I don’t even want to do this anymore, my motivation just like left out the door once I left campus……but then I kind of snapped out of it once I had a few friends talk to me and stuff and they’re like, we got it, we’re going through the same thing, you’re not alone. (Nancy)

By creating a network of friends through participating in social activities, Nancy gained access to a strong support system that allowed her to successfully navigate the stress of moving off campus, returning home, and finishing her academic courses fully online. Sports also served as a way for some of the participants to create community. Kevin and Fred, who played-on the competitive football and hockey teams found these were one of the primary ways in which they developed community on campus. Team sports allow students to share a love for a game with the shared goal of winning creates a supportive environment for one another. The comradery found in sports extends beyond official sports teams and can include intermural sports like the ones Nancy and Sue participated in at Gaspar. Overall, the utilization of the on-campus clubs and organizations allowed the participants to create support structures for themselves and solidified their sense of belonging to the Gaspar community, which aided the success they experienced there.
Hard Work

Hard work, as a component of executive functioning, was also identified by the participants in this study as something that advantaged them. Hard work can be understood to mean the amount of effort one is willing to expend in order to achieve a desired and articulated goal (Suchy, 2009). The hard work component of executive functioning was identified within the context of this study either through the participants stated recognition of working hard or by the achieving of a difficult goal. “I work hard, and I push myself really hard, like I have the highest expectations of myself” was how Nancy described herself. During high school, Nancy took part in several job shadowing opportunities, participated in clubs and sports, was enrolled in several AP courses, and maintained a 4.0 grade point average. The hard work during her high school years allowed Nancy to attain her goal of attending college of her choice and put her on the path to eventually becoming a nurse. Nancy continued to recognize that she needed to work hard while she attended Gaspar. The nursing program was “very competitive” and Nancy felt “a great deal of pressure to perform well academically.” Nancy recognized that she had done very well academically at Gaspar and had maintained “a good grade point average.” The experience of having a sense of competition and being pushed to do well academically during high school was also shared by Sue, Mary, and Kevin. The development of a strong work ethic during high school helped the participants to successfully manage the greater workloads and expectations that are commonplace in institutes of higher education and that they experienced at Gaspar.

Some of the participants also had expressed a need to work hard to not only achieve their college aspirations, but also to adequately provide for their futures. The concept of providing for her future family was mentioned several times by Sue during her interview. When speaking about her motivations for attending college, Sue had emphatically spoken about a need “to be
able to provide for my future family.” Having a long-term goal can give motivation for an individual to work hard in an effort to achieve that goal. Within the context of executive functioning the various components work symbiotically to help move an individual make progress in their life.

The need to graduate on time and not incur additional debt was paramount for Mary and her adherence to an ethic of hard work. When she was having difficulty with math during her freshman year at Gaspar, Mary committed to finding a way to be successful and she approached the student learning center rather than dropping the class and taking it later. The additional effort would ensure that she could graduate on time and not be responsible for additional debt that dropping the course and having to retake it would have incurred. For Mary, becoming a teacher “would give me a career that will see me through life.” These rural college students recognized the necessity of working hard in order to achieve the goals that they set for themselves. They also had committed to doing well at Gaspar regardless of the work involved for the sake of their futures.

**Emotional Stability**

Emotional stability refers to an individuals’ ability to regulate their emotional response in the presence of some perceived stressor (Suchy, 2009). This characteristic can be associated with an individual’s ability to remain positive and stay grounded when faced with difficult situations or traumatic experiences. In the analysis of the interview data, all five participants perceived themselves as being emotionally stable. In particular, there were instances where participants had challenges that could have derailed them from starting college or staying enrolled at Gaspar University, yet they persevered. Students from rural areas often lack the knowledge about financial aid and the way that one can supplement paying for college, which is
necessary for them to apply for and enroll in university. In one example, Kevin was able to traverse the loss of a football scholarship from one school and make the decision to apply to another university, in this case Gaspar. He had the conviction that based on how the coaches at Gaspar attempted to help him with financial assistance, when he was an incoming freshman, that he could trust them to follow through with the promise of a football scholarship in his sophomore year. Kevin’s ability to manage his emotional state when losing his scholarship while still in high school and then when on the football team at Gaspar:

…so, like for me, just constantly just getting over the fact that the kids, everyone’s older than me, and I just have to like, go out and prove myself and I feel like I’m starting to get used to like that level of pressure. (Kevin)

This experience showed Kevin’s ability to regulate his emotional-self and not be overcome by the pressure he felt of having to prove himself to the rest of the team.

High school academics for some students can be a source of anxiety and stress. The ability to manage ones’ emotions can help to reduce the stress related to academic achievement. During high school, Nancy recalled that she “had a homework assignment in every single one of my classes, and I just you know, I rode the tide, and I did it well.” Nancy’s positive attitude about how she handled the work in high school was an indicator of her emotional stability and she would later translate that same positive attitude to her academic work at Gaspar. Similarly, Sue attended a very competitive high school where “you kind of felt like you needed to impress others. I didn’t personally, but it was that kind of atmosphere.” Sue was able to identify the competitive nature of her high school and yet remain above the peer pressure and unrealistic expectations she found there. Not having to join in with the crowd can be seen as a sign of
emotional maturity and stability that helps a person to avoid situations that have the potential to create an unnecessary number of additional stresses.

One way to help create emotional stability is to be in an environment that you find to be comfortable. Rural students and first-generation students often have strong ties to family and community that will potentially be lost by moving on to higher education and can consequently result in the loss of one source of emotional stability. When speaking about the campus life at Gaspar, Nancy “felt like I was really comfortable and at home and that I could freely express myself.” This is the type of environment that is favorable to instilling confidence and creating emotional stability. Nancy had also identified the use of therapy dogs by Gaspar during exam times as a way in which the stresses of finals could be mitigated. According to Nancy, Gaspar would have the therapy dogs available around the library area so that students could take a break from studying and have a chance to “chill” with the dogs. Gaspar University will also arrange for the therapy dogs for other times as requested by students. Participating in activities that individuals find enjoyable is another potential way in which students can help themselves elevate stress. Fred recognized that playing hockey was going to be very important for his happiness in college, not only did hockey determine what college he would attend it also helped him to “adjust to college life.” The connections that come from participating in a sport or other activity can connect an individual student to their home community, which can help create a sense of belonging that in turn assists in strengthening and maintaining one’s emotional stability.

Parents who have not attended college cannot provide first-hand knowledge for their children regarding how to navigate challenges that come with being college students, so these students are often unprepared for academic and social experiences that can threaten their emotional wellbeing. As a nursing major, Nancy recognized the difference in course work
expectations between herself and her friends who were pursuing other less rigorous majors. Though she would get frustrated at the perceived unfairness of the workload, Nancy would remind herself that “it’s what I want to do” and that “it would be worth it in the long haul.” In this way, remaining grounded and her pragmatic attitude helped to keep her centered, which allowed her to maintain her emotional stability. The maintenance of their emotional stability helped these participants transition beyond high school and be retained and successful while at Gaspar University.

**Family Experience**

The experiences and expectations that come from one’s family plays an important role in an individual’s college aspirations and eventual attainment of a degree. In particular, parental involvement plays an important role in college aspirations for first-generation students (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). To better understand how the participants experienced the role of their families in the college-going process, questions were asked during the interviews that focused on how the participants experienced parental encouragement or support and their parents’ expectations for them in terms of college aspirations. Parental encouragement or support for college attainment is understood to mean the ways in which parents encouraged or supported their child’s college-going aspirations (Smith et al., 1995). This includes positive reinforcement of high school academics, positive support of college choice, and helping with college financial assistance. On the other hand, parental expectations more specifically refer to the extent to which students believe their parents expected them to attend college. During the conversations surrounding their families, participants were asked how their parents felt about the cost of paying for college and whether the student would be taking on student loan debt as these opinions may have played an important role in the choices a student made concerning attending
college or what school they would attend (public or private and 2 or 4 year). In addition, the theme of family experience includes the participants’ experience and sense of community, both within the context of their family and their local community. The ability to navigate the intricacies of community living can directly impact, in a positive way, the sense of belonging a student feels when attending college and their success while there.

**Parental Encouragement and Support for College-Going Aspirations**

The sub-theme of parental encouragement and support for participants’ college-going aspirations captures the ways in which the participants perceived any encouragement or support from their parents about attending an institution of higher learning. Parental encouragement and support for attaining a college degree has been shown to be important for students to successfully attending college. However, this can be difficult for first-generation families where the parents have no college experience of their own to draw on to help their child (Tinto, 2012). In rural communities, there has been an ongoing belief system of adults not seeing the value of higher education which translates overall to less support for rural students who want to attend college (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). The parents of both Kevin and Nancy were both encouraging and supportive of their college aspirations. During our interview, Kevin indicated that he had not always been the best student academically, saying that middle school had been a “struggle.” The perception of encouragement he received from his parents centered on them verbally encouraging him to always try his best and to not “sell yourself short,” to “try to expand your abilities and get to the highest level of education that you can get to.” This type of encouragement was important for Kevin who often struggled academically, his parents understood in what areas encouragement was needed and offered that to him to help him be successful. Similarly, Nancy shared “they’re very passionate about my education” is how she
described her parent’s encouragement. Nancy’s parents maintained a positive interest in her education, making sure that she was aware that they cared about what she was doing in high school both academically and socially. The level of attention given to her by her parents helped Nancy develop an understanding of the importance education plays in having a productive life. Her parents also helped to instill in Nancy a desire for her to aspire to higher education. Students who come from families with parents who are encouraging about their child’s college aspirations can be a positive influence on students even if the parents did not attend college themselves. Students who have parents with positive beliefs about higher educational goals are more likely to develop their own college aspirations and seek out degree attainment (Tinto, 2012).

In contrast to having very supportive parents Fred, Sue, and Mary did not identify a similar experience of encouragement that Nancy and Kevin experienced. However, they did experience some levels of support from their parents in wanting their children to attend college. Fred had been very clear that his parents were not encouraging when it came to his desire to go to college and play hockey. Fred had described himself as “not the best student” in terms of his academic performance through his sophomore year in high school. He also disclosed that the lack of academic progress was probably due to his interest in socialization during middle and high school. Fred would often find himself in “trouble” for his social activities. Somewhat understandably, Fred’s parents based on this history, did not encourage his desire to go to college as they saw this “as money being wasted” if he were to continue on the same path of not taking his education seriously. Therefore, when Fred told his parents that he wanted to attend college to play hockey he recalled that his parents had supported this decision, saying they “supported me wanting to go to college, especially to play hockey.” This support came with the one caveat to their support, which was that Fred’s parents would only agree to his going to college if he
improved his academic performance for junior and senior year in high school and he stayed out of trouble. In addition, Fred’s parents said that they would not pay for college, they would only assist with some expenses like application fees, but he would need to be responsible for all of the tuition and room and board costs. Ultimately, Fred shared that he believed he would have sought higher education with or without his parent’s support, because he had decided that earning a degree and playing hockey at the collegiate level was important to him.

A different experience was had by Mary, who identified a very generalized support from her parents that was not necessarily focused on her college aspirations. Rather, her experience was one where her parents simply “supported what I wanted to do” and really “kind of left it up to me.” Mary’s parents had been “very supportive” of her academic pursuits during her high school years and her mother was particularly supportive of her choice to attend Gaspar, saying “you need to go here” after attending a campus visit with Mary and hearing about the teaching program offered at Gaspar. An important consideration for what helped and sustained students was the support and encouragement that was received by the participants from their parents. This gave these participants a feeling that their parents support for their college aspirations were important for their futures and confirmed to them that they had made a good decision to pursue higher education.

**Parental Expectations of College-going**

The expectation of a parent that their child will attend can be a very strong predictor of a high school student’s college attendance and success. Though some rural adults continue to question the value of a college education, there is an increase in first-generation students attending institutions of higher education fueled in part by parental expectations (Harper, Zhu, & Kiyama, 2019). For Nancy, that her two older sisters had been diagnosed with learning
disabilities while they were in elementary school and were not encouraged by their parents to attend college immediately after graduating from high school, believing that college would not “be a good fit for them.” Nancy’s parents felt that money spent on college would not be the best option given their learning disabilities, which would make it unlikely for them to be successful in higher education. In contrast to that experience, Nancy, who did not have any learning disabilities, found that her parents had very high expectations for her to attend college. This led to their decision to send her to the local Catholic high school, which was seen “to be the most successful path in order for me to attend college.” As a first-generation college student, Nancy felt that there were “high expectations of me to do that [go to college], to go and graduate.”

