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Remote Rural Students' Perceptions of their Collegiate Transition Experience

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REMOTE RURAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR COLLEGIATE
TRANSITION EXPERIENCE

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This dissertation, submitted by Linda Marie Peterson Rains in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Chairperson

This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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Title   Remote Rural Students' Perceptions of Their Collegiate Transition
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Signature   *Linda M Rains*

Date   *April 29, 2009*

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ABSTRACT

This research project focused on the perceptions of students from remote rural communities as they told of their transition experiences to a mid-size, research-intensive university. During the spring of 2008, thirteen students from North Dakota remote rural counties agreed to be interviewed for this study. Ten females and three males from seven different counties in the state told of their pre-college experiences in a small town and what it was like for them to go to college. Tinto's theory of student departure helped to frame the questions and Schlossberg's transition theory informed the analysis of the data.

From this qualitative approach, an overarching theme, or meta-theme, of "Home" emerged which was supported by two constructs, environment and relationships. Each of these constructs had four themes identified that explained and described the constructs: safety, familiarity, identity and involvement. The before college "Home" for these participants was safe, caring, supportive, and stable. The after college "Home" was loud, over-whelming, and uncaring. Participants told of methods they used to integrate into the campus community that proved effective. Their pre-college experiences as well as their commitment to the institution and career contributed to their decision to persist.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I spent my childhood in a small town in Montana where I had the freedom to walk downtown. The shop owners knew my parents, and I knew most of the students in my grade at school. During summer vacation, I was able to be a part of the big city culture that was my mother's family and the farm life that was my father's family. For two weeks each year, we would visit Denver, Colorado, a large urban center, where I was never allowed out by myself, followed by two weeks in Riverdale, Nebraska, population 134, where I could go most any place alone. The city offered a variety of entertainment choices ranging from zoos and amusement parks to museums and shopping. When we went to these places, we encountered many people, but I do not recall stopping to visit with anyone. The country activities ranged from farm chores to attending the county fair and street dances, where it seemed my relatives knew everyone. It was a big occasion when grocery-shopping day came, and we would go into the nearest city to buy groceries. The pace of the city was fast and rushed while the pace of life in the country was much slower. My city cousins seemed comfortable with the anonymity of city life while my country cousins, on the other hand, seemed to know everyone in their community.

When one speaks of "rural," many thoughts come to mind. The word rural can create stereotypical images of a backwoods hillbilly or a farm kid. It also can invoke images of peaceful valleys, very small towns, and sunshine on hills. For some, rural

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creates visions of abject poverty, one-room schoolhouses, and grain bins. While some images are true, others are decidedly not true. Modern media have perpetuated stereotypes of rural residents. From the television shows "Real McCoys" and "The Waltons" to the movie "Deliverance," for some, the rural stereotype is that of the uncultured and uneducated. Others refer to rural America in terms of deficiency. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007a) write in their commentary that rural life is seen as "lacking education, lacking economic opportunities, lacking cultural opportunities" (p. 14).

What I have come to realize, and what the literature indicates, is that students from rural communities share characteristics that distinguish them from their urban peers. Do these shared characteristics correspond with success in college?

The state of North Dakota is the third least populated state, has low population density (9.3 people per square mile) and its largest urban center has a population of 90,000 residents (United State Census Bureau, 2000b). Twenty-nine of fifty-two counties in the state carry the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) most rural designation of nonmetro 9 (Parker, 2004) and are called "remote rural" by some. A county designated nonmetro 9 is "completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area" (Parker, 2004, table following ¶ 6).

North Dakota is second in the nation for proportion of students who graduate high school (85%) and first in the nation for proportion of students who go directly to college after leaving high school (69%) (Rocha & Sharkey, 2005). Although the college enrollment rate in North Dakota leads the nation, there is a much lower rate of college students persisting to a second year at both two-year and four-year institutions, or of

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earning a bachelor's degree within six years of enrollment (Isaak, 2007; Rocha & Sharkey, 2005; Sanstead, n.d.). Hoffert's (2004) study at the University of North Dakota illustrated this fact when it was found that "students who attended high schools other than North Dakota and Minnesota tended to have higher grade point averages" and that "the highest relationship with retention after the second semester was high school grade point average" (p. 64). UND has a better chance of retaining students if they are not from North Dakota or Minnesota. If the high school graduation rates and immediate college enrollment rates are indicators of a high value placed on education by some North Dakotans, then why is it that students from North Dakota are not graduating from college after six years?

Approximately 50% of the students enrolled at the University of North Dakota campus are residents of the state (UND Office of University Relations, 2006) and 10% of these North Dakota students are from counties designated as nonmetro 9. While Hoffert's (2004) study used GPA's as a quantitative measure to in part explain why students from North Dakota are not retained, what has not been explored are the personal experiences students from rural areas, specifically remote rural areas, have that might contribute to their persisting at or departing from college.

<center>Purpose of Study</center>

The original purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what students from remote rural counties experienced at a mid-sized, research-intensive university that contributed to their decision to persist in or leave before completing a program of study. These students had the shared experience of being residents of a nonmetro 9 county and matriculating into a mid-sized university. At the beginning of this study, it depended on

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the participation of both students who stayed and those who chose to leave the institution. Specifically, the original study sought to answer this question: what transitional experiences do students from remote rural communities have at a mid-sized, research-intensive college that contributed to their decisions to stay or leave? To understand this, two broad general research questions framed the original study:

1. What contexts or situations typically influenced or affected rural student's experiences as they prepared to attend this institution?

2. What contexts or situations typically influenced or affected rural student's experiences while they attended this institution? (Creswell, 2007)

Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure posits that a student's pre-college attributes influence their commitment and integration into the campus community. In order to answer the research question, the study was structured around Tinto's model of student departure and sought to answer these general questions:

1. What experiences did the student have prior to high school graduation?

2. What experiences did the student have while preparing to attend the institution following high school graduation but prior to coming to campus?

3. What experiences did the student have after arriving at the institution?

4. Which experiences seemed to contribute to the student's decision about persisting or leaving the institution?

As this study unfolded, it became apparent that the original research question needed modification. Since the students interviewed for this study included only persisters, the transitional experience of the participants emerged as the dominant focus of this study. The research question became: what transitional experiences do students

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from remote rural communities have as they transition from the small community to a mid-sized research-intensive college? The fourth general question is comparative in nature and since only persisters responded to the invitation to participate, this question could not be answered by this study.

Significance of the Study

Institutions of higher education are concerned with the issues of recruiting and retaining students. The university selected for this study, located in a rural state, is faced with declining school enrollments as the state's population is in decline. The students from the state of North Dakota who enroll at this institution are at greater risk of not being retained than students who come from states farther away. Since 50% of the institution's student population is from North Dakota and the majority of the state is rural, it is advantageous to understand rural students' experiences as they transition to the campus.

Theoretical Framework

Student departure has been written about extensively. Bean (2005) reported nine themes within the subject of student departure, which included "intentions, institutional fit and commitment, psychological processes and key attitudes, academics, social factors, bureaucratic factors, the external environment, the student's background, and money and finance" (p. 218). He suggested that, as a variable, a critical time for students deciding to leave an institution is between the decision to leave (intent) and the actual departure (behavior). When studying traditional-aged, full-time students, the longer the time elapsed between decision to leave and departure, the greater the chance the student will remain enrolled. Affecting the intent to depart are attitudes about institutional

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commitment and being a student. Institutional fit, or a sense of belonging, is important for students to feel as if they belong at the institution. For a student to feel this way means the student "shares values with other students" and the student "*feels* [emphasis original] that he or she belongs at the college or university" (p. 219). Do students from rural communities in North Dakota have a sense of belonging at the institution?

Retention studies done in the past resulted in identifying factors of successful students. Astin (1984) theorized that student involvement leads to persistence. Student involvement refers to "the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 528). Involvement can be in academic pursuits whether it is in the classroom, interacting with faculty, or in the social pursuits of co-curricular activities such as athletics or student government. The more involved a student is, the more likely it is that the student will be successful and persist to graduation. Are North Dakota students getting involved on campus?

While Astin (1984) found that involved students persisted to graduation, Tinto (1993) focused his work on student departure from college. Influenced by Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide, Tinto developed a theoretical model to explain student departure. His theory posits that students arrive with certain characteristics regarding academics and social life and the greater their degree of integration into these, the academic and social communities, the greater the chance of persistence will be. Tinto (1993) found that students went through a passage stage, or transition, in the time between high school and college when the student separates from the familiar and integrates into the postsecondary community. It is during this time that students acquire the skills necessary to integrate fully into the academic and social communities of the

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college or university. If a student has not integrated either academically or socially, departure from that institution is likely. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that "various forms of academic and social engagement are central elements in the persistence decision-making process" (p. 427). Are students from rural areas in North Dakota integrating into both the academic and social communities on campus?

Tinto (1993) looked at the entire process of student decision-making in determining whether to leave or stay in school. When this study's focus shifted from the students' decision to persist or drop out to the transition experience when entering the university, Schlossberg's theory of transition informed my understanding of the students' experiences.

Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) developed a theory of adults in transition for use in the field of counseling. They defined a transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). The three phases of transition identified are: moving in, moving through, and moving out. Her work later expanded to include a focus on adults transitioning to college. Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) pointed out that Schlossberg's theory of transition is "also relevant to traditionally aged college students" (p. 108). The participants in this study are moving out of their old environment and moving into a new environment.

Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure begins with the assumption that a student's pre-college attributes, their experiences and expectations, impact their collegiate experience. "Students are increasingly likely to persist when their experiences and expectations are aligned with the normative culture on campus and when their interactions with others are positive" (Barr, Desler, & Associates, 2000, p. 241).

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Schlossberg's (1989) transition theory is supported by the concepts of mattering marginality, which suggest that students who are in transition "often feel marginal and that they do not matter" (p. 6), while mattering is the "belief right or wrong that we matter to someone else" (p. 9). The intersection of the students' transitions from their pre-college life to their life at college was the focus of this study.

This study used Tinto's theory of student departure as an organizing framework for the questions asked during the interviews. The areas of pre-college attributes, goals and institutional commitment, and integration into social and academic communities provided the structure for the questions to study remote rural students' perceptions of their pre-college life and their life during their first college semester. Schlossberg's theory was used to make meaning of the transition.

Limitations

This study was limited to a single university and to students from North Dakota. As such, findings may not be able to be generalized to other institutions with rural populations. Within the state, however, one institution has a comparable student body size and it, too, is categorized as "Research Intensive." This study cannot address why students choosing to attend a regional state college or two–year college do not persist, although, there, too, North Dakota students persist at notably low levels. Since the students interviewed for the study reported on their feelings at a time in the past, their reflections may not be as accurate as if they were interviewed at the time of the experience. Other factors that might have influenced their answers included status as a first-generation college student, low socioeconomic background, gender or ethnicity as well as being from a farm or from town. Of the thirteen participants, ten were women.

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This gender inequity in the sample size may have an impact on the study. Five of the participants were first-year students and although they returned for a second semester, it remained to be seen at the time of the interview, if they would return in the fall semester. All but one of the students regarded themselves as good students and this may have impacted who chose to participate in the study. Only one interview was done with each participant. The researcher's personal bias will be addressed in Chapter III.

<p style="text-align:center">Definition of Terms</p>

Researchers on rural issues struggle with finding a functional definition of rural that is useful for purposes of comparison (Brady & Weitzman, 2007; Coladarci, 2007; Farmer, 1997; Hart, Larson, & Lishner, 2005; Provasnik et al., 2007). Coladarci (2007) points out "there is no single definition of rural" (p. 2). Size of population center, proximity to metro areas, functional areas, and population density are among the characteristics that frame definitions of rural, suburban, and urban.

The United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (ERS), has devised several classification schemes, one of which is the Rural-Urban Continuum Code. This scheme distinguishes "metropolitan counties by size and non-metropolitan counties by their degree of urbanization and proximity to metropolitan areas" (Parker, 2004, ¶ 1). Remote rural counties under this classification system are classified as nonmetro 9, one that is "completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area" (Parker, 2004, table following ¶ 6). This study used the "nonmetro 9" classification of the USDA ERS to define remote rural areas (Parker, 2004).

In North Dakota some rural school districts share resources by cooperating with, or collaborating with, adjacent districts to offer classes or extra-curricular activities in which students may participate. A regional term for this arrangement is "co-oped."

Scarce resources and low student numbers in some rural communities have forced the combining of two or more school districts as a way to provide education in a cost effective manner. When schools districts combine to make a new school, in North Dakota, it is referred to as consolidating.

In this study, the terms persistence, retention and departure are used to clarify a student's enrollment relationship with a college. Persistence is used to mean a student has enrolled in a college degree program and has remained in the program to completion (Astin, 1988). Retention is a term used by an institution when referring to a student who continues to return to the institution during consecutive terms until degree completion within four years (Astin, 1993). Departure, in this study, means a student has left the institution before finishing a program of study (Tinto, 1993).

Transition, as defined by Schlossberg, is an event or nonevent that alters lives (Schlossberg, et al., 1995).

Summary and Organization of the Study

Students from North Dakota attending the selected university are less likely to return after a second semester than students from other states. In addition, the six-year completion rate for North Dakota students is 48%, a rate for which North Dakota is 37th in the nation. Rural students come to campuses with unique characteristics. When institutions clearly understand the transition experiences of student from remote rural communities, they may be able to develop appropriate measures to assist those students.

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By so doing, institutions may be able to increase persistence of this student population. This study used Tinto's theory of student departure as an organizing framework and Schlossberg's theory of transition to make meaning of the students' experiences.

The second chapter of this study reviews the literature pertinent to rural students and persistence. Chapter III summarizes the methodology used in the study while a report of the findings appears in Chapter IV. The final chapter contains a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, and recommendations for practice and research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what transitional experiences students from remote rural communities have as they transition from the small community to a mid-sized research-intensive college. This chapter reviews the literature pertaining to rural college students. Since the focus of this study was students from remote rural areas, it was important to have an understanding of the rural student from several perspectives. Tinto's theory of student departure organizes the literature by reviewing what is known about rural students' pre-college attributes, their college aspirations, and their institutional experiences, both academic and social. This literature review looks at research done on rural college students in each of these areas. The final part of this literature review covers Tinto's theory of student departure and Schlossberg's theory of transition.

Rural Students' Pre-College Attributes

In an effort to understand rural student populations, studies were conducted to determine common characteristics and backgrounds of the students (Anderson, 1974; Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Carlson, 1992; Dunne, 1977; Felder, Mohr, Dietz, & Ward, 1994; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Khartti, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Loveless, 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007). The studies attempted to distinguish among rural, suburban, and urban communities and/or peoples. Most studies resulted in similar conclusions. A

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student's pre-college attributes included: community background information (demographics, socioeconomic status, community identity), educational experiences, and intellectual capabilities. In combination, as stated in Chapter I, these attributes may impact a student's commitment to an institution and eventual completion of their degree (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Rural college students tend to have several characteristics in common which categorizes them in a unique cohort separate from suburban and urban college students.

Community Background

Demographics

Although there is regional variability, on a national average rural college students are white and come from low-income, two-parent households (Dunne, 1977; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Khartti et al., 1997; Loveless, 2003). The National Center for Education Statistics' 2007 report on the Status of Education in Rural America concluded that an average of 77.7% of public school students were white, with distant rural areas having 82.5% white and remote rural areas having 78.5% white (Provasnik et al., 2007). Although the majority of the rural population nationwide is white, different regions of the country have different minority populations, with the South having higher African American residents and the Southwest having higher Hispanic populations (Khartti et al., 1997).

School size is one demographic to consider when classifying urban/rural schools. In comparing rural and urban schools by population size, Loveless (2003) found 27% of the nation's students attended a rural school (mean school size 392) and 30% attended an urban school (mean school size 663). However, the rural students occupy 42% of the

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school buildings and as a result "the average rural school is quite small" (Loveless, 2003, p. 11).

Physical location and proximity to urban centers are other factors that contribute to rurality. A rural school can be defined as being located in an area where the population is 2,500 or fewer people, and where the school is located 25 miles or more from an urban area (Provasnik et al., 2007). Remoteness can mean limited resources for rural schools. Rural schools are more dependent on funding from the state rather than funding from property taxes (Loveless, 2003). Lack of resources may also mean fewer curriculum options, few opportunities for high achievers and fewer extra-curricular activities.

Advances in technology, however, have allowed some rural schools the ability to access resources through the computer. Rural schools had "slightly greater access to instructional computers with Internet connectivity than students in city and suburban schools" (Provasnik et al., 2007, p. 79).

The size of a student's high school graduating class has been shown to have an effect on college degree completion (Anderson, 1974). Students from graduating classes of twenty or fewer students are statistically less likely to finish a post-secondary degree than students from larger graduating classes. In North Dakota, despite school consolidations, it is still possible to have graduating classes of fifteen to twenty students (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2007-2008).

Socioeconomic Status

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2007) defines socioeconomic status as "a measure of an individual or family's relative economic and social ranking" and is "constructed based on father's education level, mother's education level, father's

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occupation, mother's occupation, and family income" (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007, ¶ 188). Studies on students from families with lower SES report "financial burdens influence the decision to withdraw from college" (Astin & Oseguera, 2005, p. 249). The socioeconomic status of rural areas tends to be lower when compared to other areas of the country, thus putting rural students at greater risk of withdrawal prior to degree completion. While more parents of rural students have completed high school than parents of students from urban areas, fewer rural parents have completed a bachelor's degree (Khartti et al., 1997; Provasnik et al., 2007). In a study of rural students majoring in engineering, Felder et al. (1994) found that although more urban students came from families whose parents had college degrees than the parents of rural students, this alone did not account for the higher academic performance of the urban students.

