

Small Fish Out of Water: Rural First-Generation Student Experience at a Large University

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This qualitative study examined the experiences of first-generation students from rural communities transitioning to a large Midwestern university. Eight first-year students were interviewed, and their responses represented three distinct stages of college experience: planning for, coming to, and being in college. Social, academic, and environmental challenges reflected a protracted adjustment period, contextual dissonance, and unrealistic expectations for college. These students persevered as a result of advanced work ethic, hometown support, and targeted retention efforts by the university.

Changing rural economies are making it difficult for youths in rural areas to maintain job security without a college education (Tieken, 2016). After the 2008 economic recession, rural unemployment reached nearly 10%, and the poverty rate increased to 16.6% for nonmetropolitan areas, compared to 13.9% in metropolitan regions (Economic Research Service, 2011). This reduction in career opportunities has encouraged rural youths to think more seriously about attending college to increase their earning potential (Meece, et al., 2013; Tieken, 2016).

Compared to the average American, rural students are less likely to have college-educated parents (Provasnik et al., 2007). These first-generation students are coming to college unprepared, due to their parent's lack of institutional knowledge, creating challenges for them academically and socially as they transition into an unfamiliar environment (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011; Lightweis, 2014). These rural students are also challenged by their lack of experience with large campuses and the diversity often found in college (Schultz, 2004).

Few studies are dedicated to the rural student experience, and even fewer regard the intersection of rural and first-generation identities. Understanding their experiences as they transition to college will be key to providing this population with resources for their postsecondary education. This study utilized Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995) as a framework to describe the first-year experiences of rural first-generation students at a large Midwestern university and identify important implications for practice.

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Literature Review

Rural Students

The Federal Census Bureau defines a rural area as a community with fewer than 2,500 people total and fewer than 500 people per square mile (Groves, 2011). Studies that explored rural student experience found that rural students desired communal connections in college similar to those found in their hometown (Handke, 2012; Schultz & Neighbors, 2007). The level of educational attainment in adults was lowest in rural areas (Rubisch, 1995), and rural students were less likely to have college-educated parents and perceived that they had very few role models for college life (Battle & Grant, 1995; Provasnik et al., 2007). Many rural youths aspiring to pursue postsecondary education experienced challenges related to both their rural background and their first-generation status, thus validating the importance of studying the intersection of rural and first-generation identities in undergraduate students.

First-Generation Students

The National Center for Education Statistics defines first-generation students as college students whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Research has shown that these students were more likely than other students to choose less academically selective institutions, live off-campus, complete fewer credit hours, work more hours, have lower grades, and participate in fewer college-sponsored extracurricular activities (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Forbus et al., 2001; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Thering, 2011). First-generation students often experienced lower levels of engagement on campus, leading to reduced feelings of belonging, higher levels of depression and stress, and resistance to using campus services (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Lowery-Hart & Pecheco, 2011; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman Jr., 2014). These students were particularly intimidated by the idea of seeking out faculty members for support. As a result, their ability to respond to faculty expectations was lower (Collier & Morgan, 2007). These issues affecting a student's level of engagement contribute to the unique experiences of rural first-generation students.

Rural First-Generation Students

Findings indicate that, due to shifting rural economies, rural first-generation students were encouraged by high school guidance counselors and college admissions officials to focus more on practical degrees that would increase their earning potential (Tieken, 2016). A lack of parental knowledge lengthened the time it took for first-generation rural students to make a decision about college (Schultz, 2004). First-generation status often meant that students had a lack of information,

failed to recognize the importance of relationship-building with professors, and were surprised at the rigor of their courses (Schultz, 2004). Lack of role models reduced the ability of rural first-generation students to decode the jargon used in universities (Ardoin, 2013, p. 168). Rural status meant that students had a lack of experience with large towns, large campuses, and the diversity that occurs on large college campuses. Students were unaware of the need to build relationships to cope with their new surroundings, and support systems were slow to develop (Schultz, 2004).

The work of Ardoin (2013), Schulz (2004), and Teiken (2016) represents a starting point in examining rural first-generation students; however, more research is needed in this area. For instance, Schulz's (2004) study was conducted before the 2008 recession added pressure to rural youths' decision-making concerning college. It was also published prior to the widespread use of social media, which may affect current rural first-generation students' connectivity and engagement.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the inquiry: What are the barriers or challenges that rural first-generation students must overcome to succeed at a large university? What are some positive aspects they experience?

Methodology

The goal of this research was to describe the common "lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9) of students leaving a small rural community to come to a large university without the benefit of a parent's prior perspective; therefore, a phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this study. A phenomenological study "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon," (Creswell, 2013, p. 76) and is often used to study emotional, affective, and intense experiences, which may have occurred during a student's first year at college (Merriam, 2009). These data were analyzed and presented as a composite description of the essence of the experience as interpreted by myself, the researcher.