Being a first-generation college student can create high expectations of achieving a degree that can add an additional level of stress that continuing-generations students may not have. This additional stress, if the student is lacking resilience, can contribute to the reasons first-generation students quit college (Cuseo, 2018).

In much the same way, Kevin’s parents made the expectation very clear from the time that he started high school “that college is a must.” Kevin expressed that this expectation of going to college was based on what his family perceived as being necessary in order to obtain a good job. As Kevin’s parent had not attended college themselves, Kevin’s parents believed that a college degree would be necessary for him to qualify for a higher paying job and a better life. Kevin remarked that: “so it’s pretty much like college, is a necessary thing in order to expand your opportunities, and later hopefully, I can get the job I want.” The expectations of his parents helped Kevin to place a priority on earning his degree and to value education. Similarly, Sue’s parents had wanted her to “have the best education possible.” They even went so far as to move from the community they had been in for over 30 years, and they relocated to a new town where
the school district was believed to have a higher quality of education. By moving, Sue’s parents invested in her future while she was still a child in order to provide the best opportunity for her to eventually attain a college degree. Sue shared that her father in particular had a very clear expectation that she would be going to college saying that “the next generation should always have better and try to be better than the previous.” Sue’s father had not gone to college and he believed that higher education was the key for Sue to have a better life than he did and to be able to provide for her future family.

The belief that college still is the gateway to a better life is a belief that undergirded the participants of this study. For instance, Fred’s parents did set expectations about him going to college: “they set their expectations as me having to keep my grades up [in high school] and not screwing around or they weren’t going to let me attend college.” Within the family dynamic, the encouragement and expectations of parents may both lead a student to seek a higher education degree. However, both encouragement and expectations by parents together may prove to be the best combination for students to actually attend an institution of higher education.

**Experience of Community within the Family**

The Catholic Church identifies the place of family in society in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997) saying:

The family is the original cell of social life. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability, and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security, and fraternity within society. The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honor God, and make good use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into life in society. (para. 2207)
In this understanding of family, all people first experience what it means to be a part of a community as a direct result of their family dynamic. The sense of community experienced by individuals within the family can be an important aspect of social capital and creates a foundation upon which to expand the communities to which they belong. The family community is a source of support for an individual, a foundation of strength to rely on, and a place to find answers and access opportunities throughout life. For first-generation and rural families there are often strong family ties for support, however, family members may be lacking in information concerning the college-going experience. In other instances, rural families may not have access to the finances needed to assist their children with college attainment. Mary, who had a twin sister and both parents living at home, said that they were all “very supportive of each other” and had good communication about what was going on in their lives. Mary and her sister attended the same K-8 school while growing up and were often assigned the same teachers. In high school, Mary and her twin decided that they should attend different schools for the first-time. The experience of going to different schools allowed the sisters to grow “a lot closer” and they each shared more with the family about their experiences at school, which deepened Mary’s sense of community and connection within her family. Another person with strong familial connection was Sue. With an older brother and both parents living at home, Sue’s family would have at least one scheduled family activity on the weekend because “during the week, all of us were very busy kind of doing our own thing.” One family tradition that happened every Sunday was dinner at Sue’s grandmother’s house that also included extended family that lived close by her. Having a significant relationship with her extended family allowed Sue greater access to the supports that family offers including experiences, which her parents may not have had and others who could share their differing work experiences that allowed for Sue to have greater career
exploration opportunities. Within this larger, extended family, support group there existed individuals who had college experience that Sue could draw upon for specific questions surrounding her own college aspirations and experiences. Sue’s uncle had attended college and two of her cousins were in college and where a source of “information about what to expect [at college].”

Having shared interests such as sports, movies, reading, or card games can also be a way for families to spend more time together thereby creating stronger bonds of support. Both Fred and Kevin spoke about sports being important within their families’ dynamics. Fred, who grew up with both parents in the house and had two younger siblings, “attended a lot of sporting events” with his family including the local sports the children played and also attending professional sporting events. Kevin, his parents, and two younger siblings spent most of their time together at family meals and played sports together in their free time. For both Fred and Kevin, the time spent with their families helped them to develop a sense of community and created a strong foundation of support that they could latter recreate on the campus of Gaspar through the sports programs available there.

Nancy’s experience had been very different from the other participants. Once in high school, she felt like she was “an only child” because her older sisters had already moved out of the family home. Nancy had felt that she “didn’t really do that many things as a family just because it was more of me just doing my own thing.” Nancy’s parents were older and had both retired by the time she entered into high school. Historically, Nancy would attend Mass with her mother on Sundays and she felt that this was one way that she “became closer with her.” Regardless of how the participants families spent time together, learning how to work and live within that most fundamental community—the family, allowed them to develop a foundation
that helped to give them a greater sense of support. The ability to become an active part of a community while they were younger was a skill that could later be transferred to the college campus helping the participants to create new supportive communities there.

Beyond the confines of family, there exists a wider community made up of neighbors, church groups, sports teams, and other types of community organizations that help one learn how to be in the world. These various types of communities can be considered another source of social capital that can support an individual’s college-going aspirations. Mary and Nancy both described their local community as being “close knit” and that people generally got along well there. Sue, on the other hand, described her local community and neighbors as having somewhat mixed relationships: “there’s definitely some neighbors who we’re very close to and there are some we don’t get along with, we were just not close to them.” The neighborhood community was more important to Fred when he was younger and then became less important as he grew older and became more independent: “I felt closer to my neighbors when I was younger, but as time passed, I would only stop and chat if I saw them out somewhere.” Neighbors can be an important source of support as they may have had experiences that an individual family did not have. Additionally, neighbors can be an important point of contact with other individuals that may have different access to resources (such as job opportunities or connections at colleges) than an individual already possesses. These additional contacts allow an individual to create greater circles of contacts and improves their stock of social capital.

Various groups of people can play a role in developing a sense of community. For example, the Boy Scouts played an important part in family activities for Fred when he was younger. The Boy Scouts offer an opportunity to gain skills and make connections within individual troops, as well as the greater community through service projects. Community groups
create experiences for the participants to engage in larger social networks, as well as to practice the skills needed to connect with new community groups once they arrived on the Gaspar University campus. As previously discussed, the participation in new communities on the campus of Gaspar University allowed the participants to establish relationships and a larger number of supports to help them through their college experiences.

Financial Considerations

Every student and their family who attend college have to face the question of how to pay for tuition and possibly room and board. In 2020, 69 percent of college students took an average of $30,000 out in student loan debt (studentloanhero.com, 2020). For rural students and first-generation students, the cost of attending institutions of higher education can be daunting and, in some cases, can make college-going financially impossible. The participants shared the financial considerations of their college-going experience and how those were faced by their individual families. All of the participants were in positions where they had to accept student loans as a means to pay for their educations at Gaspar. As all of the participants are also White, it is important to note that, taken as a whole, White students take on less student debt than their African American counterparts and also have a lower default rate on those loans (Scott-Clayton & Li, 2016). However, for rural students one of the top barriers to college access was identified as financial (Scott, Miller, & Morris, 2015) and that fewer rural students file the FASFA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) than their urban and suburban peers (Abrahamson, 2019). The FASFA form is required in order for students to qualify for and receive financial aid from institutions of higher education and federal funding programs. However, the FASFA is a complicated form and needs a significant amount of financial data from parents. For parents
who do not have experience filling the FASFA form, it can seem a daunting task and any mistakes could decrease the amount of financial aid received.

An unexpected finding was the level of conviction that all participants expressed during the interview that they had no doubts about their post college job opportunities or their ability to repay their student loan debts. The participants of this study were resolute in their career aspirations and were at Gaspar expressly to help them attain the careers that they wanted. Unlike their peers of color, these participants have the advantage of being White, which has been shown to privilege job candidates (Weller, 2019). It is unclear how much thought was given to this aspect of their futures, as their Whiteness was not something that any of the participants questioned or reflected on during the interviews. While Nancy was not concerned with her future, she shared that her family had been concerned about paying for college and “that was probably the biggest stressor when talking about college.” Nancy’s father was retired and did not “have that much of an income.” Nancy understood before entering college that she would be responsible to “pay off all” her loans after college because her “parents just can’t do it.” Nancy remembered that her parents had been very taken aback by the cost of college at a private institution, like Gaspar, saying that “the idea of how much it costs per year was very mind boggling to my dad and even more so for my mom, the cost of college is absolutely absurd.”

This “sticker shock” at the cost of college can lead many students from rural areas, who are often living in poverty (McKinney & Novak, 2013), to apply to either a community college or public university to earn their degree, as they are often unaware of the grants and scholarships available to them at private schools. Additionally, some rural students are unaware of needs-based scholarships and grants that do not need to be repaid. Fortunately for her, Nancy had received many forms of aid including an academic scholarship award, choir grant, service grant, and a
Federal Pell grant. The wide variety of available aid that Nancy was eligible for enabled her to afford Gaspar University, however her experience is different from many rural students who may be unaware of the many financial aid opportunities available to them from private schools (Patch, 2020). For Nancy, the remainder of her tuition and room and board expenses at Gaspar University were covered through student loans (at the time of this study Nancy said she had about $8,000 in student loan debt for her first year). A reality is that first-generation and rural students may lack the resources to identify the many scholarships and grants that are available due to their parents’ lack of college experience and inadequate college information programs within the student’s high school (D’Allegro & Kerns, 2010; Nachtigal, 2019).

In contrast with needs-based scholarships, another form of aid exists in the form of sports and academic scholarships, both of which can help make college more affordable. Kevin felt pushed to “work hard and do the most…to get that academic scholarship and sports scholarship as well, in order to get the cost [of college] down as low as possible.” Kevin’s parents had been very encouraging and supportive in his football playing while he was growing up and they also helped him stay on track academically. Though most first-generation college student’s parents have no college experience to draw on, Kevin believed his parents were aware of what college would cost and had knowledge of the available scholarships that could help make college affordable. Kevin received scholarship aid from the school for both academics and sports and had also taken out student loans to pay the remainder of the costs. For rural and first-generation students who frequently come from lower income households, athletic scholarships can be an important source of financial aid to help make college more accessible. Approximately 130,000 high school athletes will earn a Division I or II college scholarship and 86% of those athletes come from economically, disadvantaged situations (Soriano & Kerr, 2020). Those athletic
scholarships can be helpful to rural and first-generation students; however, they cannot rely on them as a potential source of financial aid to help their college aspirations.

Not every college student focuses on the potential debt that a college education may have them incur, some choose instead to consider the improved job marketability and higher salaries associated with a college education. In Sue’s home, the cost of attending college “didn’t play a factor in where I decided to go to school.” Sue had to take out student loans to pay what the scholarships and grants she earned did not cover for tuition, room, and board. The attitude of her parents and herself had been that “the number one priority was always getting that education,” knowing that she would be able to pay back the loans in the future. Sue and her family believed that college would lead her to a career that would make the repayment of student loans possible. Similarly, Fred had not been concerned with the cost of attending college. His focus had been on playing hockey and fulfilling his dream. His parents had helped him to pay “for anything I need upfront like dues and deposits, but the bulk of everything else I took out my own loans after aid and scholarships.” Fred had indicated that his student loan debt was around $18,000 for his first two years at school after his sports scholarship. Mary, another participant who was unconcerned with paying for college because unlike the other participants, “her parents were going to help her to repay them [student loans].” Mary had a small student loan of under $6,000 for her first year of college as she had been earned an academic scholarship and was given a choir grant. A belief that higher education would help them in their futures to earn more money and have a better life positively impacted the willingness of these rural individuals to look beyond the financial costs of higher education even at a private university like Gaspar.
High School Experience

The high school experiences of the participants helped them to prepare for the challenges of attending college. High school is often understood as a time to help prepare students for the college experience, primarily by academically preparing students with the content knowledge and for the rigor of higher education (Verhoeven, Poorthuis, & Volman, 2019). During the interviews, the participants expressed how they experienced the role of friends, school counselors, faculty, and the institution in the context of how these resources offered support in terms of expertise, resources, and encouragement to their college-going experiences. The high school experience is also a period of time in which students begin to solidify plans for their futures by more deeply exploring potential career options. For students from rural areas the ability to explore careers or have community members with a range of careers can be limited. Additionally, schools may lack the ability to prepare students in this area due to budget constraints, lack of resources, and significant teacher turnover which does not allow for establishment of solid college awareness programs (Hutchins et al., 2012). The sense of community within the high school as experienced by the participants was also considered for this study, because it was germane to who the participants were as well as what supported their college admissions process. It also related to the participant’s ability to develop a sense of community once they arrived on the college campus, as they learned who they were and how to form relationships while in high school. More specifically, the participants were asked to reflect about their high school experiences and how they were or were not prepared socially and emotionally for their college experiences.
High School Counselors, Friends, and Faculty

High school counselors. High School counselors play a key role in providing students with essential career and college counseling services through the delivery of individual planning meetings (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). Lapan, Whitcomb, and Aleman (2012) indicated that school counselors in the Northeast were able to build more meaningful relationships and personalized career planning services when they were given the time and resources. In rural communities the school counselors often lack resources needed to adequately provide these services to the students (Nachtigal, 2019). One way that school counselors help students to access college information is through the internet. Gaspar’s website indicates that there were a number of services available for students with college aspirations that included a virtual tour for those students who cannot visit the campus in person due to distance, financial limitations, or campus accessibility due to the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic. The virtual tour can be an important help for rural students who may have difficulties touring the campus in person. However, with the lack of broadband connectivity in some rural communities, the virtual tour may not reach rural students with college aspirations. The Gaspar website also provides access to all of the financial aid information students need to know, including a list of grants and scholarships offered by the school to help students who may believe that a private school is financially unfeasible. This level of transparency regarding grants and scholarships is impressive and supports the recruitment of those who may be interested in attending Gaspar and need additional financial assistance.