Additionally, students from rural areas are more likely to be economically disadvantaged (Funk & Bailey, 2000; Khartti et al., 1997). Aylesworth and Bloom's (1976) foundational research in rural studies indicated that rural students have "many traits commonly associated with failure in an academic setting" (p. 240), including coming from a lower socioeconomic status and having parents with less education.

On some economic measures, the state of North Dakota is at the top of the scale, and on others, it is average. Currently, North Dakota has the second best unemployment rate in the nation at 3.3%, so more people have jobs and income (Cable News Network, 2009). As a state, it has fewer children below the poverty mark (13%) when compared to the national average (19%) but falls below the national average of 30% with only 28% of the population age 25 to 64 with a bachelor's degree or higher. Information taken from the U.S. Census Bureau web site specifically for the counties in this study indicates four

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counties in this study have child poverty rates between 13.4% and 14.4%, thus above the state average but still below the national average. Three counties have child poverty rates between 10.6% and 11.4%, below the state average. The average percentage of adults 25 and older who have a bachelor's degree in these counties was calculated to be 14.7%, far below the rate in the state (28%) and less than half the national rate (30%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a).

Community Identity

While some rural college students may be disadvantaged by their socioeconomic status, some rural cultures offer stability and support to the student through their community. Belonging, identity, and place are words used to describe some rural communities (Carlson, 1992; DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Dunne, 1977; Khartti et al., 1997).

A rural school may be a gathering point for citizens for many activities in a community. Celebrations, meetings, dinners, political rallies, and funerals all take place at the local school. To understand what it means to live and work in a rural community, Carlson (1992) surveyed rural professionals who reported one advantage of the community was the "sense of belonging, of identity" (p. 44). These rural professionals also described close contacts with students and families and ascribed this to "small numbers of people involved both in the school and community" (p. 44).

DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) highlighted differences in culture between urban and rural communities, particularly in education. The school in rural communities was often a gathering place where social activities, lectures, meetings, political rallies, and dances were held. In rural communities, strong connections exist between community,

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place, and family, and "it is in the local schoolhouse where many of these attachments are formed and solidified" (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995, ¶ 33). Khartti et al. (1997) agreed with this statement and described a rural community characteristic as "the presence of strong community connections, a sense of localism and value of place" (p. 12). Discipline, hard work, and family are values that are important in a rural setting (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1994). In fact, "many rural residents identify strongly with their place of residence, and are loathe to leave it to pursue higher education or careers. Relationships and connections to other people are given primacy" (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1994, p. 69). Rural college students, then, are arriving on college campuses with this strong sense of community and sense of belonging, and are coming to a place where few people, if any, know their name or where their home is.

It should be acknowledged that not all rural communities are as idyllic as has been described. England and Brown (2003) point out contrasting rural communities. The agrarian community is seen by some as "a serene, calmly individualistic, and structured life" (p. 317). This rural setting frequently is composed of family farms. In contrast to this peaceful setting is the setting of an extractive community such as mining or logging. Unlike the nurturing setting of the family farm, the rural extractive town is sometimes seen as "disorderly, wildly individualistic, and nonconforming" (p. 317). Even so, England and Brown reported the members of the extractive communities sometimes have a deep attachment to place. Students from either setting may enroll in college and have their own set of characteristics.

Educational Experiences

While some rural communities are able to support students emotionally by developing a sense of belonging, it can be found that some rural communities are financially unable to provide as many educational resources as larger, more affluent urban schools can provide. Studies beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the present found the combination of low student numbers coupled with fewer financial resources made it economically unsound to offer a broad curriculum to rural high school students (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Felder et al., 1994; Gibbs, 2000; Loveless, 2003). These students, then, would be underprepared for college than urban or suburban students. Also, students from rural areas who attend college may not have taken college preparatory courses, as students from more populated areas often do, contributing to their lack of preparedness (Khartti et al., 1994, Loveless, 2003). A finding of a study of chemical engineering students at North Carolina State University suggested urban students had more access to a broader high school curriculum, which included advance placement courses, than did rural students. Felder et al. (1994) speculated that rural students "receive less intellectual stimulation from parents or peers…have access to fewer potential role models…are subject to lower academic standards and less expert career counseling in high school, and are therefore, more likely to misjudge their aptitude for engineering" (p. 218). The study concluded that students from rural towns are "academically disadvantaged" (p. 218) when compared to students from urban settings.

One additional disadvantage of rural education is rural students are often taught by less experienced teachers (DeYoung, 1994; Felder et al., 1994; Gibbs, 2000). In describing barriers to higher education, respondents of a study of 285 rural Appalachian

women who were college graduates reported hiring and retaining qualified teachers as an educational barrier (Day-Perroots, 1991).

Intellectual Capabilities

Although students from rural schools are disadvantaged by having fewer curriculum choices, research is mixed on whether they are intellectually as capable as students from urban schools. Some studies have shown rural students to be as intellectually capable as students from larger, more affluent schools (Anderson, 1974; Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Fan & Chen, 1999; Gibbs, 2000; Raven, 1992). Raven's (1992) findings that "the amount of variance in final college GPA explained by school location was of little practical significance" (p. 154) supports Aylesworth and Bloom's (1976) findings that intellectually there was no difference between rural and urban students. However, Felder et al. (1994) found that rural students in North Carolina State University's chemical engineering major have lower math scores than urban students. Urban students had higher scores on standardized entrance tests, tested out of more first-year courses, and earned better grades than their rural peers. Some of this difference might be accounted for by the fact that rural students did not have access to advanced placement math and other specialized courses while urban students did. Still in another study, when comparing national test scores of rural elementary and high school students with the test scores of urban elementary and high school students, rural students' scores are equal to or higher than urban students' scores and on par with suburban students' scores (Loveless, 2003).

Another measure of intellectual capability, among other things, is high school graduation rate. Of the students who began their senior year, rural schools graduated

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students at a rate of 94.6%, which is higher than either suburban, 92.5% or urban, 89.7% (Loveless, 2003). Nationally, the high school graduation rate, based on students who began as freshmen, is 71% (Rocha & Sharkey, 2005). Students from North Dakota rank second in the nation with a four-year graduation rate of 85% (Rocha & Sharkey, 2005). Students who graduate from high school may aspire to go to college.

<div align="center">Rural Student College Aspirations</div>

It has been shown that the academic success of rural high school students is based on the percentage of students who persist to high school graduation. However, the decision to continue to a post-secondary institution and persist to graduation is based on more than the successful completion of high school coursework. "Rural students have significantly higher [high school] graduation rates, but they enroll more frequently in courses that are not college preparatory and they apply for college less frequently than do their suburban counterparts" (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995, p. 8). While at one time a high school diploma was sufficient for success in the work place, in today's information era post-secondary education is becoming essential (Gibbs, 2004). Career goals, parental influence, financial concerns, and job possibilities are among factors that affect college aspirations. While rural students aspire to further their education, their family background, particularly their socioeconomic status, may affect the career they choose (Bajema, Miller, & Williams, 2002; Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989; Hansen & McIntire, 1989). Some disagree and suggest it is more likely the rural labor market, rather than socioeconomic status, that plays a major factor in rural students' college aspirations (Haller & Virkler, 1993). A challenge for rural educational communities is to introduce career paths to students that do not exist in the community (Bajema et al., 2002). As

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students from rural communities leave for college, they often have a limited view of possible career paths. This could be problematic for them when they arrive on college campuses.

Nationally, 54.3% of rural students who graduate from high school apply for admission to a four-year college, while the rate for urban students is 56.5% and 61.6% for suburban students (Loveless, 2003). A reason for this might be "college matriculation rates may be pushed down by students wanting to stay close to home after high school. In many rural areas, post-secondary institutions simply may not exist" (p. 14).

High school graduation and applying for college are just two elements in aspiring to go to college. Academic preparation is another element in deciding to attend a four-year institution. Several factors based on academic preparation predicted whether rural West Virginian students planned to attend college. High school grade point average, college preparation courses, and self-confidence were among the factors Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) found that lead rural West Virginia youth to attend college. The level of the parent's education, their occupation, and their expectations that the student would attend college were also contributing factors in a student's decision to attend a post-secondary institution (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Felder et al., 1994; Khartti et al., 1997). More parents in rural communities did not expect their students to graduate from a four-year institution than parents from urban communities (Khartti et al., 1997). More than parental education and influence, financial considerations were also a factor in a student's decision to attend college. Since rural economic status is often rated as poor, chances are families of rural students are not as easily able to afford college (Gibbs,

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2000). Either that or "they may compensate by sending their children to less expensive, and often less prestigious, public colleges" (Gibbs, 2000, p. 84).

North Dakota does not follow the national trend of lower rates of college enrollment. In 2002, North Dakota ranked first in the percentage of students (69%) enrolling in college upon graduation from high school while the national rate of students enrolling in college upon graduation was 57% (Rocha & Sharkey, 2005). One possible explanation for this trend may be a desire on the part of North Dakota high school students for careers requiring a college education. Apostal and Bilden's (1991) study of college aspirations for North Dakota high school students found "high educational and occupational aspirations" (p. 158) for both men and women, with the women expressing "significantly higher occupational aspirations" (p.158). Another possible explanation for this high enrollment rate may be the eleven state-supported colleges and universities that are strategically placed in each quadrant of the state. It is possible for students from North Dakota to attend a state college in close proximity to their home.

Rural Student Institutional Experiences

Once rural students arrive on college campuses, their experiences can be different from those of urban and suburban students. Rural students are from communities that seem close and supportive. As rural students make the transition from their rural community to college, Elliot (1989) found that many described their college campus as a "new world," a place that is very different than their home, so much so that they claim to have to learn to balance between the old world and the new. Some feel it is like "living in a bubble" where it is difficult to maintain ties to old friends (Dietrich, 1999, p. 63). For some students, this balancing may begin with realizing that they have to make new

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relationships (Schultz, 2005). Murphy (1984) found rural students view themselves as different from other students.

Coping with this new environment can be stressful, and rural students report more stress and anxiety then do their urban counterparts (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Elliott, 1989; Murphy, 1984; Schultz, 2003). Included among the stressors that rural students report are size of community (Murphy, 1984; Wilbourn, 1987), feeling different (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976), the unavailability of faculty (Murphy, 1984), and transitioning from a small community to a larger one (Schultz, 2003). What is more, rural students do not use campus-counseling resources to help cope with this stress (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976; Murphy, 1984). Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) concluded, "rural students do not appear to have the same pattern of help-seeking behavior as do urban students" (p. 241). Wilbourn (1987), in researching rural students at Texas A & M, found the stress rural students reported was related to community size (too large) and feeling different from other students. Rural students were more likely to seek help for academics while urban students were more likely to seek individual counseling and attend career clinics (Wilbourn, 1987). Schultz (2003) found that although a few participants viewed the move to a large city positively, some decisions made by others during the first semester "turned out to be counterproductive to a positive assimilation into their new settings" (p. 109).

It is possible for students from a rural community to encounter bias in a college classroom. Donehower (2007) related a story of a university instructor who told a student, "You're from North Dakota. You have no culture. My job is to give you some" (p. 37). While faculty members may hold some assumptions about students from rural

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communities, students may also hold some faulty assumptions about faculty members. Donehower, Hogg and Schell (2007b) point out that "rural students may presume that their professors bring to the classroom the mindset that rural students are uncultured and subliterate and have little to contribute in the way of knowledge" (p. 161). Assumptions about what it means to be rural exist for those from urban settings as well as those from rural settings.

Rural students, it seems, have perceptions that distinguish them from urban/suburban students when it comes to how they experience the campus community. While attending college is stressful for anyone, rural students experience stress as it is related to difference, size of campus, and new worldliness. Rural students are also less likely to seek individual counseling for their stress.

Persistence

Other studies on students from rural populations sought to determine persistence to completion at postsecondary institutions. Studies in the 1970s laid the foundations for future research. A relationship was found to exist between the size of the high school a student attends and college completion rates (Anderson, 1974; Cope, 1972). Cope's (1972) study suggested, "the size of the high school or community is related to academic persistence" (p. 95) when he found that students from rural communities were more likely to dropout of large research institutions. Cope (1972) also added that this may be true "only where the student finds himself in a college or university environment that is substantially different from that with which he [sic] is accustomed" (p. 95).

In another study, Anderson (1974) found a relationship existed between the size of a student's high school and college completion when he studied a cross-section of

students from North Dakota institutions. The study found that students from schools with graduation class sizes of 19 or fewer had "significantly fewer completers and significantly more non-completers than did any other group" (p. 192). Possible explanations for this include "the relatively limited curriculum offered by the smallest schools and the lack of stimulation fostered by continually encountering the same few peers in the same small setting" (p. 192). Also, students from a "static society" may find the changing environment of college to be "emotionally debilitating" (p. 192). Anderson concluded," the student who faces difficulty in aujusting to college life, and who does not perceive the campus as a desirable setting, may withdraw from college rather than face a situation which to him [*sic*] is emotionally untenable" (p. 192).

Aylesworth and Bloom (1976) concluded that despite the fact that intellectually rural and urban students were the same, rural students withdrew from the institution more frequently than their urban counterparts. In a later study of freshman at the University of Northern Colorado, Peters (1990) concluded, "Rural students do have a significantly higher departure rate than nonrural freshmen at UNC" (p. 91). Other studies suggest that rural students withdraw at a higher rate than do urban students (Gibbs, 2003; Peters, 1990; Reeves, 2006).

Reasons for withdrawal from colleges and universities vary. Discouragement at not holding high leadership positions (Schonert, Elliott, & Bills, 1991), not fitting in or being lost in the crowd (Swartz & Washington, 2002) and not aligning with career goals (Aylesworth & Bloom, 1976) are among the reasons that explain why rural students do not persist. While some students do not complete their degree program, others transfer to an institution closer to their home community (Schonert et al., 1991). Parsons' (1992)

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study at the University of California, Berkley in the fall of 1987 and 1988 indicated rural students reported academic and social inadequacies. However, it was noted those students who persisted developed an assertiveness that permitted them to not become "just a number" (p. 39). Having to work to afford school and not getting involved either in student organizations or study groups were given as reasons that rural students did not persist (Parsons, 1992).

In an ethnographic account, Maltzan (2006) studied the cultural identities and decision-making processes that led students from Danville, Ohio to seek a postsecondary education and persist to a second year. The students from Danville enrolled at a rate of 43% over a ten-year period, which is consistent with the national average. However, only 13% of those who initially enrolled persisted to a second year at the same institution. In addition, students tended to select institutions that were neither elite nor highly selective (Maltzan, 2006). The difference in graduate rates between elite or highly selective institutions (85% and 95%) and four-year public institutions (45%) may be accounted for by the selectivity of the institution.

North Dakota ranks second in the nation in the percentage of students who graduate from high school and first in the nation in the percentage of students who enroll in college immediately following high school graduation. In North Dakota, persistence from first year to second year at two-year institutions for full time students in the fall of 2004 was 48% while the national average in the same category was 53% (Isaac, 2007). The rate of persistence to the second year for full-time students at four-year institutions was 71% as compared to the national average of 77% (Isaac, 2007). North Dakota then falls to 37th in the nation in the percentage of students who complete college within six

years. Although the percentage of North Dakota students who graduate from high school and enroll in college is among the highest in the nation, few of them actually earn a baccalaureate degree in six years.

Studies of rural students then have the following themes. In the aggregate, students from rural areas tend to come from lower economic status families whose parents have lower educational attainment; have limited access to a broad curriculum; come from homogeneous communities that are primarily white; and exhibit low self-esteem, particularly in the postsecondary setting. Intellectually, rural students are on par with their urban counterparts, but are unprepared and/or under-prepared for college level work. The physical size of the institution, the lack of faculty contact, and the building of new relationships are among the barriers that may need to be overcome for rural students to persist within the challenging post-secondary environment. This combination of factors puts rural college students into a category that can be labeled "at risk." Maltzan (2005) suggested:

> Rural students like those from Danville are at high risk for early
> withdrawal from college, yet this risk may easily go unrecognized or
> unaddressed in higher education in light of the privileged racial identities
> they carry. This privileged social identity renders white rural students
> invisible in discussions of access and equity in higher education. (p. 214)

Rural students are a category of students that could possibly go unrecognized on college campuses. By acknowledging rural students as an at risk group, measures could be taken to address the needs of this population.

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Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Tinto's (1993) work on the impact college has on student persistence explored reasons students dropped out of college. His study of departure focused on students in their first year and determined that what happened in that year "does much to shape subsequent persistence" (Tinto, 1993, p. 14). His model is described as process that is "longitudinal and interactional in character," and is both "descriptive" and "explanatory" (p.113). It takes into account the student's pre-college abilities. This interactive model has three distinct time periods: before college, college experiences and outcomes.

Tinto posits that each student's individual characteristics, which include family background, individual attributes and precollege schooling experiences, have a direct impact on departure from college (Tinto, 1993). Family background characteristics include "socioeconomic status, parental educational level and parental expectations" (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 2003, p. 327). Individual attributes would include race, gender and academic ability while the precollege skills and abilities are "the characteristics of the student's secondary school, the student's high academic achievement, and social attainments of the student" (p. 327).

In this process, the students' pre-entry attributes influence the students' intentions, and goals and commitments about college. A student's educational and occupational goals are the intentions of the students. The commitment is the degree "to which individuals are committed both to the attainment of the goals and to the institution" (Tinto, 1993, p. 115).

Once in college, students interact with both academic and social systems in both formal and informal ways. Their level of commitment and intentions backed by their pre-

college attributes affects their interactions within these two systems. Among those with whom they come into contact are faculty, staff, other students, and other members of the college. It is through positive interactions that the students become integrated into the both the academic and the social systems. Tinto (1993) suggests these positive interactions "enhance the likelihood that the individual will persist with the institution until degree completion" (p. 116). Negative interactions can "lower the degree of one's social and intellectual integration" and the student will depart (p. 116).