Participants

I employed purposeful sampling, choosing participants who had experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013). All participants identified as first-generation college students from a rural area, as defined by this study, and were in their second semester of study at the same university. Saturation was reached with eight participants (7 female, 1 male), each from a different hometown and representing three of the university's colleges: College of Arts and Sciences (1), College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (4), and College of Business Administration (3). To protect participant identities, pseudonyms were utilized for

reporting purposes.

Data Collection

Phenomenological studies commonly utilize interviews as a primary data collection procedure (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Data were collected from individual interviews with each of the eight participants conducted during the second semester of the participants' first year of college and audio recorded for later transcription and analysis. The interviews contained a demographic questionnaire and nine open-ended, semi-structured questions. The questionnaire was developed to ensure that the participants met the sampling and demographic requirements to satisfy the research questions. The open-ended, semi-structured interview questions were written to address the research questions regarding overall student experience, barriers, and positive experiences encountered as first-generation rural students.

Data Analysis

I employed a systematic approach to understanding the essence of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I reviewed the interview transcripts in depth and compiled a comprehensive list of every participant's responses under each interview question. I then identified significant statements and listed them with equal importance placed on each. This provided a balanced and equal value to each participant perspective (Merriam, 2009). Considering their individual meanings and thematic qualities, I distilled the responses down to 118 meaning units or theme statements. I then reorganized the theme statements into a semi-chronological outline under three main categories: planning for college, coming to college, and being in college. The categories were broken down into a total of 22 sub-categories, in which I synthesized the theme statements into paragraphs to produce the essence of the experience.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, I utilized member-checking, commonly used to demonstrate the quality of qualitative research (Guba, 1981; Lincoln, 1995; Shenton, 2004). Three participants responded to the member-checking request and shared the following statements:

- "Wow! This is so good. You described my first year of college way better than I ever could have."
- "Great job on the paper! I feel that my opinions were accurately represented and do not feel that anything needs to be changed."
- "I personally think you did a good job compiling the information. I feel it is an accurate representation of my experience."

Limitations

The goal of this study was to provide sufficient descriptive data to allow for the transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The narrow focus and

small number of participants limit the potential to generalize the findings of this study. Interviews were the only data collection method, and journals, writing assignments, or observational data could have been collected to provide a more comprehensive essence of the phenomenon.

Findings

The essence of the experience of rural first-generation students coming to a large Midwestern university diverged into three stages: planning for college, coming to college, and being in college. These stages reflected Schlossberg's Transition Theory of moving in, moving through, and moving out (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), and provided context for participants' experiences.

Planning for College ("Moving In")

The participants described experiences related to their first step of the transition to college: the planning stage.

Parental support and knowledge. Parents of first-generation students lacked knowledge of academia, but their support was crucial. Students indicated that they came to college because their family had always expected them to attend, in part, because their parents wanted more opportunities for their children than they had themselves. According to Laurie, "With my parents and how they raised me, it was never *if* I was going to college, it was always *when* I was going to college."

Searching for a school. Students had fewer opportunities to visit a variety of schools. Often, this was related to their parents' limited knowledge of the importance of college visits during the selection process. Sometimes, the college was chosen because someone had actually reached out to the prospective students in their high schools. These interactions gave students built-in contacts on campus, aiding their decision to come to college. Lily indicated, "I had come to a camp the summer after my junior year of high school that [my college contact] coordinated, and then I kept in contact with him all throughout my senior year, so that was really nice." Some contacts even helped students fill out their applications and financial aid documentation.

Choosing a school. Some students chose a larger school because they wanted a change from their small community. Others were hesitant about the population but decided there would be opportunities for academic resources at a school this size. A few made their choice based on whether it had the major they were interested in. Jenny was socially motivated: "I was actually dating someone at the time when him and all of my friends actually started coming here, so that was also kind of another influence to bring me here."

Coming to College ("Moving Through")

Once a plan was in place, students had to actually make the physical transition

from rural high school to urban university. For many, this second transition stage was stressful and fraught with challenges, yet it offered positive experiences participants did not necessarily foresee.

Challenges. Most participants were unprepared for the lifestyle change. Many struggled with time management after leaving the structure of high school. Several were heavily involved in rural high school activities and at first, were overinvolved in college. Students had to find a balance between academics, socializing, work, and personal time. According to Andrew, "It's definitely a step further in life, so there's nobody to tell you, 'wake up at this time' or 'set your schedule'...They never tell you how to [set your schedule], so just being self-dependent would probably be the most difficult thing."