Among the participants of this study, the high school counselors were identified as exhibiting varying degrees of support in their college-going aspirations. Fred, Mary, and Sue had what could be termed casual relationships with their high school counselors. Mary
recollected that she only met with her high school counselor because “they were the ones who were setting up our schedules.” When it came to meet with her high school counselors about college choices, Mary had already set her mind on Gaspar so she “really didn’t listen to them” when they offered other college choices. Sue’s experience with her high school counselor was similar to that of Mary’s. “I didn’t have much of a relationship until about junior year when all this college stuff started and even then, I would only go for like the mandatory meetings or if I had a question about anything” was the experience Sue related about her high school counselor. Sue did recognize that other students had much closer relationships with the high school counselor saying that “for other people, they (the high school counselor) were like their go to person for any problems they had throughout high school.” Similarly, Fred recalled that his relationship with the high school counselor was limited as well:

I didn’t have much of a relationship with my counselor, she knew me by name and said, “Hi,” and talked about hockey with me when I needed to see her about a schedule or another issue, but I wouldn’t go out of my way to hang out with her. (Fred)

Mary, Sue, and Fred did not utilize the support offered by the school counselor in the pursuit of their college aspirations, though they were aware that support was available if they felt the need for assistance.

Nancy and Kevin described a much more personal relationship with their high school counselors, utilizing the support that was offered to them. Kevin described his relationship with the high school counselor as being “really good.” The high school counselor had assisted Kevin with SAT preparation and registration. She also identified colleges which he should apply to, basing the selections on her understanding of his personal characteristics. The school counselor made these suggestions, Kevin stated, “[on] how I am, my personality and everything.” The
counselor was also in contact with both of his parents on a social level outside of the school environment. Kevin’s experience with his school counselor went above simply helping him to navigate the college-going process:

I think the biggest thing with her, she knew my capabilities. She knew like what I was doing, my potential on everything. She was pushing me, like, to [a higher] level and she pushed me to the point that I got, she knew I could take it. So, in terms of like, like applying to this school was a reach for me, for me to choose. She knew, like I was capable of going there and like getting into that school. So that sounded like how she just knew my capabilities, and she would just support me and like even say, like, I'd like get a bad grade in class and she was, she wouldn't be like, you know, downplaying it. Saying like, oh, I know, you can handle it, you should push more. So, then just being very supportive and like, she like knew my capabilities. I mean, that's like the most important thing. (Kevin)

The experience of Kevin’s relationship with his school counselor was positive in nature and helped him to become surer about himself as an individual and with his ability to be successful with his college aspirations. Nancy identified three counselors in her high school and said that she had a good relationship with all of them. One of the high school counselors had also been a coach for Nancy’s lacrosse team, saying she “had a really good relationship and would talk to her about a lot of different things like if my [assigned] guidance counselor wasn’t available.” Nancy spoke about her assigned high school counselor as being a “great guiding hand and guiding force” when it came time to begin the college application and selection process. This school counselor was able to work with Nancy in completing the Common Application for College and steering her towards schools that had the qualities of size, location,
student life, and programing that would best meet Nancy’s needs as a student. The school counselors helped Nancy to navigate both the high school experience and the college application process, thus helping her to achieve her dream of higher education at the college of her choice—Gaspar. These types of experiences also highlight the importance of relationship building and demonstrates the need for school counselors to have the time to create relationships with their students. When school counselors have established relationships with students, the counselors are in a better position to understand the different abilities of students and their family’s resources to access higher education (Lapan et al., 2012).

**High school friends.** When considering the many groups that offered support to the participants during high school, friends from their high schools had played a clear role of supporting the participants in their college aspirations. Friend groups are often characterized by group members sharing similar interests and goals. These types of relationships are able to support one another through shared experiences including potential adversity like difficult classes or excessive amounts of work. “Everyone always knew from the start that college was the next step after high school.” This was how Sue recalled how her friends from high school thought about going to college after their high school graduation. The relationships created in high school can often be an ongoing source of assistance for an individual. Nancy’s high school friends had all gone on to college after graduation, and at the time of this study they were all still connected with one another and were able to express their support for each other: “it’s hard because we don’t see each other that much, but we all really push each other to do our best at like, with our education.” By having selected positive friends during high school, the participants were able to have a strong source of support from their peers who were also going through similar experiences and challenges associated with the high school experience.
High school teachers. Some of the participants had mentioned the importance of the role of their high school teachers in supporting their higher education aspirations. Teachers can have a positive impact on their student’s college-going aspirations by having healthy and supportive relationships with their students. Research has found that by getting “to know each student as an individual in order to comprehend his or her unique needs, learning style, social and cultural background, interests, and abilities” (Lanier, 1997). Teachers can also encourage students to value education and to believe in their ability to be successful in their educational pursuits. Kevin’s experience with his high school faculty also focused on how they tried to prepare students for college: “I feel like some of the teachers they didn’t really know exactly what we’re getting in college, like their perception from when they were there and what it’s like today.” Kevin saw these efforts by his teachers as attempts to be supportive in helping them to be better prepared for higher education, at the same time that he doubted the validity and relevance of their experiences.

High schools are generally broken down into two major models of educational focus: college preparatory and vocational training. Sue had said that in her high school “teachers were focused on giving us activities, in teaching us in a certain manner that was supposed to be like college.” The purpose of a college preparatory program is to ensure that students are academically ready for the rigors of higher education. For rural communities there may exist a lack of college readiness as evidenced by lower standardized high school assessment scores (Swisher, 2016). Having a strong academic program in high school can help students be more successful on tests like the SAT and ACT that can then broaden their opportunities to attend a more prestigious university. This is important because for those from rural areas that do not always have strong academics or test preparation centers, it means that rural students can miss
out on opportunities that come with a more prestigious university when it comes to things like gaining social capital and better internships that lead to better job offers.

**High School as an Institution**

The concepts of support from the high school as an institution was identified during the analysis of the interview data, which revolves around the programing and school climate that is created through the policies enacted by school administration. High schools throughout the country run a variety of programs designed to engage students and to help students prepare for their futures either through preparing them for trade work or through college preparation. It has been found that rural students and first-generation students frequently come from schools with fewer resources and do not have access to the same types of college preparation programs that students from wealthier districts may receive (Hutchins et al., 2012; Roscigno et al. 2006). The participants of this study had all attended high schools that they described as college preparatory. The support provided by the high schools included the academic programs offered, the school climate created within the building, and the programs that the high schools participated in for college preparation including college fairs and college visit opportunities. Providing an academically rigorous education is one way that a school can prepare its students for the work that they will face when entering institutions of higher education. Mary identified her Catholic high school as being academically “10 times harder than the public school.” While Sue expressed that the teaching method adopted by the high school for the seniors was meant to emulate the college experience. Similarly, Nancy stated, “the workload that I got in high school really prepared me for college.” For the participants, their schools created academic programs that helped prepare them for college and that fostered the belief that success in college would be possible.
The environment within the high school can also have a positive impact on students by creating a sense of community. As recently as 2018, it was found that “building a strong sense of community in rural schools, so students feel connected to each other and to their local district, is crucial to eliminate a sense of isolation and to provide quality education that addresses the child’s full needs” (Eidelman, 2018, para. 1). The environment within the high school can also create an atmosphere that allows for shared goals such as the importance of college-going to be expressed. Sue recalled her public high school experience as being very competitive and “everyone was always trying to be the best academically.” Having a different experience, Nancy described her high school community as being “a second home.” She had very positive relationships with staff, faculty, and students saying that “she loved going to school every day” and the school was “filled with love and faith.” It should be noted that not every school environment is healthy, there can exist groups who will actively work against one another, there can be uncontrolled bullying, and faculty and administration can be unprepared for their roles within the high school which can lead to additional stresses for students (Carr, Schaible, & Thomas, 2015).

For instance, Kevin had described his high school as being “a little clicky,” yet he still considered the school to be “the community center.” According to Bryant (2012): “In fact, the common thread that seems to run through outstanding rural programs is the school as a communal gathering place—not because of the brick-and-mortar structure, but because of the group of educators, parents, and children who interact there” (para. 4). Compared with urban or suburban students, rural students tend to have a greater attachment to their communities (Alleman & Holly 2013), which helps to establish a strong sense of community by creating social capital. High schools also allow for the creation of community through extra-curricular
activities. The activities that these participants took part in included sports (softball, football, and hockey), choir, student government, and internships. The participants had developed the skill of community building and relating to faculty members in the high school environment that would help them to have the skills and confidence to make new relationships at Gaspar. In essence, the sense of community the participants felt at their high schools was latter replicated on the campus of Gaspar University.

**High School Social and Emotional Preparedness**

Beyond the academic preparation, high schools are also a place for students to grow socially, personally, and emotionally as they prepare to leave childhood behind and enter the adult world. This period of time is also an opportunity for students to identify and face any fears concerning the future while still in a sheltered experience. High schools can be a place where this transition into adulthood begins and the high school setting may also play a role in actively facilitating this transition into adulthood. Many students entering college may be unprepared for the social and emotional challenges that accompany campus life. Rural and first-generation students already face a number of factors that lessen their retention and success rates in college including a lack of academic readiness and financial difficulties. These students may also find that a lack of social and emotional preparedness will amplify any other issues they have, causing them to abandon their college education (D’Allegro & Kerns, 2010). Fred believed his experience in high school prepared him well both socially and emotionally for college. He found that his participation at his high school in extracurricular activities helped him develop the skills needed to work with others. Fred described this process as having been “forced to meet new people” because he did not have a say as to who belonged on the team or the other clubs. Fred also felt that being randomly assigned to classes in high school helped his learning how to “reach
out beyond [his] comfort zone,” having to meet and work with others who were not necessarily like him.

Sue felt that her high school had attempted to prepare her for college “by being surrounded by different types of people with various personalities” and learning how to get along with those different from herself. However, Sue noted that the people in her high school were also the same people she had known her whole life, which is a common experience for those growing up in rural communities. Sue’s more isolated experience within her high school left her feeling unprepared for college in terms of social and emotional skills: “I don’t recall anything my high school did specifically to prepare us socially or emotionally for college.” Sue believed that most of her social and emotional development happened once she started college and was the result of “trial and error.” Culture shock occurs when an individual is removed from their normal environment and enters a new environment where the social norms and individuals are vastly different from their daily experiences. The challenge with not being prepared socially and emotionally within high school is that the “culture shock” (D’Allegro & Kerns, 2010) of a college campus can create additional stress for the student and negatively impact their college experience.