Integration happens when a student has been accepted into the academic and social systems, both the formal and informal. At this point it is likely that they will share many of the same values of those with whom they interact. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded "various forms of academic and social engagement are central elements in the persistence decision-making process" (p. 427). If a student has not made those connections with peers or faculty, either academically or socially, departure from that institution is likely.

Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions

Schlossberg's theory of transitions originated in the field of counseling as a way to understand "adults in transition and lead them to the help they needed to cope" with life (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 108). Transitions take place over a period of time and are identified as "any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 27). Transitions can be anticipated events, unanticipated events, or a nonevent. An anticipated event is a transition that is expected such as going to college. An unanticipated event is described as something that is not predicted. A transition that is a nonevent is one in which an

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expected event does not happen. Schlossberg et al. (1995) identified a set of factors, termed the 4 S System, "that influence the ability of the person to cope during a transition" (p. 47). These factors are situation, self, support and strategies. Effectively coping with a transition is dependent on an individual's "resources in these four areas – in other words, his or her assets and liabilities – at that time" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 113).

Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) later adapted the transition theory for use with adults in higher education environments. Three main phases make up the transition process: moving in, moving through and moving out. During the moving in phase, people are entering a new situation, such as students enrolling in college. It is during the moving in phase that "rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the new system" need to be learned (p. 15). Once the person has mastered the rules, the moving through phase begins. In a college situation, the moving through phase would last until graduation or departure from the institution. When the college experience has ended, the moving out phase takes place and a new set of transitions may begin. While each phase suggests a passage with an ultimate conclusion, as the last stage ends a new moving in stage begins (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

From her work with adults in transition, Schlossberg (1989) became convinced that "people in transition often feel marginal and that they do not matter" (p. 6). Students who enter a college or university may feel marginal, that they don't fit in, until they are able to integrate into the community. In using the mattering dimension for adults in higher education, Schlossberg et al. (1989) concluded that adult students who feel they matter to the university persist to graduation. College students, when they begin school, are in a period of transition from the old and familiar to the new and different and have

gone from a place where they matter to a place where they are on the margins. The two constructs, mattering and marginality, help define how people feel in relation to the situation or place they find themselves. When people transition from one situation to another, they might question whether they belong or whether they are on the margin of the new group or place (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

Schlossberg (1989) explains marginality from two perspectives: marginality as a personality type or marginality as a permanent condition. The marginal personality type would be a person torn between two distinctly different cultural worlds who tries to maintain a place in the old while not quite being accepted in the new (Park, 1928). An example of marginality as a permanent condition would be a bicultural person who is never quite accepted by either culture. As students transition into college, they may experience marginality of the first type as they try to maintain a hold to a past they know and are comfortable with while trying to finding a place in the new.

Mattering and marginality are two constructs of Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The five dimensions of mattering are attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence and appreciation (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Attention is most basic to mattering. It is the concept that an individual has the feeling that "one commands the interest or notice of another person" (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 164). Importance as an aspect of mattering is explained as believing "that the other person cares about what we want, think and do, or is concerned with our fate" (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 164). Ego-extension happens when "others are proud of our accomplishments and disappointed by our failures" (Schlossberg

et al., 1989, p. 22). Dependence can best be explained another's dependence on us. Appreciation, the dimension added by Schlossberg et al. (1995) is the feeling that one's efforts were appreciated. People want affirmation that their work was worth something and appreciated by others.

Rural students have characteristics in common that, on the one hand, put them at risk for academic failure and on the other hand, support them in their goals. What is currently missing from the literature is research on how rural students perceive their experiences as they leave their rural communities and join the urban setting of a mid-sized, research-intensive institution. This study adds to this knowledge.

Chapter III discusses the methodology used to answer the question, "what transitional experiences do students from remote rural communities have as they transition from the small community to a mid-size, research-intensive campus?"

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Chapter III discusses the methodology used in this qualitative study of students from remote rural areas. The first topic addressed in this chapter is the rationale for using a qualitative design for this study. A description of the theoretical framework used in this study follows. Participant selection, data collection and data analysis are the remaining topics discussed.

Rationale for Qualitative Design

Creswell (2003) identifies quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods as three general design frameworks useful for organizing studies by social and human scientists. While each approach is useful in studying a social event, the specifics of what needs to be known, how the information is collected, and what methods will be used to report the data determine which approach a researcher chooses. Creswell (2003) defines qualitative research as "the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 37). Data for qualitative research can come from interviews, which produce rich deep data and descriptions of the event. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) write "qualitative research places emphasis on understanding through looking closely at people's words, actions and records" (p. 17).

According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), the first characteristic of qualitative research to consider is "discover what can be learned about some phenomenon of interest.

particularly social phenomena where people are the participants" (pp. 43-44). A purpose

of qualitative research is to "understand the meaning, for the participants in the study, of

the events, situations, and actions they are involved with" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 17). In

order to understand what happened when students from remote rural areas transition to a

mid-sized, research-intensive university, I determined listening to the voices of these

students was the approach to use. In this way it was possible to understand the meaning

of their transition to college and their first semester collegiate experience. A qualitative

methodology was the research method most appropriate for this study.

Theoretical Framework

To get at these students' experiences, and what the experiences mean, an

interpretative, qualitative approach was used. Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe

qualitative research as a "broad approach to the study of social phenomenon" (p. 2).

Among the characteristics they ascribe to this form of research is pragmatic, interpretive,

and "grounded in the lived experiences of people" (p. 2). Only by asking students with a

common background of living in a remote rural community about their experiences

attending a mid-sized, research-intensive university can I begin to understand what the

experience was like for them.

It is my belief that individuals seek to make meaning of their world based on their

interactions or experiences with that world. This view aligns with a social constructivist's

belief of knowledge. "The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the

participant's views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2003, p. 8). Using open-

ended, semi-structured questions, I was able to find out what these students from remote

rural areas experienced when attending a mid-sized, research-intensive university and to make meaning of their experience.

Site Selection

This study was conducted on the campus of a mid-sized, research-intensive university located in the Great Plains. The institution offers undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree programs. This research site was selected based on its enrollment demographics, the number of students enrolled who fit the selection criteria, and the convenience of the researcher. I live in the community and work at this institution. I realized that there was a potential for a conflict of interest and possible bias. The participants who chose to be included in the study were not known to me prior to the interviews, had no contact with me prior to the interviews nor did I have influence on any decisions affecting the lives of the participants before or after the interviews. I have kept my supervisors informed of the progress of my research throughout each phase. There was never a time I thought, or my supervisors indicated to me, the research would negatively affect the university or my work at the university.

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants for this study. According to Creswell (2007), "the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (p. 125). The research question is to understand the experiences of students from remote rural communities as they transition to a mid-sized, research-intensive institution. Five criteria were put in place to insure as similar a pool of participants as possible. The first criterion for selection was residence in a nonmetro 9 county. This

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would insure the participants lived in similar circumstances. Selecting those nonmetro 9 counties from which fewer than ten students were, at the time of the study, attending the selected institution was the second criterion. This criterion was to insure the participant did not have a built-in social network when arriving on campus. Next, the student had to have attended the same high school for three or more consecutive years. This provided the participant had little experience transitioning to new schools. The fourth criterion was the student's first college experience was at the selected institution. To understand what the experience is for students from remote rural communities as they first come to a campus, they needed to have not experienced that transition in another setting. Finally, they needed to have enrolled in the institution in the fall immediately following spring high school graduation. This last criterion was to provide that all participants were going through a similar experience at approximately the same time period in their lives.

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal was made and granted with approval number IRB-200803-293. The names and contact information of students attending the university who met the criteria for inclusion in this study was provided by the Office of Institutional Research (OIR). OIR provided a list of names and contact information for fifty-nine (59) students. A letter explaining the study and an invitation to participate were sent to these students during the 2008 spring semester (Appendix A). From that initial mailing, two students scheduled appointments for interviews during the following week. Because of the low response rate, I emailed the remaining students an electronic invitation to participate and an explanation of the study. Of the seventeen additional students who contacted me, one declined to be interviewed, thirteen scheduled and kept interview appointments, and three scheduled interview appointments but failed

to keep them. All students who scheduled interviews returned to campus in the following fall semester. All but one participant regarded themselves as good students.

I interviewed fifteen undergraduate students from remote rural areas counties. The Economic Research Service's Rural-Urban Continuum classification of nonmetro 9 was used to identify these rural counties. Ten counties were identified as nonmetro 9 counties with ten or fewer students attending the selected university. Nonmetro 9 counties are counties that are "completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area" (Parker, 2004). In North Dakota, 29 of 52 counties are classified as nonmetro 9 counties. The institutional demographic information to which I had access broke down institutional attendance to the county level. To reach a student population who had few social contacts at the institution, I further refined the search for participants by locating counties that had ten or fewer students from that county attending the institution. Ten counties met the second criterion. The final pool of participants who chose to be interviewed for this study represented seven of these ten counties.

The first and last students interviewed for the study had experiences prior to attending this institution and were dropped from this study. The first student attended another university before transferring to the selected university. The second student attended boot camp prior to matriculating at the selected university. Neither the pilot interviews nor the first and last interviews were transcribed nor were data from these interviews used in the analysis. One student transferred high schools at the beginning of the sophomore year as a result of school consolidation and not family relocation. The student attended the high school for three consecutive years and the student's interview was included in the study. One student used the interview for extra credit. This effort

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produced a participant pool of thirteen students with nearly similar background experiences. By having the sample so similar, it increased "the likelihood that variability common in any social phenomenon will be represented in the data" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 45).

Participant Demographics

The thirteen students whose interviews were included in this study represented seven of the ten counties identified for the study. Ten students were women; three students were men. There were six first-year students, two second-year students, three third-year students, and two fourth-year students. The average size of their home communities was 520 residents and the average graduating class size was 27. The home-town population was 200 or fewer residents for six of the participants; between 500 and 700 residents for three participants; and between 900 and 1100 residents for four participants. Seven students were first-generation college students. A first-generation college student, in this case, indicates that neither parent had a four-year college degree. Four students' mothers had four-year college degrees, one student's father had a four-year college degree, and only one student had parents who both had four-year college degrees. Students claimed majors in nursing, political science, education, psychology, pre-dental, business, accountancy, and physical therapy. Seven of the thirteen students grew up outside of town on farms or ranches. None of the counties in this study are classified as high poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Two students were siblings. Although ethnic information was not specifically collected, the majority of the students would be considered white. The percent of the population that is white in the counties where the participants lived range from a high of 99% to a low of 85.1% and averaged

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97%. Information about family income was also not collected. The poverty rates in the counties of residence range from a low of 10.6% to a high of 13.5% and averaged 12.3%. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Pilot Interviews

Prior to the start of the study, I conducted pilot interviews for the purpose of refining the interview questions, seeking additional questions, and refining interview technique. While the interviewees for the pilot study were from small communities, they did not meet all the selection criteria. Two students were interviewed during the pilot study. Both students were in graduate school. One student attended a junior college before transferring to a large institution, and for the other student, more then ten people from the student's home community attended the selected university.

In addition to conducting pilot interviews, the questions for this study were peer reviewed. Based on both the pilot interviews and the peer review of the questions, changes were made to the wording of some questions to elicit the information needed for this study and to insure that interviewer bias was not present in the questions. The questions used in this study were open-ended and prompts were used when needed (Appendix B).

Data Collection

When participants contacted me for interviews, the participant chose the time and location for the interview. At the beginning of each interview, participants received an informed consent form (Appendix C), which I read through and explained. All participants agreed to be interviewed, agreed to allow me to tape record the interview, and signed the informed consent form. Participant identities were kept confidential and

no information was included in the results or this paper that could identify them. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. No further participants were contacted when the saturation point was reached in the study.

Validity

Validity is important for any study because it establishes the truthfulness of the data and the interpretation of that data. Validity for this study was achieved by the following strategies as outlined by Creswell (2003).

Throughout the process of analyzing the data, I used peer debriefing to insure the accuracy of my analysis. I would regularly meet with my advisor as I advanced through the analysis process. In addition, I discussed my process, findings, and methodology with members of the Educational Leadership Department, and with a faculty member in the Educational Foundations and Research Department. I also received peer input discussing my data with colleagues at a department meeting. Throughout these discussions I had the opportunity to hear what others thought of my analysis and I was able to refine my findings.

Another method of peer debriefing that I employed was having a peer external to the university read transcripts to suggest additional codes, themes, and patterns. As she works in another state, email was employed as a communication tool. She suggested a code not previously identified. It helped to have a peer with whom I could discuss the codes and themes. Ideas were generated after the discussions. This strategy also asked a peer to review and question the final report "so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

To insure accuracy of the account and interpretation of the data, two participants read the final analysis. I sent electronic copies to them and spoke with them by phone after they had read the analysis. I found they identified with the meta-theme, constructs and four supporting themes. They were surprised by how similar rural students' backgrounds were and agreed with the conclusions. The strategy of member checking helped insure the accuracy of the themes.

I, as the researcher, recognize that my background and history lend to a personal bias regarding the rural perspective. While I have lived in and passed through remote rural communities, I have never had the experience of being a long-time member of such a community. My experience is that of transitioning to new surroundings on a regular basis through frequent moves. While some individuals refer to home as the place of their childhood, I refer to home as where I currently live since I spent only a few years in many of my childhood homes. I have no concept of what a person experiences when transitioning from the only place they have ever called home to a place where everyone seems to be a stranger.

The study was conducted at a place of convenience for me because not only do I live in the community, I work there as well. It became a matter of time and finances to do the study there. In addition, the population I was interested in talking with was readily available. I was also aware that the participants might find familiarity with me and seek special treatment, but that has not happened. Since I had no contact with them prior to the start of the study and I had no influence over any aspect of their studies, employment, or involvement, I felt it was prudent to proceed with the study. I was fully aware that the possibility existed that I would be approached to halt, alter or otherwise suspend the

study. This did not happen. Instead, I found encouragement to proceed so that the results might help inform practice in the division where I work. I used two different forms of peer debriefing, one group in the institution and one group outside the institution as another method to insure validity.

Ethical considerations are an important part of any qualitative study (Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Maxwell, 1996; Seidman, 1998). Qualitative researchers can be involved in the environment and ask participants to "trust us to the point that they are comfortable sharing the intimate details of their life worlds" (Hatch, 2002, p. 65). To insure the ethical use of data obtained from interviews, I first obtained approval for this study from the Institutional Review Board at the institution. Each participant was given the consent form, told about the study, that it was voluntary, and that quitting at any time was permissible. All participants signed the consent form and agreed to be tape-recorded. Verbatim transcriptions were made from the audiotapes. As the primary researcher on this project, I secured both the tapes and the transcriptions in a locked file cabinet in my home; and I will keep them for the required seven-year timeframe. At the end of the seven years, the tapes and transcriptions will be destroyed by fire or shredding. The names of the individuals who participated in the study are not kept with either the recordings or the transcriptions. Participants were told they could ask questions during and after the interview, as well as get copies of the study.

To insure the ethical handling of the participants' confidences some measures were taken. To protect the privacy of the participants pseudonyms were used when referring to the participant, their community, or any other name that could be used to identify the participant. To assure the comfort of the participant during the interview, the

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study. This did not happen. Instead, I found encouragement to proceed so that the results might help inform practice in the division where I work. I used two different forms of peer debriefing, one group in the institution and one group outside the institution as another method to insure validity.

Ethical considerations are an important part of any qualitative study (Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Maxwell, 1996; Seidman, 1998). Qualitative researchers can be involved in the environment and ask participants to "trust us to the point that they are comfortable sharing the intimate details of their life worlds" (Hatch, 2002, p. 65). To insure the ethical use of data obtained from interviews, I first obtained approval for this study from the Institutional Review Board at the institution. Each participant was given the consent form, told about the study, that it was voluntary, and that quitting at any time was permissible. All participants signed the consent form and agreed to be tape-recorded. Verbatim transcriptions were made from the audiotapes. As the primary researcher on this project, I secured both the tapes and the transcriptions in a locked file cabinet in my home; and I will keep them for the required seven-year timeframe. At the end of the seven years, the tapes and transcriptions will be destroyed by fire or shredding. The names of the individuals who participated in the study are not kept with either the recordings or the transcriptions. Participants were told they could ask questions during and after the interview, as well as get copies of the study.

To insure the ethical handling of the participants' confidences some measures were taken. To protect the privacy of the participants pseudonyms were used when referring to the participant, their community, or any other name that could be used to identify the participant. To assure the comfort of the participant during the interview, the

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participants selected the day, time and location of the interview and participants were treated well. When I could tell a participant did not want to share information on a topic, I went to the next question. I did not press for information they did not want to share.

Regarding my research and findings, I felt no pressure to find themes or suppress themes I found. I was not coerced into falsifying results.

Data Analysis

Patton (1999) notes the challenge of qualitative inquiry is to "make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal" (p. 371-372). He further indicates that there are "no absolute rules" for analyzing the data, although there are guidelines that researchers follow (p. 372). In analyzing the data from the interviews, my method followed the phases of analytic procedures for data analysis suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2006) but incorporated guidelines from Creswell (2007), Hatch (2002) and Moustakas (1994). Throughout each phase of the analysis, I was involved in data reduction and data interpretation. The general guiding format I used followed these steps or phases:

1. organizing the data;

2. immersion in the data;

3. coding the data;

4. finding clusters;

5. putting clusters into categories and themes

6. offering interpretations, and

7. searching for alternative understandings.

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Merriam (1998) suggests the right way to analyze qualitative data "is to do it *simultaneously* [*sic*] with data collection" (p. 162). The process of analyzing the data overlapped and in some cases occurred simultaneously as the interviews began. As I interviewed each participant, I took notes and began thinking of codes. I listened to the taped interviews while transcribing them and followed up with listening to the tapes while reading the transcriptions for accuracy and checking notes from the original interview. Following the verification of transcriptions for accuracy, I read through the data multiple times to obtain a sense of the material and of the individuals making the statements. From this point on, I was fully immersed in the data. Each interview was printed and codes noted in the margins of the transcriptions.