The anonymity at a large university was quite different from the rural high school experience. It was difficult adjusting to the variety of new perspectives and leaving behind long-term relationships to replace them with short-term ones. Many felt insignificant in large classes and noted that some courses contained more people than their entire hometown. They had to adjust from knowing everyone and having everyone know them, to knowing no one and being anonymous.

Some students struggled adjusting to academic expectations and felt that their high school did not prepare them for the rigorous courses and increased workloads. For many, learning to study was one of the toughest parts of the transition. Ramona claimed, "I went from the top of my class in high school to 'I don't know anything' here."

Some wanted a change from their hometown and welcomed city life, but others found the larger city oppressive. Two students claimed that they were used to open country and hated the "concrete all around" them in the city. Kelsey avoided leaving campus because she was overwhelmed by the size of the city and had difficulty adjusting to its transportation system.

Navigating college. Students found several ways to help them adjust to this new environment. While feeling distanced from their families, friends, and communities, students felt it was natural to develop new support systems. These supports often started small with a roommate or a friend and blossomed as their friends connected, resulting in a network of supports. This would often start in the residence halls. As Jodi explained it, "It started off with people on my floor, and then they were also friends with other people from another floor, and we just kind of formed a little group and hung out together, and it just kind of happened."

Learning communities, organizations, and outreach programs provided a point of entry and connection for students involved in them. Andrew noted, "I feel like [the learning community] helped me make friends and get more comfortable. I'm more comfortable when I have friends around and people that are into the same stuff that I'm into." These opportunities facilitated relationships between individuals sharing a common interest, and since these students were used to building close relationships with people from their hometown, they felt that they were better equipped to do so in their relationships in college. Andrew indicated, "One advantage, I think, in a rural area: You have all of these people that you've known for so long, and so you're used to having those types of bonds...I feel like

any relationship I start here, I want to continue it, and as a result, I form bonds with advisors, professors, and my friends.”

Students also noted that social media aided their adjustment, allowing them to communicate and network with new acquaintances and classmates in a variety of ways. Andrew noted that “For rural students in class back in 2001 or 2002, say you meet a friend. You couldn’t really communicate with them other than in class because you don’t know them anywhere else. Now, you can use Facebook or Twitter to say, ‘Hey what’s your Twitter? I can send you a message,’ or ‘We’ll hang out tomorrow or something,’ so it’s definitely helped for sure.”

Students adjusted to different social rules for city life than rural life, such as when to talk to a stranger and even whom to consider a stranger at all. According to Kelsey,

It’s strange how that definition of who’s a stranger and who you should trust really shifts. Back home, I would meet someone walking on the street, and I would talk to them once and be like, “Ok, that was a stranger. They’re a passerby.” But I come to college and sit down and talk to that person in lecture once, and then I see them on the sidewalk, and I’m like, “Oh my gosh, you’re my friend; I know you.”

Participants also learned to utilize university faculty. Every participant indicated that professors were a critical resource; however, it took some students time to understand just how critical. Ramona was not sure how to relate to professors but decided to reach out, come to office hours, and ask questions. She explained, “The first time [I visited a professor] I was really nervous, I was like ‘what am I going to say? Is this going to be super awkward?’ but the professors all loved it. They were like, ‘Oh my gosh, thanks so much for coming to my office; this is so nice’...I wasn’t expecting that, so I really enjoyed it, actually.” Once she reached out, the professors proved to be a valuable resource.

Positive experiences. Students indicated several benefits to transitioning to a large university, including a shift in lifestyle that allowed them to reinvent themselves and gain new perspectives. Jodi mentioned, “I wanted a fresh start because you’re not always the person that people label you as in high school—who you kind of grow up to be in a small town. Here you can come and start over to be actually who you really are, and that’s just kind of nice.” Students appreciated that the amount of people on campus provided more opportunities to become familiar with a diverse population. Angie noted, “[I enjoyed] meeting all the new people... It kind of helped me get out of my little bubble.”

Students also appreciated the variety of courses offered that they were looking forward to taking. According to Jodi, “I’ve liked being able to have classes that I want to take, and I come from a small school, so you didn’t really have a lot of choice in classes.” Many of her classmates were also passionate about those classes, which was different from her high school.

Being in College (“Moving Out”)

After the initial transition stages, students became more settled as they adjusted to their surroundings and gained perspective on their new experiences. The increased access to resources, internships, extra-curricular activities, and faculty were commonly mentioned as a benefit. According to Lily, “I didn’t think I would like it as much, but I think that the opportunities that we have here are amazing. The access that you have to some really, really amazing faculty...is amazing, and there’s just so many, I just feel like there are so many more opportunities here than there would have been back home.” Students began to appreciate the passion of their professors and recognized how much they could learn from them.