In some instances, the high school may not have any overt actions that help a student grow emotionally and socially. Rather, they may be able to create an environment in which students are able grow and mature at their own pace. For Mary, who described her high school experience as “a mini college,” this seemed to be the case. Describing the “loving support” of family and friends, Mary was able to grow more independent as she progressed through high school. Mary’s parents allowed her the space to make her own decisions but were “always supportive” of those choices. During high school she started to play new sports and changed her
friend group, which also helped to prepare her for college. Emotionally, Mary said that she struggled with “anxiety” and was really “quiet” in high school. Mary’s anxiety was centered around her desire to have good grades and a fear that she “didn’t really fit in” with most of the students in her high school. She felt that transitioning “emotionally to college was hard, but manageable.” The high school experience gave Mary the confidence that the emotional transition period of starting college could be navigated successfully. While rural students have a higher dropout rate in college due to issues around academics and cultural shock (Nadworny, 2018), colleges have an opportunity to provide specific assistance to rural students to make the transition to college life easier and less stressful, which can lessen attrition levels for rural students.

Kevin expressed that becoming socially prepared for college was how he related his high school experience. During high school Kevin learned how to “communicate with teachers and create lasting relationships with them.” This is one skill that may be referred to as the hidden curriculum in education.

A hidden curriculum refers to the unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, procedures, and norms that exist in the educational setting. While such expectations are not explicitly written, hidden curriculum is the unstated promotion and enforcement of certain behavioral patterns, professional standards, and social beliefs while navigating a learning environment. (Alsubaie, 2015, p. 125).

Within rural schools this hidden curriculum is often not accessed by students primarily due to underfunded schools found in impoverished areas. Kevin was able to duplicate his ability to connect with adults once he arrived at college where he was able to “become close with professors,” giving them the opportunity to help him “with potential internships and to do well in
class.” Kevin felt that having the opportunity of playing three sports in high school allowed him to “accept diversity and see different perspectives and appreciate them.” Emotionally, Kevin believed that high school taught him that “reacting with emotions can truly make you regret your actions” and that the intellect is necessary “in order to respond properly to the actions of others.”

High schools have the opportunity to work with students on their social emotional learning, academics, and the lessons found within the hidden curriculum. The participants of this study had access to all three of these dimensions of education through their high schools that has helped them to be successful at Gaspar University.

As students near the end of their high school experiences and they begin to focus on the future, it is not uncommon for students to express various fears concerning that future. Nancy had expressed a fear “of failing through the cracks” academically once she started college. She was concerned that she could fall below the high standard she had set for herself and not be able to recover academically. Nancy had been able to maintain her grades at what she considered an acceptable level while attending Gaspar. For many rural high school students, the fear of not being academically prepared for college is often cited even though they are statistically on par with their urban and suburban peers in high school graduation rates (Morton, Ramirez, Meece, Demetriou, & Panter, 2018). This perceived fear of being less than what other believe you are or being found out as a fraud is known as imposter syndrome (Weir, 2013). It can cause a rural student to either not seek a college education at all or to apply to a college that they feel would be easier to get into and thereby lessen some of their life opportunities.

Rural students frequently must face being further away from home to attend college, because there are few colleges in rural areas, their reality can create anxiety or fear for the individual. Sue was concerned with transitioning from high school life and living at home with
her parents to dorm life at college and “not being sure what it would be like.” The concern of being away from home and the familiarity that brings created additional stress for Sue as she began her college life at Gaspar. Mary had expressed a similar concern about being “away from home for the first time to go to college.” For Mary, her primary issue happened towards the end of her freshman year when she and her roommate started to not get along, which caused her to wonder if she had made a good decision in choosing Gaspar. For rural students, the challenge of navigating a culture that is often foreign to them can create stress that may lead them to dropping out of college.

The need to develop a new network of friends is an issue for many students attending college. An added complication to this can be distance, which may increase the likelihood that the further from home one travels the smaller the chance that you would already know some of the people on campus. Again, rural students face a disadvantage having to travel greater distances and coming from smaller communities, where there is little chance, they will know other students on the campus. All of the participants spoke about having to create new friend groups once they arrived on the campus of Gaspar. Nancy was especially concerned about “having to meet new people” though she was able to develop a new friend group within her dorm at Gaspar. The need to face one’s fears and be successful requires an individual to have both a strong personal support system and emotional fortitude.

College Experience

High school students throughout the United States have college-going aspirations including those from rural areas and students who are first-generation. Regardless of race, creed, nationality, or gender identity, higher education in America is desirable but access is not equal for all people. For those who are accepted to college, that college experience can be vastly
different for students depending on several conditions including their socioeconomic status, generational status, citizenship, or ability to live on campus. In describing their own college-going experiences, important aspects that the participants spoke about included how they choose Gaspar University, some of the successes and challenges that they had experienced while attending college, as well as other aspects of college life they found most meaningful.

**Choosing Gaspar University**

Choosing an institution of higher education can be a daunting task for any student and their family. Some of the considerations include cost, distance, availability of desired major, and campus feel as just a few of the factors that go into making this choice. For first-generation, rural students, this process is made more difficult because their parents have not attended college and have no experiences from which to draw on for giving advice based on experience to their child. For many first-generation students, the reason for attaining a college degree may be less about education for the sake of learning and more about achieving something for the family name like a good career (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). This is made more complex because rural parents have limited exposure to urban college settings where they may not understand the culture or only have the experience of attending a local community college to draw on for advising their student about college choice. The participants of this study were asked about what influenced their choice to attend Gaspar University and in several instances this decision had a great deal to do with how Gaspar made students feel. Sue did not consider cost to play a part in her final decision, though she recognized that a private college was more expensive than a public state college option and she would have to apply for loans to supplement the cost of her education at Gaspar. Returning for “a second or third time visit just to see if I got a feeling when I went to any of them and when I went back to the two other colleges I didn’t choose, I realized
almost immediately that they were not a good fit for me. And when I went back to Gaspar, I fell in love with it even more” (Sue). The feeling of belonging was more important for Sue than the cost, as she wanted an experience that was closer to what she had experienced in high school.

Sue, having attended a Catholic high school, wanted to be in a school that would allow her to continue to explore her faith within the academic classes she would take. For rural students, the sense of belonging is an important feeling that can help them remain at a college. Additionally, smaller, private Catholic colleges provide an environment that feels familiar to students from small towns and rural environments.

Some students are aware early on in high school where they want to attend college. This early decision making can help a student remain focused on what they need to accomplish in order to be accepted at that school. Mary had known from early in high school that Gaspar was the school she wanted to attend based on what she had heard about the school from a high school alumnus. Though Mary had described Gaspar as her “dream school,” when she began the college application process, The University of Scranton had ended up being at the top of her list because a tutor she was working with during high school had gone there and was “aggressively” recommending the school. Mary’s experience illustrates the power of how hearing about the personal experience of higher education from someone can influence a student to want to attend a particular college. When students are first-generation students or from rural areas, they may not have the opportunity to hear about firsthand college-going experiences. However, “once I learned all of the information about the Education program it [Gaspar] sounded like the perfect fit” and having a choir program was the “cherry on top” that influenced Mary to choose to attend Gaspar.
The choice between a public and private college often means a large difference in tuition costs. Research suggests that rural and first-generation students often choose to attend public colleges and universities for that reason (Giancola et al., 2008; Nachtigal, 2019). They believe that private schools are cost prohibitive. However, many private universities are able to offer financial aid packages that put their tuition and room and board costs on par with public institutions. Choosing a private school was important to both Kevin and Nancy. When his first college choice fell through due to a football coaching change, Kevin applied to, was admitted to, and selected to attend Gaspar. After applying to six schools, two public and four private, Nancy had been accepted at three Catholic institutions. Nancy chose Gaspar after visiting the campus and getting the same feeling that she had when she had visited her high school for the first time: “a sense of belonging, you know, of being accepted.” The setting and feel of Gaspar were one that was comforting and inviting at the same time to Nancy. Though there had been varying factors to the choice made by the participants to attend Gaspar, none of the interviews reflected the liberal arts program offered at the school as a reason for attending. Instead, all of the participants had selected a career goal prior to choosing Gaspar, which had professional programs that would allow them to achieve their career goals.

**College Friends, Faculty, and Sense of Community**

“Make yourself at home” (Gaspar University, 2020b) is the welcome statement on the main page about student life at Gaspar. Gaspar was invested in making students feel comfortable:

It's lively when you're in the mood for energy and camaraderie, and relaxing when you need to unwind. And there is always something to do, whether it's cheering on the
Pioneers, giving your time and talent to a service project, or just hanging out with fun, interesting people at a social event. (Gaspar University, 2020b)

Gaspar offers programs in theatre arts, choral, band, orchestra, and dance that are available to students who desire to express themselves in the performing arts. Students also have an opportunity to participate in over 60 clubs and organizations on campus with focuses on cultural heritage, academic programs, sports, and other leisure activities. These types of experiences are designed to allow students to make connections with other students. The social and emotional support that an institution of higher education provides is an important protective and adaptive factor for students who are in college. The development of social networks can help a student to navigate the challenges of the college experience including academics and social-emotional issues such as dating or roommate conflicts. Having the proper institutional and social supports in place helps retain students and foster their eventual graduations. Rural and first-generation students can benefit from these formal and informal social networks and may in fact have a greater need for this support due to the rural environments which they come from. The separation from their home social networks and a lack of parental college experiences to draw assistance from has been shown to disadvantage them when compared with urban and suburban college students (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016).

College friends. Kevin recognized the support that he received from his college social network: “just socially being able to interact and that so many people that have just helped me out and, you know.” Though institutions of higher education can offer opportunities for students to create social networks, the students themselves must have the initiative to take advantage of those opportunities.
Similarly, for Mary, “meeting my big friend group towards the end of freshman year” was one of the reasons she persevered and remained in college to continue her education. “I found my people and began to have fun,” stated Fred. This was how Fred described his connection with others who helped him to “find [his] path and settle down” into the college experience. For Mary and Fred, developing a social network was a major contributing factor for them remaining at Gaspar to continue their education. Nancy shared that she had struggled with the transition to online classes due to the Covid-19 Pandemic in March of 2020. Nancy noted that when she first got home that she had her “friends to help” her through the transition. Though Nancy could not be with her university friends during the online transition, she remained in continual contact with them, as the group of friends was making use of virtual support to manage their online education. This support from friends helped Nancy to make the transition to a new form of learning.

**College faculty.** College faculty can be another source of support for students particularly in terms of helping first-year students adjust to the college academic life. The perceptions of the participants towards their college faculty were positive in nature. In Sue’s experience:

> The faculty was honestly there for you when you needed it, they’re not there to punish you or to make things harder for you. At least from my experience, they [the Gaspar faculty] tried to make the whole process of college easier for you and to help you succeed. So, the faculty is very supporting and welcoming in that way. (Sue)

First-generation students often need this additional assistance in traversing the world of higher education (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). In the English department at Gaspar, Mary felt that she made positive connections with the faculty and said that “they were always helping me and
guiding me in the direction I needed to be going in, what classes I needed to take.” The ability to receive advisory assistance from one’s professors to make sure that one is on track for graduation and having a personal connection makes a positive difference for rural students and their retention. Nancy identified her relationships with faculty as being very positive overall saying “[I] had great relationships with my teachers.” The positive relationships helped Nancy to have a more optimistic attitude in her classes and she believed that “it helped to improve my grades.” When faculty members are seen to have a positive influence within the college community which can be helpful for students. This may be especially true for those from rural areas or who are first-generation students, who may not normally seek help or ask questions, to feel more comfortable in doing so which can improve academic outcomes for them.

Sense of community. The overall communal feel of the college campus is important to the comfort level a student feels about attending that school. That comfort level can translate into a more positive college-going experience and improved outcomes both academically and socially. Mary identified Gaspar as being “close knit, like a family community.” For her, choir was seen as a very positive experience that had “stood out” because she had made some of her best friends there and had “amazing experiences” through that sub-community. Playing both football and baseball, Kevin had been happy with the experience of life at Gaspar. Kevin had also found that he created many relationships and friendships with other students, faculty members, and coaches who helped to create a place he could be “comfortable.” The nature of the Gaspar campus community was one aspect of support according to Fred who shared “that the second someone feels alone or like they made the wrong decision and don’t belong at school, people are there to support them, and they will never know what they would miss by leaving.” Students who feel they belong and that they have made a good choice in their selection of an
institution of higher education plays an important role for their retention and degree attainment. There was also a recognition of the participants that the experience of being supported by the college community is important and valuable as an affirmation of their worth.