When I had the codes identified, I cut the transcripts into quotes, pasted these to index cards and sorted the cards according to the codes I had identified. As this process progressed, other codes were identified. With the index cards sorted into the various codes, I went through each of the codes and found they could be grouped, first, by time: before high school graduation (Before College Codes), between high school graduation and starting college (Between Codes), and after moving to college (On Campus Codes). Within each of the time groupings, I found I could group the participants' quotes by the categories of Community, School, Friends/Family, and Self. I grouped participant statements into codes and listed these codes under the categories identified. Tables 1, 2, and 3 show the codes listed under the categories for each of the time periods.

Three important clusters emerged from the first round of analysis. These clusters included academics, self, and involvement on campus. Statements on how students

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reacted to tests and classes when they got to college were organized under the academics cluster.

Table 1. Before College Codes

Community	School	Family/Friends	Self
Caring	Static	Family	Able
Knowing	Family like	Travel	College bound
Supportive	Involvement	Shopping	Focused
No secrets	Guidance	Farm life	Confident
Gossip	Dual Credits	Friends	
Safe		Hang out	
Few Resources		Make fun	
		No choices	

Table 2. Between Codes

Community	School	Family/Friends	Self
Tours	Check list	Both parents	Ready to leave
Not see room	What to bring	Mom take notes	Others actions
Prior experience	Financial Aid	Friends - continue	
Came on own	Enroll	Friends - future	
Check web for info			

Table 3. On Campus Codes

Community	School	Family/Friends	Self
Move in day	Faculty	Moms move them in	Scared, intimidated, excited
5 did all	Get done, get out	Emotional	Fears
2 move in-leave	Not know you	Mom learn email, text	Wrong classes/book
1 move in-stay	Help if approached	Bring supplies home	Roommate
2 come Saturday	Some exceptions	Expected to make friends	Get around town
2 come Sunday	Tests	Know others from schools	How to learn-big classes
1 came late Friday	Shake confidence-	Hard to make friends	How will teacher know me
Busy	No study skills	Hall not social	How to be safe
Some made friends	Hard	Miss opening day	Reinvent self
No one cares	Lectures-	Not enough 1 on 1 time	Isolated not ignorant
No one knows history	Take notes	Hard to keep old, feel loss	How to make friends
Make maps	Don't talk in class	Those who leave	Feel less significant
Meet so many	Teach self	Too big, not known	
Commotion	Long-term learning		
Noisy	Involvement		
Don't remember names	Not involved		
	Learning to study		
	Working		

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Table 4. Academics

Tests	Classes
First test is gauge of how to study	Make map to classes
Realization	Sit in front
More important - grade based on	Find someone familiar
Fewer questions – need	Make contact
Need in depth response	Honors and Integrated studies
Apply knowledge not recite	helped - small classes
Long term material	
Action	
Read book	
Do homework	
Chunking	
Talk to teachers	

In the cluster of "Self," I grouped comments the participants made about themselves, how they viewed themselves in relation to others, and their place in the world. The data fell into two categories, identity and others (details in Table 5).

Table 5. Self

Identity	Others
Separate self	Get on without you
On my own	Family expects change
Freedom	Family wants it as it was
Not report to anyone	I am a guest – home at school
Create self	
Figure out who you are	
Done with high school parties	
Done with club – high school stuff	

In looking at the cluster of "Involvement on Campus," the participants described their involvement on campus in four ways that I called Personal Interest, Building Community, Inviting, and Avoiding. The Personal Interest involvements were described as activities that they were familiar with from previous participation, such as attending a church service or sporting event or were recognized as important for their future. Involvement under the category Building Community included those opportunities to make friendships with others around them in class or the residence hall. The Inviting category happened when others invited the participants to attend an event or activity the participant would not have done on their own. Avoiding were the excuses many used to not be involved with any activity. Involvement on Campus is shown in Table 6. The themes of safety and anonymity emerged from this second round of analysis.

Table 6. Involvement on Campus

Personal Interest	Building Community	Inviting	Avoiding
Sports	Residence halls	Go to event	Major competitive
Religion	Classes	Club	Burn out
Resume	People from other B	Intramurals	Not invite self along
			Work - job no time
			High school stuff
			Older students
			Excuses

A third round of analysis began with a focus on the themes of safety and anonymity. At this point, it became apparent the time period "Between," which was happened after high school graduation and lasted until move-in day at college, was unimportant in the experience of the participants as they transitioned to life at a mid-sized

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post-secondary institution. It was dropped from inclusion in further analysis. Then the focus of the study centered on the times before leaving for college and after arriving at college.

From the search for meaning regarding the themes of safety and anonymity, an overarching theme, or meta-theme, "Home," emerged. This meta-theme, "Home," was supported by two constructs, environment and relationships. These constructs emerged in the place of safety and anonymity and are supported by four themes: safety, familiarity, identity, and involvement. Tables 7 and 8 show the meanings that were made of the themes for each of the constructs in the before and after time frames. For the student from the rural community, "Home" shifts in each of the themes, and under each construct from the pre-college life to the post-college life.

Chapter III reported the research methodology that was used in this study. Chapter IV is a reporting of the findings of the research done with rural students in this study, while Chapter V reports a summary of the study, conclusions, implications and suggestions for future research.

Table 7. Home - Before College

Environment	Relationships
Safety	Safety
Trust people	Same people from K on
Don't lock doors	Know history of all
Not get abducted	Know all relative
Get help even if don't know you	Like a big family
	No choice in friends
	Have relationships with teachers
Familiarity	Familiarity
Know everyone's house	Same teacher/room every year
School - same teachers every year	Relatives teach
K-12 in same building	History of teaching connection
	Hard adjusting to new people
Identity - Community	Identity - Self
Support school – sports, musical	Could be self - wild, crazy, rebel
School name source of pride	Confident in abilities
Lose identity when name change	Talk in class
Extends to other towns in area	Know place
Identity - Community	Identity - Self
Support school – sports, musical	Could be self - wild, crazy, rebel
School name source of pride	Confident in abilities
Lose identity when name change	Talk in class
Extends to other towns in area	Know place
Involvement	Involvement
Families run community	In everything
People transfer for sports	Most do sports someway
Provide scholarships	Be part to get things done

Table 8. Home - At College

Environment	Relationships
Safety	Safety
Look for someone I know	Only one from class here
Don't talk in class	Thought would fit in
People don't care about you	Came late, behind curve
Class overwhelming	Random roommate
Make map, don't ask directions	
Familiarity	Familiarity
Get lost in all people	Maybe friends - not enough time
No one knows my background	Relieved suitemate in class
Find building - map	Loose track of hs friends
Longer here, more comfortable	High school friends important
Identity - community	Identity - self
No one asks questions	Figure out who you are
Tests are hard	Rural more respectful
No one stops to help	Pick new identity - make it goog
Leave for high school games	Confidence shaken - not smart
Go to college games	Don't shout out in class
	Don't sing in class
Involvement	Involvement
Expo - you can't do it all like in hs	Not involved
Class offers involvement	Invited to club
Not this year	Comfortable, will get involved

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Chapter IV is organized in the following manner. First is a brief description of the importance of the study, followed by a description of the participants in the study. A statement of my interest in the study that brackets, or identifies, my assumptions is the next section. Following my assumptions are the findings reached from the data analysis. The central question to this study is what transitional experiences do students from remote rural communities have on a large research-intensive campus that contributes to their decision to stay or leave? The findings are broken down into these two general questions: (1) what contexts or situations typically influenced or affected participants' experiences prior to attending this institution; and (2) what contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected participants' experiences at this institution? The data analysis is formatted to answer these questions.

Participants

The thirteen students who agreed to participate in this study came from seven different counties and ten different communities across one state. Many of these communities are home to only a few hundred residents. In an effort to protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were given to the participants. The communities were all called "My Town," and high school mascots were named "My Mascot" as a way to preserve anonymity of the participants. Several respondents were the

only person from their community attending the selected institution. To further protect anonymity, information about community population and high school graduating class size is given as a summation. Four communities had 499 or fewer residents, two communities had between 500 and 899 residents and five communities had more than 900 residents. No community had more than 1,200 residents. Two communities had more than one person participating in this study.

The smallest high school class size was 14 and the largest was 43. The smallest communities did not necessarily have the fewest students. Some communities had a cooperative arrangement with other districts for sports or classes, referred to as co-oped by the participants. Some school districts combined their school districts with neighboring districts as a way to offer or maintain programs. The combining of districts is called consolidation. Many of the participants were able to get college credit for classes while in high school, referred to as dual credits. At the time of the interviews, some first year students were, on paper, second year students by virtue of earning college credit while in high school. As far as possible, I will refer to the years a participant has attended the institution rather than a traditional class designation (e.g. freshman, sophomore, etc.)

The students who participated seemed eager to help and had no trouble answering questions, with the exception of one first-year student. This particular student was using the interview for extra credit and did not seem focused on the interview questions. What follows is a brief description of each student who participated.

April

I met April early on a Saturday morning, just after she had finished an all night fundraiser for a national charity. This petite, dark-haired young woman seemed excited

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about her group's accomplishment, and was looking forward to sleeping. She was a fourth-year student in the spring of 2008, and was looking forward to graduation in a year so she could continue her studies in dentistry. She had an aura of confidence and self-assurance. As she told me about her home community, I got the feeling she would not return there in the future. Living in the small town, she was never quite a part of the farm culture of the high school. She much preferred the excitement and activity for which large communities are known. In fact, the university's city that seemed so big at one time had become too small and limiting for her.

Tom

Tom's great smile, quick laugh, and good sense of humor invited conversation. This average height man with sandy colored hair and glasses showed his excitement about life; in particular his excitement about coming-to-college was infectious. As he told me about his home, I could tell it held fond memories for him. He often smiled while he recalled a story about his home and his life on the farm. As he recounted stories about his home, he confided that he had a reputation as a bit of a rebel at home, but quickly assured me that was in the past. As a third-year student in the spring of 2008, he has known since sixth grade that he wants to be a lawyer.

Mary

Mary was excited to come to the interview and was eager to answer questions. A third-year student at the time of the interview, majoring in biology, and looking eventually to getting a degree in medicine. She appeared to love telling stories of her home, and shared how supportive the community was whenever there was any emergency. Her pride in her community showed as she wore a sweatshirt with her

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hometown's name on the front. Although she was the only person coming to the university from her graduating class, she was very excited when she received her acceptance letter. She shared that she looked up the classes she would have to take on the Internet.

Tina

Tina is a dark-haired, first-year student who describes herself as the crybaby of her graduating class. She realized throughout her last year of high school that the following year would be different for everyone, and that their lives were changing. She took a while getting comfortable when answering questions, and showed her nervousness by pulling at the sleeve of her sweater. She lived in a small town growing up, and she knew everyone in every house in town. Tina lamented the fact that economic growth in the area had changed the town so she no longer knew everyone. Her first semester at college was "rough" and she called home frequently. She plans to become a lawyer, and was inspired by a favorite mystery book to pursue this degree.

Cathy

Going back to her hometown to raise her future children is a dream that Cathy shared. This bright-eyed, second-year student had good memories growing up on the farm, and said the town had everything people would need. Her personality was outgoing and friendly, although she admitted to some quirks, like dying her hair different colors. The day she interviewed, however, her hair color was a dark brown. She had quite a wide circle of friends, from age six to sixty. Her desire to go to this university started at a young age, and she had always supported the institution's athletic teams. After struggling with the decision for over a year, Cathy had just declared on a major and seemed relieved

to have that decision made. She eventually wants to be a counselor and has begun her career in Rehabilitation Science.

Sue

Sue's bubbly personality filled the room when we met for the interview. This petite fourth-year student fairly bounced into the room, stowed her backpack under the chair, and sat cross-legged in the chair while we visited. She was intensely interested in my questions, and appeared very comfortable during the interview. One of her biggest culture shocks in coming to the city was in the difference in value of land between the rural community, her family's farm, and the city. Her home community was very supportive of its members, particularly in the face of illness. Sue described herself as very outgoing, accepting, and open-minded. A spur of the moment personality, she made a last minute decision to attend and her older brother, a residence hall advisor, helped her get a room in a residence hall.

Adam

This tall, light brown-haired third-year student had one of those slow country drawls and quiet demeanor that invited you into his circle. He thoughtfully answered every question, although he sometimes chuckled as if remembering a private joke. Adam was the kind of person who thinks things through before rushing in. He said he felt he was expected to go to college because he graduated close to the top of his small class. He had changed majors before he finished his first semester, and was now happily preparing to be an accountant. He was a leader in high school, played sports, was in many clubs, and served as class president. His spare time before college was spent helping out on the family farm.

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Rita

Rita was a very timid first-year student who had a hard time answering the questions. She was using the interview as extra credit for a class, and appeared more interested in hearing my questions than in answering them. Her soft voice and tentative nature contributed to the low energy during the interview. While she saw the need for a college degree, she had not made connections on campus. She would study many hours because her major, nursing, was very competitive, and she was determined to get into the program. Every Friday night, however, would find Rita on the road home to the farm to see family and friends. Her expectations of college and her experiences were vastly different.

Jean

Jean laughed when she remembered her early school years. She claimed her class would say she didn't talk until eighth grade, although she says that was just a joke. She loved sports and was regularly asked sports trivia questions. In fact, she scheduled trips home around the university's home football games. She was proud to have been to all home games. This first-year student began as an elementary education major, but changed to business because she felt there were more opportunities with this major. At the time of the interview, this first year student was looking forward to the end of classes so she could get home to the country. Her ideal future would be living in the country and being a stay-at-home mother.

Mike

Mike referred to himself as a country boy. While growing up, he worked on the family farm, and some day, would like to live on a farm but have a job in a city. This tall,

blue-eyed blonde with a big smile mentored younger children at his school. In high school, he was active in sports, speech, and "tried to get into everything." He said he always thought he would go to college, and was excited when he got the letter saying he'd been accepted to the institution. His grandfather and family influenced his decision to become a physical therapist and in his second year, he is looking forward to applying for the program. He claimed his first year was pretty rough as he was quite homesick. Besides missing his family, he admitted to missing the night stars he could see from his front yard.

Lynn

This blonde brown-eyed first-year student had the advantage of having an older sibling at this institution. In elementary school, swimming at the local pool was a favorite summertime activity, followed in the evening by playing basketball or flashlight tag with all the neighborhood children. When she got older, she said, she would drive up and down Main Street looking to see who else was driving around. There was not much to do in her hometown, so they made their own fun. Injuries she received in sports lead her to an interest in a major in physical therapy. Although Lynn had very high grades in high school, her first college test was a disaster. She remembered looking at the test and thinking, "this is nothing that I studied."

Donna

This first-year student is short with dark wavy long hair. She was neatly dressed as if she had just come from a job that required dress clothes. She had lots of confidence and it showed. She shared that her hometown had a passion for football. In fact, Donna compared her hometown to the movie *Friday Night Lights* and suggested they were the

same. She and her friend were leaders in almost every high school organization, and if they weren't doing that, they were playing sports. After they graduated, no one appeared to take over their leadership roles. The institution in this study was a family tradition, so Donna never thought of going to any other school.

Beth

Beth, a giggly, happy first-year student, was from a farm 18 miles from a small community that had clung to the traditions of the people who settled there. The older residents still spoke the "mother tongue." The school sometimes put on programs centered on the country, their foods, and music. Beth worked in the local cafe, was active in school clubs, and played sports. She admitted to being the best cheerleader from the bench during volleyball season. She was excited to come to college to get away from her home community and meet new people. She loved the people in her graduating class dearly, but said, "they are forced to be your friends." Since there were so few in the community, they had to be friends by default. She came here because no one else did.

Researcher Assumptions

My life experiences in no way match those of the participants of this study. While I have resided in different rural communities for many years, I have moved so frequently, the only place I call home is where I currently live. I have resided in very small communities as well as in very large communities. I do not know what it is like to leave everyone I have ever known and go somewhere completely new. When I went to college, I began at an institution in my home community. I then transferred to a small college several hours away from my family. I have worked with students from many different sized communities, and I believe that students from small communities are a group unto

themselves. I think their commonalities could classify them as an unseen minority group, unseen in the sense that they blend into the fabric of a university. They have no easily observed characteristics that identity them as being from a rural community.

During my many moves, the rural communities I encountered most often were agricultural in nature. As I have done this study, I have come to realize that rural is more than farms. Rural can also be mining, logging or oil towns, or rural can be a reservation. I realized that rural does not necessarily mean poor, destitute or on the brink of becoming a ghost town. I have expanded my definition of what rural is and is not.

Research Questions

The overarching question for this study was what transitional experiences do students from remote rural communities have as they transition to a mid-sized, research-intensive campus? The data analysis revealed an overarching, encompassing theme described by the participants which I referred to as a meta-theme. The meta-theme was named "Home" and was supported by two constructs, environment and relationships. The construct, environment, was the space in which they lived, worked, studied, and interacted while the construct, relationships, described how students interacted with the people. Through these interactions, the participants found predictability and consistency in their lives. From the student interviews, four themes were identified that supported the constructs of environment and relationships. These themes were safety, familiarity, identity, and involvement. Though themes were defined and analyzed separately, each of the themes overlapped and were connected to the others. Definitions for these themes are:

1. Safety – the feeling of well-being an individual experiences. Within a community, this feeling may be a result of the assurance that no harm will

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happen to the person as a result of being in the community. Individuals are comforted by the knowledge that others have their best interests in mind. Relationships may be described in familial terms and may refer to not only family members and extended family members, but also to neighbors and friends who are seen as family.

2. Familiarity – the knowledge of places and people that provide consistency in daily routines. New or unknown people, events, or behaviors are infrequently encountered.