Most participants felt they had specific advantages over other college students, such as character building, resulting from them forging their own path. Angie valued her experience because “I worked so hard to get here, I want to make sure I do good while I’m still here.” Growing up in a rural area helped them develop a strong work ethic they could apply to their studies, since they were used to putting in hours of hard work at home. They also had the support of their entire community to succeed. As Jenny said, “Since everyone knows each other in such a rural area, everyone wants to see everyone succeed, so they’re going to do as much as they can to help us with that, and they did.”

Discussion

Elements of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory provided a framework to conceptualize these results (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The three stages of Schlossberg’s theory (moving in, moving through, and moving out) mirrored the stages that emerged in this study.

Moving In

The students planning for college began steeling themselves to “move in” to the college lifestyle and become familiar with the norms and expectations of a new system. Some students chose their university because it was large and quite the opposite of their hometown. These students may have experienced fewer social adjustment issues and more issues with academics during their transition to college. This could be a result of their perceived social preparation but lack of academic preparation. Those who chose the institution because it contained their major of interest seemed to experience fewer academic issues and more social issues due to their perceived academic preparation but social trepidation.

Similar to the findings of Forbus et al. (2011), Lightweis (2014), and Schultz (2004), parents of students in this study had a lack of information. It was a forgone conclusion that these students would go to college, but many were ambivalent about its outcome. These students assumed they would go to college but, without logistical knowledge, had difficulties planning and preparing for college. These

families particularly benefitted from university outreach during the application process.

Moving Through

Students “moved through” the transition by physically coming to college and they were faced with lifestyle changes that forced them to balance their social, academic, and personal lives. They had to create structure for themselves when they were used to structure being built into their high school educational system. This was accomplished, in part, by creating support systems to replace those they missed from back home. That expansive support system was so ingrained in each rural student’s identity that it was difficult to replace in college.

Social media also facilitated new support systems and allowed students to network and adjust to their new environment. Texting and other social media helped students stay in contact with their rural support systems. It also connected students to new friends they were meeting in class, where they could follow up in-person interactions.

Moving through also aligned with the use of academic supports. Similar to Collier and Morgan’s (2007) findings, these students did not recognize the importance of relationship building with professors. They liked having an accessible point of reference but took longer to utilize faculty members as a resource because they were intimidated and initially had difficulty relating to their professors.

Moving Out

When acclimated to their new environment, the students in this study began “moving out” of that transitional stage and considered what came next. By their second semester, these students had navigated through challenges by incorporating social and academic supports; however, there were still issues to deal with: individual attention was harder to come by, academic rigor was high, and life in the city could seem overwhelming.

Continuing on, these students embraced their advantages and used resources offered to them by the university to move into their next stage as successful college students. Students noted that being from hard-working rural families perpetuated an advanced work ethic that they applied to college. Having to work harder for their education accentuated character-building qualities among rural first-generation students, and led them to attribute more value to their experience.

Implications for Practice

Considering the findings from this study, several implications for practice become apparent. Moving in, rural first-generation students and their families have little knowledge of the application process and higher education in general

(Schultz, 2004); therefore, colleges need to increase outreach to rural areas. Institutions need to emphasize college visits or provide non-cost-prohibitive alternatives like online virtual tours to help these students make informed decisions about their education. Colleges should also facilitate discussions between current and prospective students to help provide a real-world perspective before college.

As students transition, it is important to consider rural students' desire to recreate communal connections similar to those found in rural areas (Handke, 2012; Schultz & Neighbors, 2007). The participants in learning communities noted that the experience helped their transition. A learning community specific to rural first-generation students would facilitate early connections on campus. Initiating peer-mentoring programs specific to rural first-generation students would also promote connectivity. Peer-mentoring programs have already proven to be effective with several student populations (Jacobi, 1991) and could easily be converted to fit the rural first-generation demographic.

Academic advisors can also be important advocates for these students. Barry, Hudley, Kelly, and Cho (2009) indicated that first-generation students needed more opportunities to share stressful college-related experiences with others. Advisors should learn and recognize the added pressures their first-generation rural students experience. This could impact course planning and generate opportunities for additional conversations. For instance, advisors could facilitate discussions to normalize interactions with faculty so students would feel more comfortable speaking with their instructors. Advisors can also provide information to rural first-generation students about where to form new communities and support systems on campus. Strength-based language from an advisor helps students frame their experiences in a positive light by focusing on their advantages: work ethic, value attributed to their experience, and the opportunity to make their communities proud.

Conclusion

It is important to gain a better understanding of first-generation rural student experiences so that institutions can better serve them. These students have a unique perspective regarding their transition to college and need more robust support systems. They experience incongruence between rural social norms and college life. Knowing this, colleges need to reach out to these students to provide information about how to operate in this new system, peers they can engage with, faculty they can approach, and opportunities to become involved in activities that allow them to develop their sense of belonging and engagement in their new college environment.

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