Students who live on campus during the school year spend a large part of their time in their residence hall. Nancy’s sense of community at Gaspar came from her experiences with residential life. Nancy did many activities with her “roommates and the people from her floor.” Nancy’s resident assistant also helped her by giving her tips on “how to share a bathroom and sleeping quarters” with her roommates. Living on campus can also afford additional time to be a part of the various organizations that a commuter student may not have the ability to participate in because of access and time constraints. Having a large friend group and participating in “club lacrosse, physical therapy club, Love Your Melon (a club supporting pediatric cancer patients), and Italian club” were all ways in which Sue’s sense of community was strengthened at Gaspar. By participating in a variety of activities, Sue was able to create a large social group to draw support from when she needed it. Having access to a larger variety of friends who have different sets of expertise can give an individual additional support in a variety of circumstances. For rural and first-generation students who often live at home or off campus and are working more than other students, it is important to have time to develop a sense of belonging and support on the campus to increase the likelihood of completing their degree.

Gaspar University

One important aspect of a Catholic institution of higher education that separates it from public institutions is the development of faith as a component of the whole person and not to simply offer an academic program or career preparedness. Participants of the study were asked
to identify how they have experienced support from their college as an institution and what programs had they recognized as being supportive.

**Academic Programming**

Gaspar offers a liberal arts education based on the Catholic intellectual tradition, with a focus on asking the “fundamental questions of human meaning and purpose” that is referred to as the Human Journey (Gaspar University, 2020c). The overarching theme of the development of the whole person centers on a core curriculum required by Gaspar. This core curriculum includes a First-year Seminar that “is an introduction to academic writing and discourse. It focuses on writing as both process and product, linked to critical thinking and problem-solving” (Gaspar University, 2020c). Students must also take courses in Critical Thinking, Western Civilization, and Great Books in The Catholic Tradition. Students also are required to select courses in the following areas: humanistic inquiry, social and global awareness, and scientific literacy. These courses are designed to assist students in being prepared for the rigors of higher education and to give them a foundation in a liberal arts education. The benefit for rural and first-generation students of this type of introduction into higher education is that it can help build confidence that they are prepared for the challenges of college. Additionally, it gives them access to courses that they may not have had in the past due to limitations in their high school’s curriculum. Fred had found the First-year Seminar and Critical Thinking courses to “be very helpful in acclimating to college” and preparing him for his work in the School of Business. To further the material and ideas covered in these Human Journey courses, the University has also installed over 300 pieces of art around the campus that are meant to help students reflect further on the ideas covered in these courses. For example, Social and global centric courses focus on culture, ethics, art, and the politics of the world. As indicated on the Gaspar website, these
opportunities support the concept that “our goal is not only that our graduates will lead fulfilling and productive lives, but that they will act as responsible citizens in their community and in the world” (Gaspar University, 2020c). Not only are students becoming more fully formed intellectually, but they are also becoming more connected to the greater world. Throughout the curriculum, Gaspar has also instituted Core Commitments: Educating a Student for Personal and Social Responsibility, a national initiative with members of the Association of American Colleges and Universities that “seeks to embed personal and social responsibility objectives pervasively across the institution as key educational outcomes for students and measure the impact of campus efforts to foster such learning” (Gaspar University, 2020d). Additionally, Gaspar provides opportunities for community service and offers service-learning programs that incorporate learning and service into a singular experience, this connects students together as well as to the local and global communities.

Gaspar also offers a study abroad program that gives students an opportunity to spend a semester at other institutions around the world giving the students a better sense of where they fit in the global world. One participant had already joined in the study abroad program. Mary had spoken about her semester spent in Italy as “being a great opportunity to grow and become more independent.” For many rural and first-generation students, the opportunity to study abroad may be their first opportunity to travel abroad and experience a culture outside of the United States. The time spent in another country can help engender a growth mindset allowing individuals to explore a greater variety of opportunities than they would otherwise have. The programs offered by Gaspar are designed to engage students on a social-emotional level to help them become connected with the larger world in an effort to develop socially responsible individuals who will make a positive impact in the world.
New Student Orientation

Colleges and universities across the United States offer incoming freshmen and new students a variety of activities to help students to become familiar with the institution. Gaspar offers two programs for new students. The first is a Welcome Week that allows students to be on the campus and meet faculty, staff, and their fellow students prior to the start of academic classes. Along with this, Fred and Nancy both identified a tradition of having social activities called the First 50 Days at Gaspar. “We would go and make some arts and crafts and like, just doing something like that kind of just takes your mind off of the fact that everything’s so new” (Nancy). Similarly, Fred shared that “They had an overload of events for 50 days as an opportunity for you to go out and interact with people and just get out of your room and away from your homework for a little while.” These early programs for in-coming students were designed to help students acclimate to college. Another way to transition from high school academics is that all incoming freshmen are required to take a freshmen seminar course that helps them with critical thinking skills, academic writing, and discourse. The Welcome Week, First 50 Days, and Freshmen Seminar programs all support the development of a sense of community and academic confidence that would then help to retain them at the college and support their academic experiences. The transitional phase for incoming freshman was seen as a positive aspect of support by the school by Sue: “they did everything they could to make the freshmen have a smooth transition from home and high school, to college.” Creating this sense of community for rural and first-generation students is important for their retention at institutions of higher education and to increase their degree completion rates.
**Structural Supports for Academics and Health**

Offering academic, mental, and physical health supports is an important role of institutions of higher education in helping college students feel that the college is supporting their academic goals and in developing a sense of community on campus. One of the supports offered by Gaspar University is the [name removed] Learning Center, which offers students free academic assistance including tutoring (peer and professional), writing support, peer study groups, Student Success Coordinators (who help students create plans to help them be academically successful), various labs in academic subjects, and workshops (Gaspar University, 2020e). Rural and first-generation students have been identified as having greater difficulty with academics at the college level than their non-rural and continuing-generation peers (Adelman, 2006). Having academic resources available for rural and first-generation students can assist them in their academic success. Mary had a very positive experience of receiving tutoring from the learning center to help her with math and said, “they have so many resources that help people and I definitely needed that academic help freshman year.” The accessibility of support can be essential for rural and first-generation students who may be entering college with deficits in their education.

Beyond assisting students with academic and health concerns, most institutions of higher education also aid students with finding employment after graduation. The Center for Career and Professional Development assists students in identifying and securing employment opportunities or moving to secure additional educational levels. The center boasts that “in 2018, 99.2% of the graduating class had obtained employment or are continuing their education” (Gaspar University, 2020f). Having assistance in finding employment after graduation is a significant benefit, particularly for rural students who may be looking to either leave their home
communities or are looking for opportunities in those same communities that they may have not been aware existed.

Gaspar University also offers their students access to a health and wellness center to cover any medical needs students may have and includes services for substance abuse and mental health concerns. Though the participants had not used the wellness center they were all aware of its existence and location on the main campus of Gaspar University. Other research has found that rural students were likely to use the available health services for physical conditions while the stigma attached to mental illness made seeking help for depression or anxiety less likely (Hussain, Guppy, Robertson, & Temple, 2013).

Though there was recognition by the participants of the many ways in which Gaspar University had made academic and health resources available to them during their college-going experience, the participants had identified personal obstacles that they faced during their time at Gaspar as their greatest concerns. These issues included time management, developing a sense of balance, and transitioning to online learning due to the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020. For example, Mary had considered the balance between academics and friendship to be her greatest challenge while attending Gaspar: “I think balance and time management [of social and academic responsibilities] was a problem for me when I first got to Gaspar. I’m very hard on myself. I tried to always put my academics first while also balancing a big friend group.” Mary had expressed that she had a very small friend group while in high school and had a great deal of anxiety about “fitting in and doing well academically.” Mary had started to expand her high school friend group during her junior and senior years as a way of her addressing her anxiety. Once arriving at Gaspar University, Mary was faced with the task of creating a new social network that would become one of her safety nets necessary for success in college. As Mary
increased her participation in extracurricular activities like the choir, new friendships developed, and the academic requirements of her classes became greater, Mary began to feel the stress and anxiety of managing all of these components of her life at Gaspar. As a “people pleaser,” Mary said she struggled with keeping everyone happy (her friends by spending enough time with them and her professors at Gaspar by keeping her grades up) as well as making herself happy. Being a self-motivated individual, Mary began to feel the weight of the obligations of being a “good friend” and “doing well academically.” Mary felt that her time at Gaspar has “made her the most independent person” she could be and has helped her to develop a “more open mindset and additional coping skills that allows [for] reflecting and coping with anxiety.” The opportunities offered at Gaspar for building a community through activities and opportunities that are self-selected had helped these rural and first-generation students to overcome their perceived obstacles in their college experiences.

An unusual and unforeseen occurrence became Nancy’s biggest challenge, the transition to online learning that happened in March of 2020 due to the Corona Virus Pandemic. She explained that during this period of time she was “feeling like I am stuck in a rut right now, I don’t really know how to adjust.” For many rural students, having broadband access to complete course work can be a challenge. There are about 16 million people without broadband access and many of them are located in poorer rural areas (Federal Communications Commission, 2020). This count may be off by as many as 20 million people according to Poon (2020). Having to complete college work without internet access may lead many rural students to not complete the course and thus not earn their degree. The participants had all said that they had overcome their individual obstacles by making use of the various resources available to them through Gaspar and through their own growth as individuals.
Perception of Positive Experiences

A positive perception of one’s experience can lead to improved outcomes for college students including a greater chance of college completion (Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2017). All of the participants in the study had shared a positive view of their time at Gaspar University. Fred’s initial experience of college was a struggle “not knowing what to do or what to expect.” However, after a period of time, Fred found his “place and adjusted to a new way of life and started to enjoy it [Gaspar].” He described his experience of Gaspar as being positive: “I’m happy that I am where I am.” Similarly, Nancy felt that the activities held by the school “remind me of home” and made her feel more comfortable. Doing well academically was also identified as a positive experience for Nancy. Kevin found that he was “most comfortable at” Gaspar and described his time at the school as being “fun.” Having a strong GPA had also been identified by Kevin as a positive experience: “first and foremost, having a 3.7 GPA, I was happy about that. And then just being able to interact socially with so many people who have helped me out and have become my close friends” (Kevin). The concept of Gaspar being “close knit like a family community” was one-way Mary described her experience at college. Mary’s time with the choir was also a highlight for her where she “made most of [her] friends” and had “amazing experiences” that would “resonate” throughout her life. The importance of the feel of the college experience was expressed by Sue who had wanted “to fall in love with the school I was going to and stay at, I wanted it to feel like home because I wouldn’t succeed otherwise.” Sue’s experience had been that the “school does a good job” creating a positive atmosphere where “everyone will fit in.” The positive overall experience at Gaspar of the campus community, activities, and academics had created an opportunity for the participants to become fully integrated at the school and helped them to perceive in their college-going experience.
However, the sudden termination of on campus life due to the Corona Virus Pandemic in March of 2020 (which stopped face-to-face classes and forced everything to become digital and online at Gaspar University and other university campuses around the United States) was identified as a seriously negative event for the participants. Having to leave the Gaspar campus and return home had disrupted the sense of community that the participants had created as it separated them from their social circles. The participants no longer had direct access to friends, professors, and campus resources to support their academic and personal pursuits. Additionally, the study participants were no longer able to participate in their extracurricular activities including sports, choir, and clubs. This sudden departure from their normal life caused the participants to feel “lost” (Mary) and “uncertain” (Fred) about what would happen next in their college experience. The negative impact on the participants to leaving the Gaspar campus illustrates the positive impact that campus life has on students and how that experience should be the norm and provided to all students.

Summary

The rural participants of this study who elected to attend a private, Catholic university were found to have well developed executive functioning skills that included goal setting, independence, resource utilization, hard work, and emotional stability. There also existed a sense of faith/spirituality that when taken as an entire set of qualities helped the participants to be successful in overcoming challenges faced in attending and persisting at Gaspar University. The expectation and support of family and friends for college attainment played a significant role for the participants in their college-going aspirations and the experiences of community through their high school years helped them to create a new community of support on the Gaspar campus. The participants were found to be well prepared for the academic challenges of higher
education through the strong academic programs and the efforts of their teachers during high school. The high school counselors were found to play a role in assisting the participants in navigating the college application process as well as assisting in testing and financial aid form completion. The success of the participants at Gaspar may also be attributed to the many programs and assistive supports that the university has developed. These supports include academic and social programs that helped the participants create a sense of community and belonging that helped to retain these students in their chosen programs.
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the college-going experience of rural and first-generation students at a Catholic institution of higher learning. The participants of this study, through extensive interviews and written questionnaires, shared their experience of attending Gaspar University and details regarding their high schools and home life experiences prior to attending higher education. The study utilized a theoretical lens that included social capital, resilience, and executive functioning to better understand what the students (participants) had understood about their experiences. The findings from this study included that some of the student’s participation in Catholic education at the high school level was germane to their desire to attend Gaspar, a Catholic University. Their faith was important to them as was the smaller, “more familiar” environment that they felt gave them a connection to Gaspar. They also felt supported financially, socially, and academically by the commitment of individuals and structural supports at Gaspar University. Catholic colleges need to create programming to achieve greater success in helping students who are from rural areas and are first-generation students to attain college and persist in higher education to obtain a degree. Along with this initial overview, chapter five provides a discussion of findings, implications for practice, recommendations for further research, and a conclusion.