3. Identity – the characteristics or traits an individual perceives as unique to a community, themselves, or others, and that defines the community or individuals to outsiders. These traits may be locally or regionally identifiable but may not extend beyond the area. There may be a sense of pride associated with identity.

4. Involvement – the activities that a community, its members, or individuals engage in that provide continuity, consistency, or membership.

To determine which theme a statement might be, cue words were given each theme to guide the placement of the statement. Safety, for example, was the theme for statements about *feelings or emotions*, i.e., statements about trust, care, and safety. The theme of familiarity is where those items that the participant had *facts or knowledge* of people or places were located. The theme of identity was where *descriptions* of community or self were grouped and the involvement theme had *activities* as a central grouping cue. Some statements, it could be argued, could be grouped in each of the

themes. Most statements illustrated only one theme. An occasional story was used to illustrate two themes.

The analysis is divided into three parts. The first part of the analysis looked at the answers the participants gave to the question, "What contexts or situations typically influenced or affected your experiences as you prepared to attend this institution." The second part of the analysis looked at answers the participants gave to the question, "What contexts or situations typically influenced or affected your experiences at this institution?" A summary comparison of the before college and after entering college is the final part of the analysis. The participants in this study were recalling past experiences and relating their perceptions about those experiences, which may or may not be the same as fact.

"Home" – Before College

The pre-college "Home" comprised the time for participants prior to leaving for college. The analysis that follows is organized around the constructs of environment and relationships. The first part of the analysis focused on the participants' experiences prior to matriculating at the university. The construct of the environment and the construct of relationships were analyzed using the four themes: safety, familiarity, identity, and involvement.

Environment

As participants in the study began to tell about their home communities, words, phrases, and feelings were repeated in each interview: "safe," "caring," "know everyone," "small," and "go to games" were among the ideas that were shared by the informants. As participants described their life prior to coming to college, a picture

emerged of what it was like for them to live in their home community. The first theme to resonate about the pre-college "Home" environment of the participants was safety.

Safety

Safety, as a feeling of well-being, was described in somewhat different ways by each participant. Some chose to frame it as a caring situation while others saw it as a trust issue. In all instances, it was a feeling that each described.

In this day of Amber Alerts, Internet stalking, and terror levels, it seems as if no place is unaffected. The participants in the study, however, described settings not appearing in the national media. Children in rural communities are allowed to play outside without the watchful eye of a parent or guardian nearby. Tina shared,

> You know all the neighbors and everyone in the surrounding community so you
>
> feel safe letting younger kids play and walk up and down the street. You trust
>
> everyone, you never have to, like, worry about watching your kids too closely;
>
> you don't have to worry about them being abducted or anything.

This environment still allowed for taking care of each other and the assurance that help, if needed, was always available. "we always knew we could talk to people even if we didn't know them, because they were going to help" was a sentiment Lynn shared about her home. About his home, Adam commented, "If you ever needed help or anything, or if you had a flat tire, anyone would stop and help you." This caring attitude was sometimes seen as too much when Beth said,

> In [My Town] you can, like, walk down the street and someone can pull over and,
>
> like, say, 'Do you need a ride?' You can never just go for a walk. Everyone will
>
> think it is just kind of weird.

Knowing that help, whether needed or not, was always available was a matter of trusting people do to the right thing. This level of trust extends to trusting that your possessions were safe as well. In describing how his community felt like home, Tom said, "Ah, secure. Like, you don't really have to lock your doors--that kind of feeling. You're safe. You know everybody in the town and ah, [you] don't really have to worry about crime."

Familiarity

Hand-in-hand with safety in the environment was the knowledge or familiarity the participants had of their home community and community members. The knowledge these participants had went beyond an acquaintance familiarity that may be found in other, larger communities. In some of these small communities, it was possible to know everyone, in every house. Mary told me, "Um, I guess I could go through the whole town and, like, name everybody that lives everywhere." Beyond knowing where everyone lives, Beth claimed,

> You know…everything about everyone. You know about their brothers and their
>
> sisters and their parents and grandparents and what they did this weekend and you
>
> know a lot of information about everybody. And it is just like one huge family.

The familiarity with knowing where everyone lives and being able to name everyone in the town overlapped with the feeling of safety.

While the participants knew everyone, they were also aware of how information was spread throughout the community. Cathy put it best when she told me, "But, also at the same time, a very gossipy town. You know small towns…so if something interesting happens everyone knows about it before the person who it happened to even knows about

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it." Rita explained it this way, "Well, of course, it is a small community. Everybody knows everything, um, gossip was a huge thing. That's what I think of in a small town, everybody knows everything. There are no secrets."

When circumstances changed the status quo, it proved uncomfortable for some of the participants. Economic development occurring in one community brought in workers, and Tina told about not knowing them.

> Well, we have a manufacturing plant that draws in a lot of people for work…a lot of out-of-towners. Right now we have, like, an [energy] boom and we have a lot of riggers in town and you recognize them when they are in town. Right now, because of the…rigs, there, is like extending…there is a smaller trailer park right outside of town and you can see maybe ten trailers that are exactly the same thing and that is where the oil rig people are living right now, for the most part.

She continued to talk about her school, which included kindergarten through twelfth grade. Tina knew everyone in all the grades, but added, with pride tinged with regret in her voice, "It was a K-12 school, and I liked knowing all…well recently, a lot of new families were moving to town, so I don't know everybody any more. But I can name most of the kids in the whole school."

The participants described going to the same K-12 school for the entire time they were growing up. Mike's school, like most of the others, was in one building. He described it this way:

> We had one floor throughout our school and it was just a really long building and like half of it was the high school and half of it was the elementary. But we had to walk through there to get to the cafeteria. We had to walk through all that and

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they had to walk to get to the library. They had to walk through the high school to get to the library, so you really kind of got to see all the little kids and they got to see all the bigger kids and all kind of stuff. And throughout the school, like during Halloween, all the little kids would dress up and walk through all the classrooms and I don't know, it was kind of like a big family.

While most students in remote rural schools attended school in the same building from kindergarten through high school, they also became quite familiar with the teachers. Jean explained it this way, "While in our school, everybody knows everybody. You probably have the same teacher from 7th grade through 12th grade, the same teacher every year for something."

Familiarity, for the participants in this study, included not only knowing who lived in town, but in which house they lived. It included knowing the school, the students, the teachers, and the classrooms. In these remote rural communities, the participants in this study had a level of predictability in their daily lives that contributed to the meta-theme of "Home."

Identity

Within the context of the environment, identity was a characteristic or trait that distinguished a community and may have also been a source of pride. This identity may have been regional in nature, or may have been only from the perspective of the student. Community identity could be found in economics, ethnic background, or school activities depending on the perspective of the participant.

Community identity was first associated by many of the participants with the economic nature of the town. In describing his town, Tom told me, "The mall, you can

see that, and small businesses all around, a lot of farm and ranch dealerships dealing with machinery and cattle and whatnot." Many of the remote rural communities' economic drivers, in this state, were related to agriculture, whether it was farming or ranching or both. Some of the communities were sustained by energy production, such as oil drilling or wind energy.

Heritage was another factor that contributed to the identity of a community. Beth related stories about the [European] background of her hometown. Each year the community sponsored a festival with [European] food, a parade, and entertainment by the school students singing in [a European language]. She laughed,

[My Town] is largely [European], even if you go if you go to coffee shop, THE [her emphasis] restaurant in town, um during coffee hour you won't hear English. I waitress there and you have to remind them I don't speak any [European]. I can say a few words; I don't really speak [European] at all. And then I would say, "Can you repeat that in English because I don't speak [European]?" Everything is spoken in [European] with the older populations, and it is largely an older population and … [My Town] is the "[European Food] Capital of the World."

As Beth was telling about her hometown, there was pride in her voice. The customs of her town distinguished the community from all other communities in the area. She even boasted that people came from all around to buy the town's specialty food.

Schools were also sources of identity for the remote rural communities from which the participants in this study came. Community members followed the sports teams on a regular basis. Donna, in describing her home town, said this, "Yeah, our community is pretty much all about football. The movie, *Friday Night Lights*, that is

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pretty much about our town." April was realistic about the adulation given sports. "We're not very good at sports. Really. But that's what usually gets recognized and acknowledged rather than academics." State championships helped mark the identities of some communities. Mike was proud of the fact that his school had won several state championships. "Especially with sports, we had a pretty big honor, four state champions. So, uh, our school was pretty well known for sports, yeah."

Cooperating or "co-oping" with other schools to field sports teams or offer classes and/or consolidating school districts was a common method of maximizing scarce resources in remote rural communities in this state. This happened in several communities where participants lived, and it affected their perception of identity in the community. For Beth, school cooperation happened the year after she graduated. The high school changed names "'cause there wasn't the population and less people, and so there wasn't enough people to participate in all the sports, so they co-oped with another school. They are now the 'My Mascot'." She was sad because she didn't have the "gear" to support her siblings' teams when she visited home.

Even though sports appeared to be acknowledged more readily, the academic side of schools did contribute to the identity of the community as well. In talking about her high school, Donna said, "Out of all the smaller schools around our area, we are probably like one of the best ones because we do have harder classes and we are really into organizations." Rita's school had a reputation for academic excellence as she told me,

I heard from lots of people around [My Town] that our standards were above

other schools. And, like, a 94 to 100 was an A and in other schools it was lower

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than that ...One friend said she tried studying with her boyfriend and he couldn't help her study because he didn't do that in high school.

Some participants viewed their schools as being academically better than other schools in the area, and this view contributed to the identity of the community. Many of the schools also helped the impression of academic excellence by offering dual credit classes, which are classes taken in the high school that counted simultaneously for credit toward high school graduation and college credit.

The participants viewed identity as being supportive, both of the students and other members of the community. In some ways, this support was tied with safety, the knowledge that someone was always there to help. Support came in other ways as well. Through the schools, the community supported the students' educational efforts. Many communities offered dual credit courses so students could get credit for college classes while still in high school. Cathy was one who took courses for college credit. "I came in to school with 12 credits already under my belt, so I was kind of ahead of the game."

Involvement

Involvement is defined as those activities that communities, community members, and individuals engage in that provide continuity and cohesion. These activities may include community celebrations, support for school functions, school involvement, and shopping. The participants in this study told stories of how everyone in the community was involved in community celebrations as well as sporting events.

For these participants, community celebrations appeared to occur in the summer and early fall, and appeared to be centered around identity characteristics such as

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ranching, national holidays, or heritage. Mary proudly told of the summer events in her home town,

> We also have a roping area, which was just built, and that's kind of a big thing
> because a lot of the areas [*sic*] are farmers and ranchers and we have kind of a big
> roping every summer. A lot of people attend. We also have a huge Fourth of July
> celebration which is, like, um, I think all the money that the town makes goes into
> buying the fireworks for it, but, like, it's kind of known around the area.

The Fourth of July celebration in Cathy's hometown was somewhat different as she described it:

> We have a derby and street dance and during the day there is the fair showing
> where the kids show their animals... A lot of people come up for it, lots of
> relatives so it is pretty packed that week.

While in Beth's town, the community celebrated their [European] heritage. Beth's story of involvement with the community follows her story of community identity. In order for the community to celebrate their cultural heritage, the school children needed to be involved. She told of how the school children would learn songs in [a European language] to sing during the festival.

> So we have [European] Day every year in the fall. And they make large vats of
> [food] and everyone comes to the civic center and gets in for free and then the
> band and the choir from the school play. And they have, like, radio people come
> and talk and different musicians come and perform while the people are eating
> their [food], um, and speak in [European] and the songs in the choir and the songs
> we sang were all in [European]. So I know a ton of [European] songs. I don't

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know what they mean, but I can sing them.

The participants in this study experienced involvement through their community's celebrations. Whatever the theme of the celebration, the participants had a role. Whether showing farm animals or singing, they were involved in the life of the community.

Community members participated in the life of the school. As Sue described what happened when the school football team had a game, "There is absolutely no one anywhere else in the town when a football game is going on and that is basketball games are very huge too." Cathy's view of the community and sports was told like this, "Sporting events were a big thing…even if parents didn't have kids in sports, they would always just come to the games to just support them." While the school supported community activities, the community supported the school. Beth put it this way,

> The school and the community are intertwined a lot. Because like the different activities in school, like I mean, I was in FFA and I was in, um, the annual staff. And we would go to the community and ask for donations for different things and the community was based, I mean was largely involved, with the school. I mean like sometimes different, um, organizations would have scholarships for the school seniors. And they were intertwined a lot through different things.

In the school, the participants told how everyone was involved in clubs and sports whenever possible. Lynn explained how it worked at her school, "We are big into athletics. Um, and almost everybody in our class participated in, um, at least one if not two or three sports." Donna's small school was much the same, "the town doesn't really have very many things to do since it is so small, so you just do sports. Everybody just does sports." Being involved in sports, whether as an athlete, cheerleader, statistician, or

spectator, was one way for the participants to be involved with the community since it appeared many community members supported the teams.

One last activity in the pre-college environment of involvement was that of the monthly shopping trip. These remote rural communities had few resources and what they did have may have cost more than in a larger community. The participants told of having to go to a nearby larger community to do monthly shopping. Sue's explanation summed the experience up best when she said,

We have to plan ahead. Um, we are running low on this or we are running low on that and we have to run to [The City]...Like, it wasn't just 'cause you can't really just get groceries. For the most part in town, you can, but they are more expensive. We have to plan trips out of town to restock everything.

Mary told a story that explained the intertwining of the community and the individual. A young child from her hometown had a serious illness and was hospitalized in another state. A web site had been set up so concerned people could check on the progress of the child's treatment. People from all across the country signed into the site to wish the child well. In marveling at the response from so many people, Mary said the child observed, "You can take the person out of [My Town], but you can't take [My Town] out of the person."

The pre-college environment of the participants has a sameness associated with it. The participants felt a high degree of safety in their community. They felt cared for and had the assurance that if they needed help, help was available nearby. They were familiar with the people and places in their community and were proud they knew everyone. Unfamiliar or new people were a novelty. Their communities had identities they could

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take pride in, whether it was the community or the school. Finally, the participants had connections to the communities through activities where the involvement went both ways, the community giving to the students and the students giving to the community. The students felt a part of something.

Relationships

While the environment included those larger connections, relationships were those personal interactions the participant had with others in the community or with their view of themselves. The themes of safety, familiarity, identity, and involvement supported this construct and contributed to the meta-theme of "Home."

Safety

Safety in the context of relationships comes when an individual experiences a long history (or interaction) with other individuals. It is the well-being found in knowing the backgrounds of those with whom an individual has daily or almost daily contact. Participants in this study told stories of knowing the same people for their entire lives. With graduating class sizes ranging from 13 to 43, it was possible to know many details about everyone.

Sue began telling about her high school graduating class, and a picture of their first grade class.

I graduated with 37 students, and in my senior yearbook there was a picture of my first grade class, which had 32 of those 37 students I graduated with were also in my first grade class [sic]. So, I knew everyone's birthday, their parents, their grandparents, everyone's church…

With class sizes ranging from 13 to 40, it was possible to get to know each other very well. Beth told a similar story about her graduating class of eighteen.

In school I knew all my classmates. Ninety percent of them were with me from kindergarten, so they were like my brothers and sisters. So, you know, in [My Town], everything about everyone. You know about their brothers and their sisters and their parents and grandparents and what they did this weekend and you know a lot of information about everybody. And it is just like one huge family really.

Some of the class members were relatives. Adam explained, "It is just a small knit community. I went to school with at one time, there was six or seven first cousins in the same school as I was growing up. That's nice."

The sense of security that is marked by knowing everyone has another plus, close one-on-one attention from teachers. Mike liked the small class size. "I was really into everything, just being at school. I really liked the teachers, and I really liked all my friends there [and] the fact that the school knew who we were."

Beth explained one downside to the small numbers in this way, "When you're so small, they're your friends, but they are forced to be your friends because you only have 18 people to choose from, you know." The students in these small communities often have no choice in friendships. To be a part of the group or to be included in activities, they need to work to maintain the relationships with their classmates but they never really know if they liked for who they are or if they are just tolerated.

Familiarity

In the daily relationships of the participants in this study, the participants had acquired years of knowledge about the people that came into their lives regularly. Often times the participants had the same teacher every year for several years, had class in the same rooms, went to school with relatives and had relatives as teachers. This daily familiarity permeated their lives to the extent that when new people moved into the community, it was a major event.

Some of the schools in remote rural communities represented in this study had 150 or fewer students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Given the low numbers of students, often there would be one teacher per subject in the upper grades. For example, students would have the same teacher for English throughout grades seven to twelve and they would have class in the same classroom for six years. Jean explained it this way, "You probably have the same teacher from 7th grade through 12th grade…every year for something. We actually did have two English teachers…but that would be the only one we had two of [sic]."

Not only were classmates relatives, there were times when teachers were relatives. As Adam explained, "I liked the small class size. For a while, I had two aunts that taught there too, so they kind of kept an eye on you, too. Not too close, but they always knew what was going on." The idea first discussed in the environmental construct, that those in a rural community have no secrets, was observable in these relationships as well. The students from these remote rural areas were explaining their life as an open book.

While it was possible to have relatives teaching in the school, it was also possible to have different generations of family members taught by the same person. Jean told a story of her family's connection with one teacher. Her father had grown up in the same community where she had, and they'd been taught by some of the same teachers.

He went to school when it was just in my town, and then they consolidated with some of the same teachers. So yes, some who taught him taught me and actually my grandpa taught one of the teachers who taught my dad, then he taught me. He like just stayed. He was ready for retirement but he said, "I'll teach you." So, he stayed until I got through the class, and then he retired. It was kind of funny.

Cathy's view of her school was, "I liked having close contact with the teachers, which is way different than going to college. So I was used to that, being close with the teachers, but you know." Relationships with the teachers in remote rural communities were possible, as was the fact that the teachers also knew the parents.