Discussion of Findings

The admission and retention of rural, first-generation students is an area of increased importance within higher education (Cuseo, 2018). This is especially true for private Catholic institutions, given the importance of student enrollment for livelihood and the reality that the majority of rural students who do attend higher education do so at public 2- and 4-year
institutions (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015). However, many of the participants in this study had attended Catholic High Schools or were religiously Catholic and the “feel” of Gaspar was appealing to them. Analysis showed that connection to one’s faith was important and actually created opportunities that resulted in participants making friends, engaging in activities, and feeling supported, all of which helped their retention. Another finding is that some of the participants expressed that their parents both encouraged and expected that their children would go to college. For the participants who did not express that their parents offered encouragement or expectation for college attainment, it appears that other factors played a role, and that parental expectations and encouragement may not be as important as has been previously assumed (Hertel, 2010; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Moschetti & Hudley, 2008; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). The students with parents who did not have college as a firm expectation shared that their high school friends all expected to go to college.

Next to parents, support from friend groups in high school was experienced by all of the participants in a positive way. High school friends were seen as both support and motivation to attend college due to the shared goal of attending college. Peer groups and the phenomenon of peer pressure may account for this finding. Students who are considered loners may need greater support from other sources in order to fill this particular gap. As Coleman (1988) identified differing social networks as creating social capital to better enable students to be successful, parental encouragement and expectation for their children to attend institutions of higher learning has been seen as an important piece in the college-going experience of students. In this way, their social networks could have been supporting them as Coleman suggests. Another type of support from parents was tied to the ways that they supported their children once they were accepted and enrolled at Gaspar and was viewed as important to all of the participants. The
experience of support as described has given the participants a sense of confidence and belief that they were capable of being successful in their college aspirations. Interestingly, the participants did not identify other community members (such as neighbors, employers, or extended family), outside of their immediate families and high school communities, as sources of support in their college-going experiences. This may mean that the wider community is not as important to students when there is sufficient support from one’s parents and peer groups.

While still in high school, the high school counselors were essential to many students when it came to navigating the college application process as well as helping with financial aid concerns. While the participants of this study were split in how they viewed their high school counselors, the vital role that they provided for some students is an important consideration. Two of the participants felt their counselors in high school were crucial for helping them achieve their college-going aspirations. This finding may speak to the individual needs of different students and their families when it comes to structural supports needed while students are in high school. It is also probable that high school counselors vary in the number of students that they have on their caseload, as well as their abilities to make closer relationships with individuals more difficult or impractical. Other teachers within the high school setting were identified as being supportive in preparing the participants for college, primarily by assisting the participants in learning the skills necessary to develop professional relationships that could be transferred to the college level. This ability to foster working relationships with their college professors was a benefit.

In choosing to attend Gaspar, the participants identified the sense of belonging that they felt on the campus. This sense of belonging was associated with the Catholic nature of the university and its goal of educating the whole person. At Gaspar, the most important source of
support for the participants as they faced challenges came from their friend groups. The friends made while attending Gaspar were identified as being important to facing academic and social problems on campus. The creation of new peer groups by the participants assisted them in creating a sense of community that was essential to their overall success at Gaspar. These friend groups helped the participants navigate the complex issues of entering adulthood and exercising their independence. Faculty members at Gaspar were also identified as a source of academic support for all of the participants. The participants positively interacted with the faculty in order to gain additional support academically, as well as to create the opportunity for later support in identifying opportunities for internships in their chosen career paths. The activities and programs created by Gaspar for the purpose of helping students to meet other students and professors in a social setting were also experienced in a positive way by the participants. In particular, the participants mentioned social activities for new students as being a very positive experience and distinctly helpful in establishing new social circles. The participants also noted that Gaspar excelled at communicating the range of resources available for students including the health and learning centers. The participants found the available tutoring through the learning center as being extremely helpful. Institutions of higher education must make communication of available resources clear and accessible for all students, particularly for rural and first-generation students who do not normally seek out these forms of assistance.

Certain characteristics were identified for the participants of this study that have been associated with internal protective factors of resilience and are also considered skills associated with executive functioning. All of the participants exhibited goal setting skills within the context of their college-going experiences. From their high school days, the decision to attend higher education and the choice of attending Gaspar University, the participants had set clear goals for
themselves and followed through on those goals. The participants had also all enrolled in a program of study based on the professions they had chosen prior to starting college. By having a clear goal, college students can potentially save both time and money by not switching majors while in college. The participants were also aware of available resources and made use of resource to help achieve goals that they had set. The ability to not only identify resources but also utilize those resources can assist students in having a more successful college experience. By making use of resources, students would be less likely to drop out of college thus improving the rates of degree attainment among rural and first-generation students. The analysis of the data also indicated that the participants were emotionally stable even when faced with challenges including the abrupt end of their on-campus college experience and transition to online education during the COVID 19 Pandemic, beginning in March of 2020. The ability to transition successfully, even with some concerns shows a significant amount of emotional stability for these participants.

The participants also identified that they considered themselves as hard working or having a strong work ethic. The hard work characteristic may be involved in their success of both attaining college and being successful there. Independence was identified as skill or quality that the participants possessed. Independence was important to them and helped them in various ways (including course selection, social activities to attend, resources to seek out, and how to spend their free time) during their college-going experiences to help them be more successful. The participants also had a positive impression of the college and their time spent on the campus. The participant’s overall positive experience at the university was attributed to Gaspar doing a good job in creating an overall positive college-going experience through various social and academic activities. This positive outlook may have contributed to their success in overcoming
obstacles and doing well academically. These characteristics of goal setting, resource utilization, hard work, independence, and emotional stability coupled with a positive experience or a combination of some of these characteristics appears to have played a role in both the attainment of higher education and being successful while in college. The literature on both executive functioning and resilience (Hartley, 2011; Suchy, 2009) would indicate that development of these characteristics or skills would improve resilience in the individual and help them to better overcome adversity. In terms of college-going, adversity faced by students includes academic challenges (including failing a course), separation from one’s home community, and the freedom associated with becoming an adult. The ability to navigate these challenges successfully may allow students to have a higher graduation rate which will improve their overall life outcome (improved job opportunities, improved health outcomes, and higher life satisfaction feelings), which is especially important for those first-generation students from rural areas.

Though choosing a Catholic Institution was not the primary goal when considering potential colleges, that Gaspar University was a Catholic institution did have some positive impact on college choice. The Catholic nature of the institution seemed to play an important role for many of the participants in terms of the participants being able to practice and live their faith. The practice of the participants’ Catholic faith and the manifestation of that faith within the greater Gaspar community served as an additional source of support during difficult times. While attending the university, the participants identified what they perceived to be the biggest obstacles they faced were focused on perceived social issues of creating new relationships and time management skills. While Gaspar provided many first-year experiences to assist incoming students, the fear and concerns that students had before starting college needed to be addressed before the students arrived on campus for their first semester. Additionally, proactively assuring
students about the resources available to learn to manage one’s time may also be helpful. Both of these areas relate to communication in the space after students have been accepted, yet before they are on campus. This may be an opportunity for the university to improve the college experience by helping new students eradicate their fears.

A developed sense of community was found to be essential for these participants. An understanding of the prominence that community had in their life was found in terms of their family, local communities, high school and at Gaspar. This sense of community was identified as helping them grow and feel supported even in the face of challenges, in this way it served as an external protective factor of resilience. Williams and Ferrari (2015) found that school sense of community as associated with small class sizes and a diverse student population allow rural and first-generation students to feel a strong sense of community. The student enrollment of Gaspar has some diversity with 27% being non-white (Collegefactual.com, 2020b) and an average class size of 21 (Gaspar University, 2020f), both of which helped the participants to feel a sense of community that in turn helped them be successful. The campus itself has limited green space due to continued expansion of campus buildings and has a more urban feel which may negatively impact some rural students. Ultimately, institutions of higher education want to be places that appeal to students. In this way, the environment, opportunities for social connection, and academics all matter. The combination of these three are what helped foster feelings of success by creating a sense of confidence for rural and first-generation students.

One of the most unexpected findings of this study was the lack of concern that the participants had over financing their college education. Though participants had some discussion concerning financing college with their parents, the participants all believed that the education and opportunities that would come from having a degree was well worth the expense
even when they had to assume student loans. This particular finding may be grounded in the high value these participants placed on the college experience and what they expected to gain from the professional careers/majors that they were pursuing. All of the participants were pragmatic in this respect, they had declared majors that all can be categorized as professional in contrast with liberal arts. One’s attitude about the value of education may be an important factor for helping other students realize their own college aspirations.

**Implications for Educators**

This research study found that rural, first-generation students from the Northeast had specific social capital resources and protective factors that helped with their resiliency. The social capital resources found to be most important included family and high school peer support for college-going. Educational administrators need to consider the essential role school counselors’ play in assisting students in post-secondary planning and direct resources to assure rural high school students have access to school counseling services that assist with the development of college attainment ambitions, as well as to provide the necessary activities for executive functioning skills to be successful at the college level. High school educators should also become more familiar with the curriculum of the colleges most attended by their students in an effort to better prepare them for the academic structure of higher education. To help students develop executive functioning skills, including goal setting, independence, resource utilization, hard work, and emotional stability, high school educators will need to devise programs that assist students in developing these skills in their early education while giving them an opportunity to practice and strengthen those skills in high school. Additionally, mindfulness programs have been shown to improve executive functioning skills for students when included in the school’s curriculum for younger children (Janz, Dawe, & Wyllie, 2019). Similarly, resiliency factors are
currently being worked on in many schools through programs that help build social-emotional skills. These programs need to be continued and expanded to help students develop as many protective factors as possible including empathy, curiosity, social competence, peer relating, and sense of purpose to give students the best chance at success in college and life.

At the collegiate level, the programs designed to acclimate students to campus life seemed to be effective for the student population, including rural and first-generation students. Gaspar University has developed a new student orientation seminar that helps students become aware of the resources available to them including academic assistance and health related services. Programs for new students also include a welcome week for new students and social activities during the first 50 days. These programs were specifically designed to help students become connected to the campus and the other students, beginning the creation of a social support network which will help the students be more successful. Other Catholic universities would benefit from modeling their freshmen student programs on what Gaspar has developed in order to increase degree completion rates. Catholic universities around the country could also benefit from developing improved student tracking based on rural and first-generation designations in order to better target and monitor students based on the particular needs of these individual groups. The creation of support groups or additional seminar opportunities may assist these particular students to better acclimate to college life and thus increase their degree completion rates.

Given the importance that faith played for the participants of this study, Catholic institutions of higher education should work to develop scholarship and partner programs with other types of Catholic organizations in a more purposeful manner. The goal of this collaboration would be to increase the number of Catholic students at these institutions and offer
them the additional support that faith/spirituality has to offer. In the early history of Catholic higher education, only Catholic students were served and one of the purposes of the school was to transmit the moral and faith teachings of the Church (Power, 1958). In our current pluralistic society, the transmission of the Catholic faith and morality is sometimes seen as a potential negative to perspective non-Catholic students. This is apparent in the fact that Gaspar ’s website does not mention the term Catholic on the first page. However, the creation of a safe space for both the practice and teaching of faith and morality could be helpful for rural and first-generation students who may benefit from the additional support that a faith community offers. This outreach could also be targeted to rural areas giving rural students a greater opportunity to apply to a private college and helping rural students to better understand the affordability of Catholic colleges.