Occasionally new people moved into these small communities. It might have been a result of an increase in economic development, as with the increase in oil drilling that Tina talked about or through marriage. Mary explained that people who moved into her town "are people that are working for like the surrounding ranches, …teachers who come in to teach. And mostly the new people are like people who marry people…who are staying in [My Town]." When new people do move to town, it is an event for the students in the school who are not accustomed to new students. Beth remarked about the excitement a new student brought to her school, "You couldn't meet anybody new. We were always excited when we heard someone new was going to move to [My Town], and, oooooo, like a new person in school and that was exciting."

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For the participants from these remote rural communities, their daily lives were filled with consistency, from the same friends, teachers, classrooms, and schools. Only occasionally would anything new happen in their lives to change this flow.

Identity

The participants in this study had a clear idea about who they were, and how others perceived them in their school and community. Their identities were characterized by their personalities or role in the school structure and by their abilities. They described themselves as "a bit of a rebel," "the class cry-baby," "a leader," "just a farm boy," and "antisocial." Rita said that when others would describe her, they'd say, "...I am loud, my laugh is loud. I am pretty outgoing and energetic a lot in high school, like to screw around a lot and not pay attention."

The participants talked about their high school academic experience with confidence. They saw themselves as intelligent and could see themselves as college students. In describing herself in high school, Mary said, "The thing about high school wasn't really hard, like I had a 4.0, and I really never studied for it so, and I'm not, I mean, I'm smart but I'm not like prodigy." Lynn's view of her high school experience was much the same. "Everything came easy for me in high school. I didn't have to study for tests or I studied for twenty minutes before and got A's on all my tests. I barely did homework 'cause I didn't need to." Participants saw themselves as being smart in high school. One reason Adam came to college was because, "I was kind of expected to go to a four year school just 'cause [*sic*], well, I don't know, like, the second in my class, so the smart people always go to four year schools."

Family, community members, teachers, and guidance counselors each played a role in helping to shape the participants' views of themselves as college students. Expectations were that the participants would go to college. In Tina's case, as in most of the others' cases, guidance counselors' worked with the participants to help them on career paths. Tina explained, "In high school, we were drilled on going to college, and getting that higher education, and knowing what you wanted to do with your life."

These participants took the guidance counselors' ideas and other people's suggestions seriously, about attending college, and came to view themselves as college students. Each one made comments like Tom's about going to college, "Well, as far as I know looking back, it was always my plan to go to college. I've always had a big passion for the traditional system." Along with the vision of going to college, these participants were confident they would be accepted, and desired to attend only this institution. Jean's confidence came through in this statement, "I guess I only applied to here, I didn't apply anywhere else. I don't know, I guess I just didn't really worry about it, and I got it [the acceptance letter], and it said I was accepted."

Involvement

The participants were very involved in activities while in high school, whether it was formal organized clubs common to schools or the informal social activities organized by the participants themselves. Most, but not all, listed some sort of sports involvement, whether as athlete, statistician, or cheerleader. School clubs, such as Future Business Leaders of American (FBLA), speech, choir, and Future Farmers of America (FFA) were among the more common clubs cited. Donna recalled her high school activities this way.

Yea, like my best friend and I were, like, the president and vice president, of, like, every organization. So we were always busy doing projects and, like, lining up things for activities and we had to like run pretty much the high school. It was kind of sad but we were always busy with the school and if we weren't doing that, we were playing sports.

Mary's high school experience was similar. There were twenty-eight in her class and she described her involvement this way, "I was, like, one of the more leaders. I was class president, like, the FBLA president. So involved probably, maybe a little too involved?" Lynn's involvement followed a similar track. She told her story this way.

I was involved in a lot of extra-curricular activities. I did student council, [Gold Rewards Card], which is you get a card based on your GPA that comes with privileges. So, um, I was on that team and we had to, um, talk in front of the rest of the student body and like hand out prizes and stuff. And I was in FBLA for four years. I went to nationals in that. And then I was in National Honor Society and I was, what else? There is a lot of stuff. Anything that, um, we could be in we probably all of us were. We were, just like, we wanted to be like, all my classmates wanted to be involved in as much stuff as we wanted to be possible.

Clubs and sports were just two of the activities the participants did while in high school. Some participants had jobs. While in high school, Rita held two jobs, was a cheerleader, and participated in Girl Scouts. April worked with her church's youth. Clubs, sports, and jobs were the formalized activities with which the participants kept busy.

There was time for informal socialization as well. When school was not in session, the participants found time to meet. Lynn laughed when she recalled the fun she and her classmates had driving up and down Main Street on weekends and after Wednesday church school.

In high school, we drove up and down Main Street for fun. It was the thing to do. We would start at the beginning of our high school parking lot and then go [down], what we call Main Street, and we would go all the way down Main Street up to the water tower, which is probably like a mile and a half long the whole Main Street at the most. We would get a group of friends and drive around and see who else was driving around, and we would have a parking lot, and we would go sit in and just talk, and Main Street was the place to be when you were in high school.

"Home" – Before College Summary

Within the meta-theme of "Home" is placed the construct of relationships that is supported by the themes of safety, familiarity, identity, and involvement. The participants in this study found safety in their relationships by virtue of the fact that nearly everyone they came into contact with was known to them, in great detail. The participants knew family histories, important dates about individuals, and described this feeling as family. There was consistency in the "familiar" for them in their daily encounters, from the school they attended for almost thirteen years to the teachers they had for the same subject for several consecutive years, and frequently in the same room. Their identities were tied to their place in their group, and to their successes in high school. They were rebels or smart or college students. Finally, they appeared to understand that involvement

was part of being a community. Mike put it this way, "I believe that comes from small towns and living on the farms and having to work your whole life and knowing what you have to do to get things done."

The first general question in this study was, "What contexts or situations typically influenced or affected participants' experiences prior to attending the institution under study?" The data analysis revealed a meta-theme referred to as "Home" which included two constructs, environment and relationships. The constructs were supported by four themes: safety, familiarity, identity, and involvement.

The second general research question was, "What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences at this institution?" To answer this question, the participants were asked questions relative to their experiences from the time they moved to campus in the fall semester to the end of their first semester at school. The end of the fall semester was chosen because the interviews were conducted in the spring semester. This allowed for all participants to have completed one semester of college prior to the interview.

"Home" - At College

As soon as the participants arrived on campus in the fall, they entered their new "Home." From this point forward, they were physically separated from most of their pre-college contacts and connections. The analysis that follows describes a transition time to their college life. In their own words, the participants described what their environment and relationships were like within the four themes of safety, familiarity, identity, and involvement.

Environment

On opening weekend of the fall semester, the participants in this study moved into their new environment. Like most first-year students at this institution and others around the country, these informants, with the help of family and friends, moved into an on-campus residence hall. Their residence hall would become their home, a place where they ate, slept, and studied. It was a place where all their "things" were kept. The realization that her "home" was now in a different location became apparent to Mary when she made her first trip to the family home. There she discovered her bedroom had been made into a guest room. "I was left a box in the closet … they always wanted my room to be the guest room … and my mom said, 'You have your own room now in college.' Oh, my gawd, it's true, you know." The university campus became the place they attended classes, met new people, and found involvement. In contrast, the city where the campus was located became their new address, but their interaction with it was limited.

Safety

Safety is the feeling of well being expressed as caring and trust by these participants. "Overwhelming," "scared," "shocked," and "mad" were words repeated throughout the interviews when they described their new home in the beginning, whether referring to the residence hall, classes, or the campus. Participants were able to describe their experiences on move-in day and their first classes. The participants also described how they learned new behaviors regarding safety.

Move-in day was generally described as chaotic, with the finding of rooms, unpacking, and meeting roommates. Although hall activities beginning after evening meal were planned to help with this transition process, only three participants arrived on

campus in time to participate in the full range of events. One participant moved in only to return home until the day classes began. Nine of the participants came after the first flurry of activity. Tom arrived on Sunday and tells this story:

> So, ah, we get to [the city where the university is located], and I'm feeling a little nervous because I came on that Sunday, and that was the orientation weekend, and it started on Friday. My check-in began on Friday, so I kind of felt a little behind the curve, I guess… Sunday it was a little strange. My mom was kind of freaking out because she was getting a little frustrated. It was a blistering hot day, no air conditioning, I don't think, and, ah, having all this stuff. I brought so much stuff – way too much … No Help Team [a group of volunteers to help with move in] and I was a little mad about that because there were people there who were busy doing other stuff.

Adam's experience on move-in day was similar. Adam came on the first day of check-in, but came later in the evening. His check-in story went like this:

> [There were not a lot of people at] the time I was moving in 'cause we were there at like 8 or 9 o'clock at night. And so we had to call a [resident advisor] and have him come down to check me in and stuff. They weren't set up out in the common area any more.

These two experiences were typical of other participants who arrived late, and were the first impressions they received of the campus. Coming from an environment where caring for others is part of the fabric of their lives, their first introduction to the campus did not have elements of caring. Tina summed up her experience this way:

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It is just different adjusting to a place where not everyone is looking out for your best interests, and they are in their own world, and they don't ... they don't necessarily care about what is going on in your life or what is happening with you, your safety and well-being. In general, the public doesn't care about this, as opposed to home where everyone cares, and everyone is concerned about how you are doing.

Trust is another facet of safety expressed by the participants. Besides adjusting to large classes, they had to adjust to the size and many had to become trusting of their classmates. Lynn was used to classes of four or five when she came to campus and had two or three classes of 200 students in each class. Although she said she prepared herself for it, she admitted, "I never thought that I would be in a class that huge, and I walked in and it was overwhelming." Even though she is outgoing, she changed her behavior because of the sheer number of people. She admitted to not talking in class or asking questions, and expressed it this way, "And you don't know if you can say anything or not because it was just so many people in there. And you don't want anyone else to get mad at you for just saying or if you ask a question."

Like Lynn, Adam had to adjust to large classes. "I was a little overwhelmed, I mean it was a lot of people," was his comment on his large classes. He said it didn't take too long to get used to the number of people, "I don't think, just a different setting, more people walking around, and then all you do is sit there and listen to lectures." But he never asked a question in class. As a senior, he has finally gotten used to the faculty in his major and the classrooms, and made the comment, "I feel more at home now, finally." It

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took him a few years to finally feel secure and safe enough in classes to talk and ask questions.

The participants needed to change behaviors in this area of trust. Lynn learned from her friends from large cities that there were certain actions that needed to be taken to ensure her personal safety. She felt that people from small communities needed to learn this while those from large communities already had that knowledge. She explained,

We're, I think, we, coming from a small town and going into a big town a bigger community, as far as, we don't have some of the knowledge of people coming from the Minneapolis do.

[It's] kind of like, you know, you shouldn't walk outside at night by yourself, you know. I am used to walking wherever, you know. But you have to be more careful about what you do. You have to make sure to lock your car…just safety kind of stuff that people from Minneapolis are used to, that and know because they are in a bigger city. I, like, my family, they never lock their vehicles, you know, and coming up here it is automatic. [You] automatically have to lock your vehicle. And, you know, at night you have to be careful. When I am walking at night by myself, I have my phone with me. You know, if you have someone come up behind you, you know, it is not that big, but some things have happened here before. I just think we are kind of more closed to that aspect you know. We don't really know it, so when we come up here we have to like do this.

Familiarity

Familiarity is the knowledge of the community and its members. The participants have moved to a community in which they may have little knowledge of place and people. The unfamiliar showed up in surprising places from the classroom to learning about their place in the environment, and learning about the city in which they now live. This concern overlapped with the safety theme in that they were not familiar enough with the environment or people to know who to trust or who would care.

After adjusting to their new surroundings in the residence halls, participants needed to become familiar with the location of classrooms followed by adjustments they needed to make in the classroom. There seemed to be no universal way the participants became familiar with the campus. Some took advantage of tours before coming to campus; others attended events on campus during high school that helped with the familiarization. Still others waited until they arrived to find their way around. While all participants came to the summer orientation, not everyone took a tour and some of those that did were interested in seeing their residence hall. "We toured campus and I wanted to see my dorm room, but we didn't get to see that," was Beth's comment about the campus tour. It was not until they needed to be in a certain building did it matter where the buildings were located. The day before classes began all 13 participants mapped out the way to their classes, and went on a self-guided tour. Donna, after admitting to not having taken a campus tour, told how she handled finding classes.

Yep, because online they tell you what building it is in, and what room it is in.

But other than that, I didn't know where any of the buildings were, either, because

I didn't go on a campus tour, either, when I came. So I had to go the night before

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and look for all the buildings. That was kind of scary. I hope I don't walk into the wrong room or anything.

Fear of entering a wrong room or having the wrong book was expressed by several of the participants. Mike told of labeling books to be sure to have what was needed for class. "I remember the night before we went to classes, so it would have been Monday night, I remember sitting down and labeling all my books. I was so afraid I was going to forget or grab the wrong notebook."

Making maps of the campus to find classes was one way the participants brought familiarity into their lives. Cathy found another way to connect with the familiar in this story of the first day of class.

> I would try to find someone I knew in the classes with me, 'cause, that, you know, I don't like to sit by myself in a room full of ... 'cause I don't have anyone to talk to then. But, um, if I would sit next to someone, then I would try and maybe sit next to them for the rest of the week, and we would hopefully talk to each other, and get to know each other so we wouldn't be alone. And that usually happened in most of my classes.

In order to achieve the feeling of familiarity in their new environment, the participants developed strategies for finding their way around and coping with large classes. Within the classroom, they also encountered the unfamiliar where they needed to adjust. Stadium seating in a classroom was a first for Mike who commented, "I've never sat in movie style seating with a teacher in front of you. I mean it was a different experience for me. I mean, it was kind of nice - it wasn't really scary or anything." Sue

found certain teaching methods, such as power point presentations, and scantron cards used on tests, "weird."

Beyond the campus and the classrooms, the participants also told of having to get used to the city. Driving in the larger city was a source of stress for some participants. Jean laughed when she talked about driving, "I just hadn't really driven in a big town before, I don't know, different than the gravel roads you drive on." But for Adam getting used to the sound of the train was his challenge. "The train, that was the toughest thing to get used to, the train tracks were real close. I don't know the closest [train track] at home was twenty-five miles away so never heard that at all."

From new sounds to the masses of people encountered on a daily basis, the participants in this study had to adjust too much when they came to campus to bring about the familiarity to which they were accustomed. For these rural students, things that many would not even take note of, like the sound of the train, was just another 'something new' they encountered. Throughout their pre-college time, there was remarkably little that was new in their lives and if there was, it sparked excitement. At college, they encountered new at every turn and even the smallest thing, like a train whistle, was notable to them, even years after it happened.

Identity

The participants in this study described two identities of their new environment. One of the identities came from ideas they had formed before coming to campus and the second came from the reality they found after attending college.

The participants in this study reported being regarded as smart students and always at the top of their classes in high school. Each one knew that they would be

attending a college, and they had career goals when they arrived. Although the participants knew the institution was a place for education, their answers described their experiences at the institution in terms of "fun." In describing college and college life, Rita said, "What the college life is exactly I don't know. My opinion of it is you go to college, you live in the dorms. You go to all the hockey games, you party, and go to the frats." The idea that college life is about partying may have come from stories the participants might have heard. Mary's idea that college was a big "social thing" came from stories friends had told her.

> I just think from hearing stories, from like, from like ... I have good friends that are a year older than me, like I said, that we were friends with, in classes. They would come back from college and be like, "Oh, we're going to this party, blah, blah, blah." It wasn't like, "Oh, I'm taking this really cool biology class" or whatever. You know. I think that's just what you hear about, are the social parts of it.

Although colleges and universities focus on academic excellence in promotional materials, the college identity that most participants had developed, initially, was from a different source, one closer to them: friends. The identity they held of the institution after they had arrived changed. Continuing with Mary's story of college identity, she added,

> But really, like, it's about, you know, furthering your education and preparing for a career that you want to have. Like, you need to definitely learn how to balance that social and educational aspect or else you're in trouble, that's for sure.

After attending classes, the informants changed their impressions of what the college identity was. The identity went from a place to play, have fun, and party to a competitive place to get an education. Lynn summed it up this way,

So, I guess my first impressions of going to college were so much fun and probably going to be hard, but it shouldn't be too hard, and I should be able to handle it. But coming to college, I realize it is a lot harder than I thought it would be and it is a lot more competitive than I thought it would be.

The participants also realized that college was a place to be independent from parents and family members. April remembered her first night on campus. As she stepped outside, she recalled thinking, "Oh my goodness, I am completely independent. I can come home whenever I want, I can do whatever I want, I don't have anyone to report to." College is a place to be independent, it is also a place to find an identity. In describing college, Cathy advised, "You should really figure out who you are. That is what college is, you know. If you want to create a new person in yourself, you can do that at college, so make sure it is a good one, though."

The participants in this study found two categories of identity for their new environment, perceptions and reality. Seven participants came to college with the view the college identity was parties and fun only to discover that college was about learning, education and competition. When reflecting on what he thought college was about, Adam made the observation, "I really got a lot more respect, now, than when I started, for people who go through four year degree just 'cause it is a lot tougher than I thought it was going to be."

Involvement

The division of identity described by the participants – the academic and the social – reflects an administrative arrangement universities and colleges typically have. An academic affairs division coordinates classroom activities, research, and teaching. Student Affairs is the part of the system where out-of-class activities happen in co-curricular and extra-curricular involvement opportunities. The chances for involvement possibilities happened both in-class and out-of-class for participants. Unlike their before-college environmental involvement, the participants reported limited involvement with the city proper in general. Other than a quick trip to a store, they generally had no interaction with residents of the city.

Honors and the Cross Discipline Program were two academic program options some students took advantage of their first year on campus. Through these two programs, participants found involvement opportunities. Mary explained it this way, "We were involved with, like, Honors that had a lot of, like, you know, social activities and stuff so we did that." Tom also found being in the Honors program socially beneficial, "[W]e had a chance to get to know some of my other classmates on a more personal level."