Suggestions for Future Research

There are several suggestions for further research, beginning with the realization that a larger study of rural students from different rural areas around the country could illuminate other findings. In addition, a study that focuses on rural students of other faith backgrounds and their perspectives on their experiences at a Catholic institution of higher education could yield other important understandings. Additionally, a study from an organizational leadership perspective of Catholic universities could be designed that would include interviews of admissions staff to better understand their outreach to rural first-generation students. Similarly, a study of Catholic leaders could be undertaken to understand the connections that they make with the Catholic educational mission as understood through John Paul II’s Ex Corde Ecclesiae (1990) which speaks about the Catholicity of the institution and how that institution must be at the service of people.
Conclusion

This study examined the college-going experiences of rural, first-generation students who attended a Catholic institution of higher education. Participants shared what influenced their decisions and ability to attend Gaspar. Familial relationships and parental support were of importance in sustaining their aspirations for higher education. Participants discussed how their high school experiences helped them with the academic portion of being prepared for college, but that they felt less prepared for the social aspects of college life including making new friend sets and how to successfully experience communal living. Though financial concerns were a reality for all the participants, it did not prevent any of them from attending college and they were confident that the value of their education outweighed the overall cost. Participants also shared their challenges and successes while attending college including the creation of new social circles, academic challenges, living independently, and transitioning to online learning. The participants were universally successful in overcoming the obstacles they faced and were able to feel pride in what they deemed as their successes. However, in order for rural, first-generation student enrollment to increase at private Catholic institutions of higher education, it is important for these students to see the value of what they can gain there. This can be accomplished through these institutions targeting rural students as a unique population of potential students, increasing student understanding of how to financially, socially, and academically prepare for college life before students arrive on campus, and making connections to other Catholic faith organizations.


Anasuri, S., & Anthony, K. (2018). Resilience levels among college students: A comparative study from two southern states in the USA. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 23*(1), 52-73. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322509473 ResilienceLevels_Among_College_Students_A_Comparative_Study_from_Two_Southern_States_in_the_USA


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Balthazar University (2020). Balthazar University profile. Copy in possession of author.


Gaspar University. (2020f). Center for career & professional development Copy in possession of author.


Appendix A

Western Connecticut State University

Institutional Review Board
Office of Sponsored Research & Admin Services
321 Warner Hall, 181 White St.
Danbury, CT 06810  Secretarial contact: 203-837-8740
irb@wcsu.edu  Web: www.wcsu.edu/irb

Application for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects

ENTIRE PROPOSAL (INCLUD. SIGNATURES & ALL APPENDICES) SHOULD BE SUBMITTED AS 1 .DOC FILE
ATTACHMENT TO irb@wcsu.edu

WCSU Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) role is to review all proposed research by/on/at WCSU faculty, staff, or students to ensure the research meets Federal standards for safety & protection of human subjects. In compliance with U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) Title 45 Part 46, WCSU’s IRB has registered approval (Federalwide Assurance/FWA) from Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and requires all researchers to submit protocol for review (see www.wcsu.edu/irb). WCSU IRB discusses any concerns with investigator/s before issuing a final decision. Researchers are encouraged to attend IRB meetings to address concerns directly. During normal academic semesters, deadlines for Full proposals are the 1st of each month; Expedited/Exempt proposals are accepted on rolling basis.

FOR COMMITTEE USE ONLY

____ Not/Approved as
IRB Chair’s Approval: Date:

Before submitting research for IRB review, everyone involved must complete Human Subjects Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification, (accessible at www.wcsu.edu/irb/) or equivalent. List anyone responsible for the method, recruitment, consent, and/or involved in data collection, analysis, or follow-up. Student- or non-WCSU-affiliates: list nonvisiting WCSU faculty/staff as project sponsors.

1. PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/S: David Paul Hill
   a. If PI is a student, FACULTY SUPERVISOR: Tricia J. Stewart, PhD
2. DEPARTMENT: Education and Educational Psychology
3. EMAIL/S: hill130@connect.wcsu.edu, stewartt@wcsu.edu
4. PROJECT TITLE: RURAL, WHITE, AND FIRST-GENERATION: CATHOLIC COLLEGE EXPERIENCE
5. IS THE RESEARCH DEVELOPED WITH A GRANT?  ☒ NO ☐
   YES
   a. If yes, indicate grant source:

6. IS THIS A NEW RESEARCH PROJECT?  ☒ YES ☐ NO
   a. If NO, any modifications to the original proposal?

   Yes

   b. Protocol # of prior approval:

   ☒ No ☐
7. RESEARCH SUMMARY: In lay language, briefly summarize the objectives/relevant details of the research.

This qualitative study seeks to understand the perceptions of first generation college students from rural areas around what helped them attend and continue at Catholic colleges.

8. INTENDED DISSEMINATION: Indicate your intended goal/s for the results of this study (Check all that apply).

- None; data collection for internal program assessment purposes only (i.e., “I am the only one who will use/see this data”)
- Class project/paper/presentation
- Conference/Journal submission (academic or trade)
- Other: please describe Doctoral Dissertation

9. PERFORMANCE SITES: Including WCSU sites, describe ALL the research sites for this protocol. Where, specifically, will the research activities occur? For each non-WCSU site, describe each site’s (a) possession of an IRB & your stage in their approval process, (b) permission for this research to be conducted (append approvals as applicable), and (c) contact info.
1. Gaspar University in Trumbull, C
2. University A
3. University B
I am in the process of contacting the institutions and identifying the process for conducting research on their campuses. It is anticipated that I will go through IRB at each of these institutions.

a. Will you collect data in/during class or other formal programming? □ NO □ YES
   If YES, #10 must detail (a) planned nonparticipant alternatives, (b) where (e.g., classroom, private area) both non/participants will be located/affected during study, & (c) rationale/method to assure nonparticipants’ standing not affected (also note in #12 & #13 below).

10. PARTICIPANTS & RECRUITMENT: Describe number & characteristics of target sample participants and how they’ll be recruited. Indicate any special/vulnerable populations included. Address if: any researchers are associated with subjects (e.g., students, employees, patients) & any specific agencies are providing access to subjects or their data. Who/how will contact subjects? Detail solicitations (e.g., posters, internet), personal interactions, resources (e.g., phone, class, registry, referral); append recruitment materials.

   Between 10 and 15 participants will be interviewed at each site. Participants will self-identify as White and coming from rural areas and be first-generation college students who have completed at least one year at a Catholic institution of higher education.

11. RESEARCH PROCEDURES/DATA: Using LAYMAN’S LANGUAGE, describe what researchers & participants will do (e.g., dates/durations, treatments/meetings/measures) & participants’ total commitments. Attach as appendices copies of all instruments.

   The researcher will interview the participants for a period of 45 to 60 minutes on the school’s campus. These interviews will be conducted in early Spring and the Fall of 2019. The researcher generated semi-structured interview protocol is attached.

   a. Will you be collecting or using (e.g., pre-existing) any protected health information?
“Yes” if, during either recruiting or data collection, you’ll use or have access to such info related to (a) past/present/future health or conditions of, (b) provision of health care to, (c) or payments for the provision of health care to living or deceased individual/s.

☐ YES  ☒ NO

12. DATA HANDLING: Explain who collects/handles data in terms of: (a) How confidentiality (or anonymity) maintained during/after data collection (if applicable, confidentiality/security for emailed data, web interface, computer server, other networked info); (b) How subjects tracked/coded/ID’d (e.g., use recording, storage, etc.); and (c) What inducements/rewards offered. Note: Current CT BOR policies do not guarantee privacy of info stored physically, remotely, or otherwise on WCSU computers (e.g., laptop, Dropbox, drives). To maintain truth of any claims to participants regarding anonymity/confidentiality, researchers should NOT connect any data-storage to any CSU network. It’s the primary researcher’s responsibility to store data actually securely if such assurances are made to participants.

All data will be collected by the researcher. The participants will be given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Only the researcher, his dissertation chair, and a paid transcriptionist will have access to the raw data. All data will be stored securely by the researcher.

13. CONSENT: CSU research policy requires comprehensive, written documentation comprehended and validated by the subject (or an authorized representative) as the principal consent method. Children 8-17 should sign written assent forms (those under 8yrs. may assent orally or passively, depending on maturity), with guardians separately consenting on child’s behalf (i.e., 2 different forms). Describe steps to minimize coercion, when/where consent obtained, how often, by/from whom. Append forms minimally including (a) procedure, (b) location, (c) date/time commitment, (d) alternate activity, (e) risk/incentive, (f) researcher & IRB contact info, (g) Protocol # and approval expiration.

Participants will be offered the opportunity to participate in the study

14. RISKS: Risks include ANY potential discomfort re. emotions, psyche, physical well-being, privacy, dignity, reputation, employability, &/or criminal/legal status. If your protocol involves ANY of these potential risks to participants (actual or perceived) psychological comfort, it DOES involve more than “minimal risk”; indicate as such below & detail how addressed.

a. Is there anything in your study that presents more than “minimal risk” to participants?

☒ NO  ☐ YES

If YES, detail all known and/or potential risks to subjects and describe all steps taken to minimize them.

b. Will any individually identifiable info be published/shared/otherwise disseminated?

☒ NO  ☐ YES

If YES, explain. Participants must provide explicit consent/assent for such usage.

15. BENEFITS: Describe study’s expected benefits to subjects or society. Provide evidence that benefits outweigh any potential risks.

The potential benefits of this study include a better understanding for high schools in rural areas as to what activities may need to be explored to help their students to attend college. The Catholic Universities may benefit by understanding what actions they may take to help increase a student’s resiliency. The study will also benefit future rural students to have an increased opportunity of attending and staying in college which will benefit their futures.
16. INVESTIGATOR ASSURANCES: By inserting your signature/s below, you agree to the following:

- I certify that the info provided in this application, and in all attachments, is complete and correct.
- I understand that I have ultimate responsibility for (a) protecting the rights and welfare of my human subjects, (b) the conduct of this study, and (c) the ethical performance of this project.
- I agree to comply with all WCSU policies and procedures, the terms of its Federal Wide Assurance, and all applicable federal, state, and local laws regarding the protection of human subjects in research including:
  - Obtaining legally effective informed consent or assent from human subjects as required.
  - Reporting unanticipated problems, adverse events, & new info that may affect the proposed risk-benefit assessment to the WCSU IRB Office (203-837-8470; irb@wcsu.edu).
  - Maintaining ethical, safety, and/or regulatory training & study implementation of any student/guest investigators on this project.
- I agree that any changes to the project will be submitted to the Institutional Review Board for review prior to implementation.
- I further certify that the proposed research has not yet been done, isn’t currently underway, and will not begin until WCSU IRB approval has been obtained. I realize that some changes may alter the approval status of this project.

Include actual, handwritten signatures of all involved (anyone named in #1); scan/photo your sig. & then insert/paste image file/s below.

For student projects, student is PI and Faculty Sponsor is an additional investigator.

Primary Investigator: [Signature]
1/28/19

Investigator: [Signature]
1/29/19

[Add more as needed...]
17. APPENDICES

[Insert relevant documentation here. See website for example templates]

Student Informed Consent Form

January 2019

Dear {Name of College} Student,

I am a doctoral candidate at Western Connecticut State University in the Educational Leadership program. I am conducting a study pertaining to college students who are first-generation college students, come from rural areas, are white, and have completed at least one year at the college level. This qualitative study will be asking questions about your high school experience and your family’s role in your applying to college. I will also be asking questions pertaining to your college experiences thus far.

I will be conducting interviews with 8 to 12 students at each of the following campuses over a one-week period in March: Gaspar, Melchoir, and Balthazar Universities. In order to protect participants, they will be identified with only pseudonyms in any documents created from this research and any potentially identifying attributes or information will be blinded.

I thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at hill130@connect.wcsu.edu or 914-512-0359.

Sincerely,

David Hill, BA, MARS
Doctoral Candidate WCSU

I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.
I acknowledge that I have been informed of and understand the nature and purpose of this study and freely consent to participate in the interview.

____________________________________
Name (Please print)

____________________________________          ____________________________
Signature          Date
Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the area where you lived while you attended high school?
   Probes: What was your town like? Did you consider this area to be rural? Were you close with your neighbors?

2. Tell me a little about your home life during high school.
   Probes: What family members did you live with? What type of home did you live in? What kinds of activities did you do as a family?

3. How would you describe your parents’ attitude towards higher education?
   Probes: How did they encourage you? Discourage you? Did they set the expectation for you to attend college? Did they have differing opinions? Where they worried about the cost?