Opening weekend is a celebration welcoming new and returning students to campus. Although many activities were planned for opening weekend, few participants in this study took advantage of these opportunities. Rita moved into her residence hall room and left for home. "I unpacked everything and I went home for the weekend. I didn't do any of the [opening weekend] stuff, I went home." Sue, who had decided at the last minute to come to this institution, dropped her things off in the room, and also left for home immediately. Her reason for going home so soon was, "There was a party that next

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night, actually is why I went back." At the other extreme, Mike moved in on the first day and was excited about going to college and meeting people. He and his roommate took advantage of all that was offered the first weekend. "We did all that kind of stuff [opening weekend activities]. We just did that to kind of have some fun and get to know more people." Between these extremes were the participants who moved in late and did not get involved with any planned activities. Donna and her roommate came on the last day. They didn't participate in the opening activities, instead they, "didn't really do many of the freshman things. We just kind of talked to the people from around [My Town] ... all the small towns around there and they had, like, their suitemates and so we met all those people."

As one of the ways to learn about involvement opportunities, the institution in this study hosts recruitment day for organizations each fall so that students, new and old, can find opportunities to join clubs and organizations. After Mary attended her first recruitment day, she exclaimed, "Holy cow, you can do all this stuff? You have to step back and decide what you want to do 'cause you can't do it all like you could in high school."

The ties to the pre-college home community took many of the participants away their first semester. Donna's younger brother played high school football during Donna's first year in college and rather than attending her college's games, she went home. She explained it this way,

> Yeah, 'cause I had a brother playing and so, like, we are really good and
> everybody goes back. So, I, yeah, we went. I probably saw like five football
> games which is bad 'cause like the first semester, I didn't go over a month

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without going home ... which is not good, but at the time, I liked it because I was not so like meeting people here.

Many of the participants in this study recalled frequent trips home rather than staying on campus to be involved in activities. While many participants went home every two or three weekends, Rita traveled home each weekend.

I know some people frown down on going home every weekend. "Why are you doing going home again, you were home last weekend?" But I had those strong friendships and relationships from high school, and those are the ones that are going to matter in life.

Jean, a self-proclaimed football fan, was one of only a few who remained for home football games. When telling about times she went to her home for visits she said, "Let's see, hum, can't remember for sure. [It] depends on when football games were that determined when I was going home. I have to be here for every football game."

The participants did find an advantage to living in the "big city." Beth laughed when she said, "I can run to Target if I am out of shampoo." The convenience of having resources nearby took getting used to for the participants. Mary remembered one of her first classes required a three-ring binder and she had forgotten to get one.

I was, like, "Crap! I don't have this 3-ring binder," and I remember being, like, "Oh! I can just run to Walmart." You know it [is] just a trip down the block ... I remember my roommate, Laura, she just like made fun of me for that 'cause she's, like, "Well, it's just to Walmart." I was, like, "Usually if I need something from Walmart, I need to make a list because we weren't going to go there for two weeks so it was, like, get what you need."

Relationships

The participants in this study had moved to an institution where they knew few if any people. In many cases, they were the only people from their graduating class at this institution. The majority of the relationships in this place would be with people they had just met. Within this space, they would also examine what they knew about themselves.

Safety

For the majority of the participants, they had little or no history with people at this institution. It followed that the sense of well-being that comes from this knowledge also might have been absent. Meeting new people and beginning to establish the feeling of safety appeared to be the first order of business. Often, the first people they met lived in the residence hall, followed by those they met in the classroom. While most participants lived with randomly assigned roommates, three participants planned to live with people known to them. Two "roommates" were related to the participant and one roommate was a friend.

Roommate experiences went from one end of the spectrum to the other. Some encounters resulted in friendships while others were horrible. Some roommates dropped out at the end of the year, and were not significant in the participants' lives. Jean met her roommate during the summer orientation, but they never became friends, and at the time of this study, she lived alone. "I tried a roommate. But at least I know what that was like, at least I tried it, you know, or whatever. But she moved out which was fine with me."

April's three different roommates exhibited bizarre behavior, stole her possessions, and did drugs. She summed it up by saying, "I had the worse experience with roommates ever. It was awful." Feeling there was not much that could be done, she

finished the year by saying, "I just kind of paid my dues and kind of closed myself off."

After her first year, she lived in an apartment, and then with her sibling.

Some of the loss of safety, in the forms of caring, were shown in homesickness.

Mike admitted to missing family and home.

Um, the nights were kind of tough. I would call my parents pretty often, and talk

to them. Just sitting there, you start thinking about home again, and get kind of

homesick. So, you ... but other than that, it got better as the year progressed. But,

yeah, I still thought about it.

Even though some participants were the only ones from their community or

graduating class attending this institution, this didn't necessarily mean they didn't know

people at the school. Rita missed all her floor's get-acquainted activities, but still knew

most of the floor. "I already knew like half the girls on my floor from surrounding towns

back home, so I already knew a lot of people on my floor."

Familiarity

At the university, everything was new and different for the participants, including

the people. While some participants came with people they knew, all participants needed

to make new friends. The sheer numbers of people on the campus meant the participants

had the opportunity to meet many new people. This also meant not everyone would know

them, including faculty members. For some participants, coming to college was the first

time they could remember having to make new friends.

Many were excited about the prospects of meeting new people, and not having

anyone know who they were. April was excited to move into a community where no one

knew her. "I loved just being able to go into a class, sit down, be a number, have no one

know my name, have no one know my grandma's name, my favorite color. I just loved being a number, and being completely anonymous." As exciting as it was to be anonymous, there was also some trepidation. Donna described her first day in class.

You just walk in among a whole bunch of people, and nobody knows how old you are and what you are doing, and all of a sudden you are in a huge classroom of people. But luckily, I had one small class. I had public speaking, and my suitemate happened to be in it, and we didn't know that before we got to class. So there was like 25 people in that class, and I walked in, and I saw her, and I was relieved, but most of my classes are like at least 100 people in it, so.

Meeting people and remembering who they were was a challenge. For Lynn it was strange to try to have to remember people's names. "You meet so many people you don't remember their names. And so, I just, like, I need to remember their names, and the next day you see them and you, like, 'Hi, can't remember your name.'" Jean anticipated she would meet a lot of new people, in fact, she thought she could meet someone new every day. "Just randomly you will meet someone and, like, everywhere you go you will see them. And, I don't know, and, that I meet a lot more people in my two semesters here then, like, my whole life."

For some, making friends seemed easy, but others had a hard time. Rita expected to make many friends but found, "You have to work to make friends and go out of your way to involve yourself in social activities, and that was difficult for me." She felt this was because she hadn't had a lot of opportunities, "to spend one-on-one time or small group time with a lot of girl friends, that is. I think if given the opportunity I could become close friends with these girls."

Making friends was just one new activity the participants needed to learn to establish familiarity in college. The second activity was to attend classes in which instructors didn't know them. When Tom attended his first large lecture class, one of his first thoughts was, "How is the teacher going to notice I'm here? And that was kind of the main thought I had going into the room. I was like, I was so used to all this one-on-one teacher/student contact." Donna explained the feeling of attending a large lecture in a college classroom as:

> Overwhelming, kind of. Because in high school, you, like, the teacher always knew everything about you. Everybody knew everything about you. And here, the teacher doesn't even know you are in the class, and you have been there all year long, unless you are vocal. And you just go there, and you listen to lectures, and they have no idea. Really it is kind of different in that form.

Identity

Although the participants knew they were leaving home for college, realizations that changes were going to happen were slow to come. They recognized changes to their identity as they occurred. They were challenged in the classroom, and in other behavioral traits.

The participants were shaken following their first exams. Most participants' rested on being very smart in high school, never having to spend much time in studying for classes. When they reached college, however, things changed. Lynn recalled her first test.

> Oh, I can remember one test that I want to forget … We kind of didn't know what to expect of that class, we didn't know what to study or how to study or what we

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should be studying. And I just was, a couple of us who had been studying for a week and a half, and we had not a clue what we were doing. And it was the first test, and we don't know what to expect. And I remember going and getting the test and sitting down and, like, this is nothing that I studied.

How participants behaved was another change to their identity. Cathy commented that in class, she was very quiet. "I am used to being able to shout jokes in class, and now I can't really do that." Outside of class, Cathy was also working to find out who she was. When she came to college, she began to party, something she had not done in high school. She finally talked to her mother about this behavior. "So the first year of college was kind of hard, rocky for my mom, 'cause I was trying to lie about it or something, so I really had to figure out who I was and what was important."

With the realization that change was happening to the participant came the realization that change happens everywhere. When Mary returned home for a visit, she was surprised to see that the people at home had changed. "When you leave, like, everything should just stop and stay the same. But when you come back, you're, like, oh, you know, people can live without me here."

Involvement

The many opportunities available at the institution for involvement included clubs and organizations, intramurals, band or choir, and classroom activities. The most common answer regarding involvement, however, was summarized by Lynn when she said, "But, I, as far as, like, clubs go and stuff, I am not that involved yet...But I definitely think that next year, now that I am comfortable with everything and where everything is at, I will get involved." April saw involvement in this light, "I was so

involved in high school, the first couple of years I didn't want to do anything. I didn't want to get involved." Most of the participants were not involved in clubs or organizations their first year on campus. Regarding involvement in clubs and organizations, Rita put it down to "that was high school stuff," and had not considered getting involved on campus. As Sue remembered her first year on campus, she recalled,

First semester, I didn't really get involved in those groups. Like, we would get our floor, [we] would play games and we would have to go to mandatory things or whatever. But I didn't really get involved [with] too much university affiliated … I go to school and I work.

Summary

For these participants from remote, rural communities, coming to the "big city" to attend college resulted in many differences to "Home." Their environment and their relationships underwent changes.

The environment of the participants' "before college" and "after college" worlds still had the themes of safety, familiarity, identity, and involvement. What those themes looked like before and after college enrollment was different. In the home environment before college, the participants' "Home" was safe. They trusted people. They didn't lock their doors. They knew that people would help them, even if they didn't know the individuals, or even if they didn't need the help. They knew details of the lives of the people they encountered on a daily basis to the point where they felt like family.

Contrast this with the college environment where they had to learn personal safety skills, which included locking doors. The participants also mapped out routes to buildings to help find their way. When they were checking into residence halls and when they were

entering classrooms, they felt people didn't care about them. Tina's comment sums up this idea, "In general, the public doesn't care about this [the student's safety and well-being], as opposed to home where everyone cares, and everyone is concerned about how you are doing." Although feelings of safety and security were not present to begin with, these feelings did appear later, as Adam noted after four years, "I feel at home now, finally."

For the participants, familiarity differed between "Home" before college and "Home" after college. In the participants' before-college home, few things changed in their daily lives. They knew everyone with whom they came into contact, and they knew where everyone lived. In school, they had the same teachers each year, for six years, for the same subject, and often in the same room. They knew everyone, in every grade, and sometimes knew the people in the surrounding communities as well. Not much changed in "Home" from one year to the next.

When the participants got to campus, one of the first things they did to get ready for classes was to map out their route to and from class. Then, they did a self-guided tour. What was once a very familiar activity, going to school, now changed. For the first time in many years, they were going to be in different classrooms, with different teachers, and different classmates. Mike was worried about taking the wrong book to class, and even going into the wrong classroom. He color-coded his books, and upon entering a classroom, he would check to see if other students had the same book to reassure himself that he was in the right classroom. The participants also were adjusting to differences in the classroom, size configuration, teaching methods, as well as to the sights and sounds of the city.

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The students knew what their home community identity was and were proud of it. Communities were known by their heritage, economic resources, or by the reputation of the school. When they talked about the state championships the school had won or the academic excellence, the students knew what it was their community stood for. The communities recognized the importance of education, and did what was necessary to ensure the students were able to get what they needed. If it was economically necessary, the communities cooperated in sports or consolidated districts.

The identity of the community the students entered when they enrolled in the institution seemed to change over time. The students initially came with an image of college as a place where you spent some of the time learning, but where you could have a lot of fun. After they got to college, they found it was more about education and preparing for a career than about fun. In addition to the change in perception of the college identity, the students found that college was a place to work on their own identity. After having lived in a place where everyone knew everything about them, they were now able to create who they wanted to be. Cathy advised, "If you want to create a new person in yourself, you can do that at college, so make sure it is a good one, though."

Involvement is defined as those activities in which community members engage that provide continuity and cohesion. These may be in the form of celebrations, school support, and shopping. The participants described the parts they played in these activities as members of a hometown community, as well as the parts community members played. During community celebrations, participants had active roles, either as participants or spectators. While in high school, students contributed to community activities by providing entertainment through concerts and plays. Community members attended

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school events, whether or not they had children in the school system at the time. It was through activities such as these that Tom's involvement helped him feel a part of the community. "[As] I grew up, I became more involved with the activities in school and all that good stuff, so I became a member of the community, so to speak." The final activity participants shared was shopping trips to the "big city" for groceries and other items.

For participants, the first real opportunity for involvement at the university was the orientation weekend activities. However, only three of the participants attended any of these events, some came late and didn't get a chance to participate while some moved into their dorm rooms and returned home immediately. The ties to their home community still appeared to be quite strong, and throughout their first semester, most of the participants returned home frequently, to see friends, attend games, or just to be home. Rita explained her frequent trips home this way, "It is so quiet and peaceful when here it is just so busy and you don't have as much privacy as you do at home." The participants did find shopping to be more convenient than they were used to in their home community.

The relationships participants developed were different between "Home" before college and "Home" at college. Participants all had close relationships with their hometown friends, and the people in their home community and, for the most part, found safety in these relationships. Their high school classmates felt more like family. "Brothers and sisters" was the way Beth described her relationship with her high school classmates, because she knew them so well. Besides enjoying close relationships with their classmates and teachers while in high school, there were instances where classmates or teachers were relatives.

In college they had to make new friends, which was a new experience for many. "I have made friends but, like, compared to high school, I was friends with everyone, you knew everyone, it was very difficult coming here," Tina reflected on her experience meeting new people and making new friends. Roommate experiences ranged from horrible to great, with most falling somewhere in between. Some participants didn't feel cared for, and kept close connections with home through phone calls and trips back home.

Participants commented on the differences in the theme of familiarity between their pre-college "Home" and their college "Home." At their pre-college home, the participants had close friends, had long histories with community members, and had close contact with their teachers. The close friends were sometimes forced on participants. As Beth explained, "they're your friends, but they are forced to be your friends because you only have 18 people to choose from." In small communities, participants didn't get to choose who their friends were, because there were just a few to begin with. In college, Jean found she met so many people she couldn't remember their names.

For the participants, familiarity with teachers may extend back to their parents having had the same teachers in high school. Cathy particularly liked having a relationship with her teachers when she compared it to college, "I liked having close contact with the teachers, which is way different then going to college." Donna experienced the difference between high school and college classrooms like this, "…here the teacher doesn't even know you are in the class and you have been there all year long. Unless you are vocal … and you just go there, and you listen to lectures, and they have

no idea really." Where the high school classroom was familiar and safe feeling, the college classroom was filled with differences.

The way the participants viewed themselves or their identity, also underwent a change when they entered college. In high school, they viewed themselves as smart, or loud and crazy, a class leader, and so on. Many commented that they didn't have to study to get good grades in high school. After they began college, these things in their self-identity changed. The first exam left some participants questioning their abilities. Others changed how they behaved in class. While Cathy used to be loud in high school classes, she felt she couldn't do that in college and was happy with the change. "If the teacher acknowledges me, then it makes my day."

Involvement for the participants also underwent a change. In high school these participants were very active and involved in academics, sports, leadership roles, and work. Some said they might have been too involved. In college, however, they spent most of the first year not involved in anything. Few students talked about joining clubs. Those that did get involved chose familiar activities, such as attending football games or church. With so many more activities to be involved in, Mary commented, "You have to step back, and decide what you want to do 'cause you can't do it all like you could in high school."

The participants in this study painted a picture of "Home" before and after they attended college. The picture of these two "homes" showed a sharp contrast between the small rural communities in which they grew up, and the large university they chose to attend.

Chapter IV reported the findings of this qualitative study. The summary, discussion, implications, and recommendations for further research are reported in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand what transitional experiences do students from remote rural communities have as they transition from the small community to a mid-size, research-intensive campus. A qualitative methodology was selected for this study so the voice of the participants could be heard. This chapter presents a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, and recommendations for practice and research.

Summary of the Study

This study originally sought to answer the question: what transitional experiences do students from remote rural communities have on a mid-size, research-intensive campus that contributes to their decision to stay or leave? Since only persisters agreed to participate in this study, the question was modified to: what transitional experiences do students from remote rural communities have as they transition from the small community to a large research intensive campus? Two broad questions framed this study:

1. What contexts or situations typically influenced or affected students' experiences as they prepared to attend this institution?

2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected students' experiences at this institution? (Creswell, 2007).

These four original questions of this study, based on Tinto's model of student departure, provided a structure for the study:

1. What experiences did the student have prior to high school graduation?

2. What experiences did the student have while preparing to attend the institution following high school graduation but prior to coming to campus?

3. What experiences did the student have after arriving at the institution?

4. Which experiences seemed to contribute to the student's decision about persisting or leaving the institution?

The actual interview questions (Appendix B) were written to answer each of these questions. During the data analysis, it was determined students' experiences following high school graduation and before coming to campus had little new data to answer the overarching question and the third question was eliminated from the study. Since only persisters volunteered for this study, question four, a comparative question, was not able to be answered.

Fifteen students from nonmetro 9 counties with fewer than ten students attending the selected institution agreed to be participants in the study and arranged to be interviewed. Of these original fifteen only thirteen also attended the same high school for at least three consecutive years, their first college experience was at the selected college, and they enrolled in college directly from high school. These thirteen interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Open-ended questions used during in-depth interviews provided the data used in the analysis in this study. Data were analyzed following a data reduction method that generated codes, categories and themes. Making meaning of the themes concluded the data analysis. A discussion of the findings follows.