4. Let’s talk about your high school experience….tell me about your high school?
   Probes: What was your relationship with your guidance counselor like? How did they support you with preparing to college? How did they support you attending this college? What were your friend’s attitudes about attending college? Do you think your school prepared you to go to college? Why or why not?

5. Tell me about your process for deciding to go to college?
   Probes: What do you consider to be the most influential factor? Did you have any concerns? How did you transcend these? What do you think most helped you “get to college and stay there”?

6. What made you decide to attend a private, Catholic college?
   Probes: What other schools did you consider and why did you not choose to attend them? What influenced you the most in your choice? Did you know anyone from your town who was going here and did that play a role in your choice? Did you get a scholarship? Financial Aid/what type? Do you participate in Work Study?

7. Please tell me about your college experience so far.
   Probes: What do you consider to be your biggest success so far? How did you manage that? What have been your most difficult challenges? How did you face them?

8. Did you ever consider not returning or dropping out?
   Probe: What kept you going?

9. Tell me how you perceive the role of the college in your experiences thus far?
   Probes: Can you describe a time when they have been particularly helpful? What more could they be doing? What activities do you participate in through the college? What types of peer relationships do you have? What are your relationships like with faculty?

10. What would you like to see the college do to help White, rural, 1st-generation students like yourself?
    Probe: Outreach, scholarships, clubs?

11. What else would you like me to understand about your college-going experience as a White, rural, 1st generation college student?
Follow-up questionnaire

1. Please describe in as much detail as possible how you perceive the way your high school prepared you socially and emotionally for the college experience.

2. Please describe in as much detail as possible how you perceive the way in which your college has helped you socially and emotionally to be successful there.
Appendix B

GASPAR UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Submit (by email) completed form to:
A Smith
Executive Director
Office of Sponsored Programs
Gaspar University

PROPOSAL TITLE: RURAL, WHITE, AND FIRST-GENERATION: CATHOLIC COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

INVESTIGATOR(S): David Hill
DEPARTMENT: Education
ADDRESS: 36 Tamanny Trail, Danbury Ct 06811
EMAIL ADDRESS: hill130@wcsu.edu
TELEPHONE NUMBER: 914-512-0359

FACULTY ADVISOR (if student): Dr. T Stewart, stewartt@wcsu.edu

TYPE OF REVIEW REQUESTED: FULL _____ EXPEDITED __x___

IF EXPEDITED REVIEW, indicate the section(s) in 6.2 of the IRB Guide under which this proposal qualifies for expedited review: 6.2.7: I will be interviewing students 18 and older about their perceptions of high school and family practices that helped them to attain college and what they perceive as how the college has helped them to remain and be successful.

FULL OR EXPEDITED REVIEW, check the appropriate response:
___YES__x__NO The protocol involves human subjects who will receive drugs.
___YES__x__NO The protocol involves human subjects who will receive or be exposed to radioactive materials.
___YES__x__NO The protocol involves human subjects and will take place in an outside facility.

The protocol involves human subjects who are: ____ minors (under age 18), ____ fetuses, ____ pregnant women, ____ prisoners, ____ mentally retarded, ____ mentally disabled.

The protocol is being submitted for: ____ Federal funding ____ Other external funding.
The investigator must provide summary statements addressing the following points of information. Where indicated, include the protocol page number(s) that contains detailed information. Use supplemental pages if necessary.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:
This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of a doctoral program. The study intends to understand the social capital of the target population that aided them in attaining college and also the aspects of resiliency that helped those same students remain in college.

CHARACTERISTIC OF SUBJECT POPULATION: Include selection criteria and any age, sex, physical, mental, and health restrictions.

The population being studied are self-identified as first-generation, white, and from rural areas (communities under 50,000).

METHODS AND PROCEDURES APPLIED TO HUMAN SUBJECTS:
The researcher will interview the participants for a period of 45 to 60 minutes on the school’s campus. These interviews will be conducted in early Spring and the Fall of 2020. The researcher generated semi-structured interview protocol is attached. I plan on setting up a table in the Student Union with a sign asking for volunteers.

RISKS TO THE SUBJECT: ____ YES __x__ NO
If subjects will be at risk, assess the probability, severity, potential duration and reversibility of each risk. Indicate protective measures to be utilized.

BENEFITS: __x__ YES ____ NO
Describe any potential benefits to be gained by the subject as well as benefits that may accrue to society in general.
Subjects may become more self-aware of what factors are helping them in being successful in college. The information gathered may help high schools better provide programs that help this student population have higher college-going rates and also help colleges provide programs for this population that will help them remain at school and complete their degree.

INFORMATION PURPOSELY WITHHELD: ____ YES __x__ NO
State any information purposely withheld from the subject and justify this non-disclosure.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Describe how confidentiality of data will be maintained.
All data will be collected by the researcher. The participants will be given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Only the researcher, his dissertation chair, and a paid transcriptionist will have access to the raw data. All data will be stored securely by the researcher.

ANY ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:
SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Doctoral candidate

POSITION

Signature certifies that the investigator to the best of his/her knowledge is in full compliance with the federal and Gaspar University regulations governing human subjects research.

ATTACHMENTS
(for example)

Informed Consent Form(s) (required, unless waiver is requested)
Detailed Research Protocol (see Appendix D)
Questionnaires or Test Instruments
Requests for approval from outside facilities
Federal forms, if applicable
March 2020
Dear {Name of College} Student,

I am a doctoral candidate at Western Connecticut State University in the Educational Leadership program. I am conducting a study pertaining to college students who are first-generation college students, come from rural areas, are white, and have completed at least one year at the college level. This qualitative study will be asking questions about your high school experience and your family’s role in your applying to college. I will also be asking questions pertaining to your college experiences thus far.

I will be conducting interviews with 8 to 12 students at each of the following campuses over a one-week period in March: Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar Universities. In order to protect participants, they will be identified with only pseudonyms in any documents created from this research and any potentially identifying attributes or information will be blinded.

I thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at hill130@connect.wcsu.edu or 914-512-0359.

Sincerely,

David Hill, BA, MARS
Doctoral Candidate WCSU

I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.
I acknowledge that I have been informed of and understand the nature and purpose of this study and freely consent to participate in the interview.

____________________________________
Name (Please print)

____________________________________          ____________
Signature                                         Date
Interview Questions

12. Tell me about the area where you lived while you attended high school?
   Probes: What was your town like? Did you consider this area to be rural? Were you close with your neighbors?

13. Tell me a little about your home life during high school.
   Probes: What family members did you live with? What type of home did you live in? What kinds of activities did you do as a family?

14. How would you describe your parents’ attitude towards higher education?
   Probes: How did they encourage you? Discourage you? Did they set the expectation for you to attend college? Did they have differing opinions? Where they worried about the cost?

15. Let’s talk about your high school experience….tell me about your high school?
   Probes: What was your relationship with your guidance counselor like? How did they support you with preparing to college? How did they support you attending this college? What were your friend’s attitudes about attending college? Do you think your school prepared you to go to college? Why or why not?

16. Tell me about your process for deciding to go to college?
   Probes: What do you consider to be the most influential factor? Did you have any concerns? How did you transcend these? What do you think most helped you “get to college and stay there”?

17. What made you decide to attend a private, Catholic college?
   Probes: What other schools did you consider and why did you not choose to attend them? What influenced you the most in your choice? Did you know anyone from your town who was going here and did that play a role in your choice? Did you get a scholarship? Financial Aid/what type? Do you participate in Work Study?

18. Please tell me about your college experience so far.
   Probes: What do you consider to be your biggest success so far? How did you manage that? What have been your most difficult challenges? How did you face them?

19. Did you ever consider not returning or dropping out?
   Probe: What kept you going?

20. Tell me how you perceive the role of the college in your experiences thus far?
   Probes: Can you describe a time when they have been particularly helpful? What more could they be doing? What activities do you participate in through the college? What types of peer relationships do you have? What are your relationships like with faculty?

21. What would you like to see the college do to help White, rural, 1st-generation students like yourself?
   Probe: Outreach, scholarships, clubs?

22. What else would you like me to understand about your college-going experience as a White, rural, 1st generation college student?
Follow-up Questionnaire

1. Please describe in as much detail as possible how you perceive the way your high school prepared you socially and emotionally for the college experience.

2. Please describe in as much detail as possible how you perceive the way in which your college has helped you socially and emotionally to be successful there.

_________________________________________________________________________

ACTION TAKEN: __________________________________________________________

DATE: ______________________________

SIGNATURE: ______________________________

IRB CHAIRPERSON
Dear applicant,
Thank you for your submission to the IRB requesting exemption from review. Thank you also for submitting a more complete application (here attached) as requested by the IRB review. Based on the new documentation provided and in accord with the criteria for review exemption, the IRB is pleased to approve your application and we wish you success in your research project.

All the best,
B Mindful, PhD
Chair, IRB
B Mindful, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Languages and Literatures
W 340
Gaspar University
March 2020
Dear {Name of College} Student,

I am a doctoral candidate at Western Connecticut State University in the Educational Leadership program. I am conducting a study pertaining to college students who are first-generation college students, come from rural areas, are white, and have completed at least one year at the college level. This qualitative study will be asking questions about your high school experience and your family’s role in your applying to college. I will also be asking questions pertaining to your college experiences thus far.

I will be conducting interviews with 8 to 12 students at each of the following campuses over a one-week period in March: Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar Universities. In order to protect participants, they will be identified with only pseudonyms in any documents created from this research and any potentially identifying attributes or information will be blinded.

I thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at hill130@connect.wcsu.edu or 914-512-0359.

Sincerely,

David Hill, BA, MARS
Doctoral Candidate WCSU

I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.
I acknowledge that I have been informed of and understand the nature and purpose of this study and freely consent to participate in the interview.

____________________________________
Name (Please print)

____________________________________          __________________________
Signature                           Date
Appendix D

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the area where you lived while you attended high school?
   Probes: What was your town like? Did you consider this area to be rural? Were you close with your neighbors?

2. Tell me a little about your home life during high school.
   Probes: What family members did you live with? What type of home did you live in? What kinds of activities did you do as a family?

3. How would you describe your parents’ attitude towards higher education?
   Probes: How did they encourage you? Discourage you? Did they set the expectations for you to attend college? Did they have differing opinions? Where they worried about the cost?

4. Let’s talk about your high school experience….tell me about your high school?
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   Probes: What do you consider to be the most influential factor? Did you have any concerns? How did you transcend these? What do you think most helped you “get to college and stay there”?

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   Probes: What other schools did you consider and why did you not choose to attend them? What influenced you the most in your choice? Did you know anyone from your town who was going here and did that play a role in your choice? Did you get a scholarship? Financial Aid/what type? Do you participate in Work Study?

7. Please tell me about your college experience so far.
   Probes: What do you consider to be your biggest success so far? How did you manage that? What have been your most difficult challenges? How did you face them?

8. Did you ever consider not returning or dropping out?
   Probe: What kept you going?

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   Probes: Can you describe a time when they have been particularly helpful? What more could they be doing? What activities do you participate in through the college? What types of peer relationships do you have? What are your relationships like with faculty?

10. What would you like to see the college do to help White, rural, 1st-generation students like yourself?
    Probe: Outreach, scholarships, clubs?

11. What else would you like me to understand about your college-going experience as a White, rural, 1st generation college student?
Appendix E
Additional Questionnaire

1. Please describe in as much detail as possible how you perceive the way your high school prepared you socially and emotionally for the college experience.

2. Please describe in as much detail as possible how you perceive the way in which your college has helped you socially and emotionally to be successful there.
EdD in Instructional Leadership
Department of Education and Educational Psychology
Dissertation Registration Form

David P. Hill

Date: March 4, 2021

Dissertation Title: *A Case Study of the Catholic College Experience for Rural, First-Generation Students*

Dissertation Committee Members: See attached Dissertation Approval Page

For Office Use Only.

Tricia J. Stewart, Ph.D. Tricia J. Stewart 2/27/2021
Dissertation Committee Chair Signature Date

Marcia A. B. Delcourt, Ph.D. Marcia A. B. Delcourt March 4, 2021
Interim Program Coordinator Signature Date

Joan S. Palladino, Ed.D. March 14, 2021
Interim Dean, School of Professional Studies Signature Date

Christopher Shankle, Ed.D. Christopher Shankle March 11, 2021
Associate Director, Division of Graduate Studies Signature Date