Discussion

Home, as a lived experience, has been studied by some researchers and describes a physical place, a familiarity, identity, and involvement (Buckley, 1971; Baldursson, 2002). As I bracketed my assumptions, I noted that my multiple moves left me viewing home as the building in which I resided. About the experience of home, Buckley (1971) wrote,

> A good part of feeling at home has to do with the satisfaction and security that comes from being in a situation which is *familiar*, that is being situated within a *structure* that one knows about ahead of time and knows reasonably well what to expect, and knows this in a relatively unthreatened and comfortable manner.
>
> (p. 205)

This study of remote rural students showed these participants view home as existing far beyond the walls of their residence. They find their entire community and the people in the community to be familiar. They reasonably know what to expect and feel safe and comfortable in this place.

In looking at the transition these remote rural students made to the mid-size university, the themes of safety and familiarity resonated most strongly among these participants. While the adage "there is safety in numbers" may be true in some circumstances, living in a small town may also provide the feeling of safety. The participants frequently stressed how small their community was. The small size had several advantages for them. They felt safe in familiar surroundings and felt cared for by others. Their perceptions of safety seemed to be real. Crime statistics for these counties confirm low incidents of reported crimes. In 2005, the most frequent crime reported was

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a theft or burglary and no violent crimes were reported. In looking back through several years, theft/burglary seemed to be the only crimes reported in these counties (Weltz, 2007). Their perceptions of hometown safety appear to be accurate. When they arrived on the campus, safety was a topic they needed to address in a way that they hadn't done until then. There did not seem to be a formal training in safety, the participants just had to learn it on their own. Perhaps because so many of the participants were women, the issue of safety seemed to gain in importance.

Closely tied to the sense of safety are the feelings of being cared for by others. Whether help was wanted or not, someone from the community seemed to be available to help in times of need. Taking a simple walk was sometimes a challenge. The walk could be interrupted with offers to give the person a "lift," as if the only reason for walking is because something was wrong and the walker needed a ride. However, when help was needed, for example a flat tire, help was there. As the participants told their stories of caring, it struck me that these rural students are not accustomed to asking for help when they needed it. Their background in the rural community would suggest asking for help was not a part of their culture while giving help was a part of the culture.

It seems odd, then, that the first encounter most of the participants had with campus when they came to move into the residence hall was to have to seek someone to help them. The reasons most came late or did not participate in the opening weekend varied. Over half were from agricultural backgrounds and check in for fall semester is in the middle of grain harvest. The explanation some gave for their father not helping with moving was they were in the field. Many were first-generation college students and may not have known they "should" participate in all opening weekend activities to begin to

get oriented to campus and begin social integration. Although excited about beginning college, some were maybe delaying the inevitable break with home. Whatever the reason for the late arrival, those who came at times other than the Friday start time did not receive the same attention as those who arrived early on the first day of check in. Attention is one of the dimensions of mattering that is important for transition (Schlossberg, et al., 1989).

The theme of familiarity resonated loudly with these participants, as well. Perhaps because of the size of the community, the participants felt they knew everyone. It was not uncommon for the participants to refer to their home community as one big family. This level of familiarity with the community would tend to add to the feeling of safety. The trade-off for this feeling is privacy. The lack of privacy means knowing what everyone did was also possible. While most of the participants appeared to dislike having their secrets known, they seemed resigned to the status quo. April was the only one who expressed dismay over the fact that everyone knew everything about everyone else. She was the only one who wanted to get away from the small town to a place where she would be a number. Rather than disliking the feeling of anonymity, April seemed to embrace it.

Having someone know your name or care what happens to you represents the importance dimension of mattering (Schlossberg et al., 1989). In this new environment, most participants struggled with not being known. Coupled with not being known, they also had to learn the names of everyone around them. Since it was a rare occurrence in their lives to have new people move to town, they had little opportunity to develop the skill of remembering names. There did not seem to be a time when the participants had to

learn multiple names at once. When they began classes, they looked for a familiar face in a class and worked to sit near the familiar so they did not feel so quite alone. If the first intentional opportunity to learn the names of the people in the residence hall is the first day ice breaker and it is missed, transition for some students from remote rural communities may be difficult.

Size of everything seemed to be another challenge for these participants. Large classes, large campus, large city all seemed to overwhelm them. For those who enjoyed being known, size could make them feel insignificant. Those who had experiences on campus, whether through a summer camp or repeated visits to campus appeared to have begun to develop the familiarity they needed to find comfort in the size.

Besides having little practice learning names, the participants had little opportunity in the years leading up to college to learn how to make friends. They didn't realize how difficult a task it would be, what was involved in making friends or even how to go about making friends. If they came late to campus, they also missed out on the opportunities early on to begin developing that skill. While the university provides opportunities for friend-making prior to classes beginning with various planned activities, if these activities are missed, students who are already on the margin, may feel even more marginalized.

If opportunities are missed in the residence hall for making friends, another opportunity to meet people is in classes. However, faculty members, particularly those who teach large sections, may not take the time to make sure everyone in the class meets everyone else. They may also not take the time to learn the names of the students in their

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classes. For students from remote rural communities, this may seem odd as they had close contact with their high school teachers.

There also exists the possibility that not everyone in a class is new to campus. It occasionally happens that second-, third-, and fourth-year students enroll in first-year classes. The older students have had more opportunity to learn the art of meeting new people and may or may not take the time to meet a first-year student.

During the first semester, many of these students returned home as often as possible, one went home every weekend. The reasons for the trips included going to see a boyfriend/girlfriend, a sibling participate in sports, their former high school athletic teams, or to just get away from the noise of the city and see stars. Returning home is returning to a place where they felt they mattered. What can or should post-secondary institutions do to help students feel they matter?

Involvement in school activities was another aspect of remote rural students' pre-college lives with which they were very familiar. All participants were actively involved outside of class before they came to college. This involvement included sports, clubs, friends and working. Involvement in these sorts of activities became virtually non-existent for the first year for these students. These participants spent their spare time learning how to study. If they sought out a club to join, it was a sports booster club. They were familiar with sports and cheering for teams, so they tended to gravitate toward the familiar. Two spoke about other extra-curricular involvement, a fund raising group and intramurals, but both had been invited to join these groups. For some, their involvement was strictly class related, particularly in smaller classes. Whether by intention or accident, these students chose a road to involvement that worked for them. They focused

on classes as a priority before stepping out to other involvement. When they did choose to get involved, they began with familiar activities. Once again, this speaks to the underdeveloped skills of making friends and staying with the familiar and safe.

The students who participated in this study were persisters, they all returned for a second year. By other measures, the experiences these participants had upon entering this university and during the first semester may have made other students leave. The fact they persevered despite the odds may be explained by other commonalities in their background. All the participants had a strong desire to attend this university, had a strong commitment to their life's goals and had the support of their family. The support they said they received seems to have helped them get beyond the first phase of transition, moving in. What possibilities exist or could be implemented for the university to help facilitate the transition?

The findings in this study indicate that the "Home" students from remote rural communities have before college is one where they matter to the people living there. The college "Home" they describe is starkly different and it appears, in some ways, impeded the transition. This difference has the potential to impact a student's decision to remain. For this reason, several recommendations for practice are recommended.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

Recommendations for Practice

The participants in this study have described some barriers they encountered as they entered their college "Home." Recommendations for practice will focus on four areas: opening weekend, friend making, right-sizing activities, and faculty interaction.

Campus programs should be reviewed for multiple entry points that allow students similar integration experience with the campus regardless of the timing of their check-in.

Campuses could consider what their role is in helping students make friends. The process could be facilitated either accidentally by putting students from neighboring small communities in the same hall or intentionally by providing an upper classman to be a mentor or consistent friend on campus. Potentially, information about how to meet and make friends in the forms of signs or posters that might help students from rural communities begin the process of learning to make friends.

The students from these communities were overwhelmed by the size of everything on campus. Programs for integrating new students could be reviewed for the possibility of varying the number of students participating at any one time in different activities. With small and large group activities, students learning to cope with increased numbers would help to gradually introduce students to the campus.

Typically first year required classes have large numbers of students in class. When advising students from remote rural communities, it might help their transition to counsel them into signing up for a smaller section or a specialized program, which might have fewer students in them. Programs to promote increased faculty-student interaction may be explored. Students from remote rural communities are accustomed to contact with instructors and miss it at college.

Other class delivery locations might be explored. Holding a first-year experience class in a residence hall may provide for familiarity of location for rural students.

A program where faculty members interact with students socially, such as having meals in the dining halls or at an off-campus location may provide increased interaction between faculty and students. Perhaps a faculty-in-residence program could be implemented whereby faculty members spend a night, a weekend, a week, living with students in the residence halls.

Recommendations for Research

While studies exist about students from rural communities, this is the first I could find on a specific segment of the rural student population, the remote rural student. This is an easily identifiable segment of the college population and could be studied further. The following lists some possible research topics about this population.

This particular study was with students who persisted. There is a need to do a similar study with students from remote rural areas who decided not to return to their first institution or who chose to transfer.

This study was conducted with students at different stages in the transition process, some were first year and some were fourth year. To get a more accurate picture of what the transition is like as they experience, this study could be replicated using students from remote rural communities during their first semester of college. It could also be done with only fourth year students to find out more in depth what barriers they encountered and what they did to overcome them to persist.
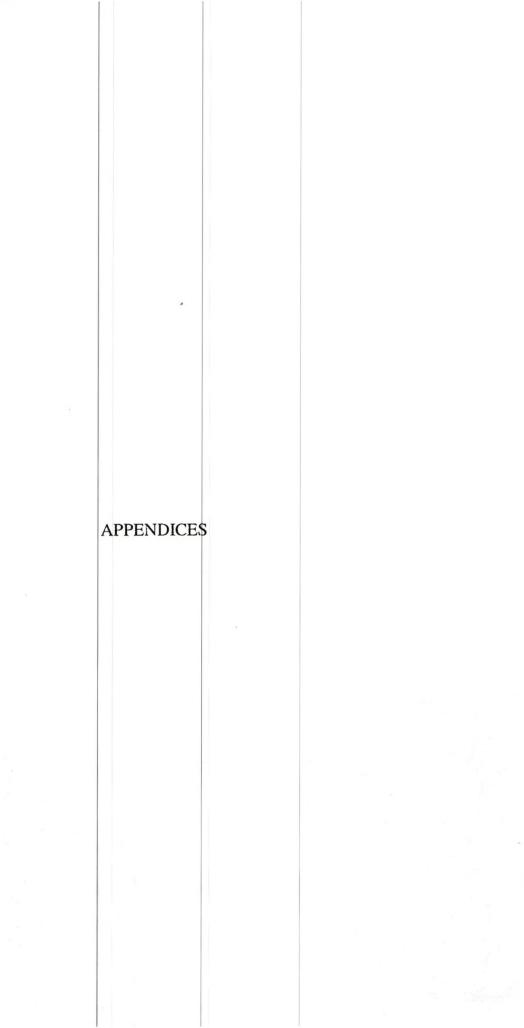
In finding out about their majors, I discovered several picked their career based on a work of fiction or a movie. Small communities, by their very size, have few career choices modeled. Because of this limited view of possible careers, study could be done to determine ways students determine their majors.

This group of students had support and encouragement from family and high school personnel to attend college. A study could be done to find out what other pathways students from remote rural communities take to get to college.

Every one of the students in the study made frequent trips home during the first semester. Given that this population has strong ties to their home community a study could be done to determine what impact frequent students trips home have on persistence.

Final Comments

All of the students who participated in this study were generous in sharing their stories about their experiences. They painted a vivid picture of what it is like to grow up, live and learn in very small communities in rural America. They also displayed a great deal of courage by deciding to leave everything and move away. Faced with feelings of not mattering, impossible roommates, and homesickness, these students persisted to return for another year. Their dialogue provided valuable data about the transition experiences of students from remote rural communities who chose to attend a mid-size university.

APPENDICES

Participant Invitation Letter

Date

Address

Dear (*Potential Participant's Name*):

I am a University of North Dakota graduate student working on my Doctor of Philosophy degree in the department of Educational Leadership. I invite you to be a participant in my dissertation research study. This letter explains my study and the participant's role.

I am researching what students from remote rural communities experience at a large research institution that contribute to their decisions to stay in or leave college. To answer my research question, I need to interview students who went to high schools in remote rural communities in North Dakota. You are one of only a few students who are potential participants in my research study because your home community fits the criteria I have selected for remote rural communities. I will be working closely with my advisor, Dr. Margaret Healy, a professor in the Educational Leadership department.

I would welcome the opportunity to interview you on this subject. All interviews will take place at a mutually agreeable location, at a time convenient to the participant, in a location comfortable for the participant and are expected to last around 60 to 90 minutes.

I work in the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership at UND and if you would like to visit with me more about this project before you commit to being a participant, you may call me at 701-777-4076 or email me at lindarains@mail.und.edu. If you would like to participate, I will be happy to arrange a convenient time for the interview. **Please call my office at 701-777-4076 and let me know if you are interested.** When you call, we will set a convenient time and location to get together. I will have full details and a consent form for you to sign when we meet. Your response to this invitation is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Linda M. Rains
Enclosure

Contact Information

Information to be collected at time of acceptance:

Name: _____

Local Address: _____

Local Phone: _____

Cell Phone: _____

Preferred email address:_____

Permanent Address:_____

Permanent Phone: _____

Please indicate all schools you have attended and the years you attended them.

High School Attended: _____ Dates attended: _____

High School Attended: _____ Dates attended: _____

College attended: _____ Dates attended: _____

College attended: _____ Dates attended: _____

APPENDIX B

1. Background Information

   a. Paint a verbal picture for me of what your hometown is like and what it would be like to live there.

      i. Feelings about living there (prompt)

      ii. Interactions with community members, under what circumstances (prompt)

   b. If I were to ask your best friends from high school to describe you, what would they tell me?

      i. Why would your friends say that about you (prompt)

      ii. Feelings about your school (prompt)

      iii. Social activities/involvement (prompt)

   c. Tell me about how you decided to go to this institution.

      i. Who or what influenced your decision to attend college? (prompt)

      ii. Who or what influenced your choice of this college? (prompt)

      iii. Who or what influenced your major? (prompt)

2. Tell me the story of what you did and how you felt between the time you sent the application for admission to the institution and the day you got the letter telling you that you were admitted?

   a. Telling friends (prompt)

   b. Telling family (prompt)

   c. Who was important during this time and why? (prompt)

   d. What questions did you ask yourself during this time? Why? (prompt)

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3. Now you have been accepted to the institution, tell me what all you did to prepare to go to college and what you thought about.

    a. How did you know what to prepare for at college? (prompt)

    b. What were your thoughts on the summer orientation program? (prompt)

4. All the preparation is now done and you are leaving for college, tell me as much as you can remember about your first semester at school, beginning with move-in day and include how you felt.

    a. Perceptions of opening weekend (prompt)

    b. Thoughts on move-in day (prompt)

    c. Tell me about your roommate(s) (prompt)

    d. First classes/getting ready for classes (prompt)

    e. First trip home (prompt)

    f. Contact with family (prompt)

    g. Involvement – social event, new friends (prompt)

    h. First tests/first finals week (prompt

    i. Other than friends, who is the one person on campus you tell your family about (prompt)

    j. Think for a minute about what you thought college was going to be like and compare that with what you have experienced. Tell me about the comparison. (prompt)

5. You have been in school now for a while. Wha are your thoughts about your future at this institution and what has influenced this decision?

a. Under what circumstances could you envision that would make you decide to leave school? (prompt)

b. For students who have decided to leave: Under what circumstance would you have decided to stay? (prompt)

APPENDIX C

Consent Form
Qualitative Research Consent

I, Linda M. Rains, am a graduate student in educational leadership conducting research to be used in my doctoral dissertation. The purpose of my qualitative research study is to understand what students from remote rural areas experience at a large research-intensive university that contributes to their decision to persist or depart, from the student's perspective. Specifically I want to answer this question: what transitional experiences do students from remote rural communities have on a large research-intensive campus that contributes to their decision to stay or leave? I will be conducting this study beginning in the Spring Semester, 2008. Information from this study will help to improve practice in higher education, particularly in the area of student retention.

You have been selected to participate in this study because you are from one of the ten counties in the state that I have identified for the purposes of this study as remote rural counties. By signing this consent form, you are granting permission for me to conduct a taped interview with you lasting approximately 90 minutes. Any questions or comments concerning this study should be directed to me, Linda Rains, at (701) 777-4076 (weekdays) or (701) 746-7728 (evenings and weekends), my qualitative research committee member, Dr. Marcus Weaver-Hightower, (701)-777-2171, or my advisor, Dr. Margaret Healy, (701) 777-4391.

There are no known physical or financial risks associated with participation in this study. I will take precautions to reduce, if not eliminate, the potential for emotional risks – in the form of unexpected anxiety – that may result from participation in this study. Should participants in this study identify experiencing unexpected and/or undue stress or anxiety as a result of their participation (or if for any other reason) choose to leave the study, they may do so without penalty as participation is strictly voluntary.

To ensure your anonymity and confidentiality, no personal information, other than contact information, gender, category of age, family status, etc. will be sought. In addition, pseudonyms will be assigned to all interview subjects in the final written product. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), approval # _____. For seven years following the study, the signed consent forms and collected data, in the form of field notes, journal entries, and taped or transcribed interviews, will be stored in a locked file in my home. Until that time, the data will be used solely by the researcher for the purpose of a dissertation study and future publications.

I have read this consent form and understand my right to confidentiality and to terminate participation.

Participant: _____ Date: _____
Linda M. Rains, Researcher: _____ Date: _____

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