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Elise J. Cain

*Georgia Southern University, ecain1@binghamton.edu*

Natesha L. Smith

*Binghamton University*

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# Using Critical Race Theory as a Framework to Explore the Experiences of College Students from Rural Areas: A Strategy for Educators

**Elise J. Cain** (Georgia Southern University)

**Natesha L. Smith** (Binghamton University)

*There are several indicators (e.g. lower enrollment rates and lower persistence rates) that rural people are achieving less postsecondary success compared to their urban peers. This is particularly true for people with low socioeconomic statuses and people of color. This article, therefore, utilizes critical race theory in education as a framework to explore the experiences of college students from rural areas. The article begins with an overview of critical race theory and a review of relevant literature about rural people organized within a critical race theory framework. This information is then utilized to construct a strategy to guide educators in their critical explorations of rural students and their experiences through assessing pertinent questions. A vignette is also provided as an example to assist educators in their utilization of the strategy, providing a promising practice to support educators at higher education institutions in their efforts to be more inclusive of students from rural areas.*

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In recent years, higher education professionals have increased their awareness of people from rural areas. For example, according to the 2017 Survey of College and University Admissions Directors released by *Inside Higher Ed* and Gallup, 52% of public and 28% of private colleges increased their recruitment of rural students (Jaschik, 2017). Some colleges and universities are also starting financial and academic support initiatives for rural students similar to ones previously only offered for urban students (Nadworny, 2018). Because rural students as a distinct student population are often ignored in higher education research (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017) and because there is the potential for greater numbers of people from rural areas attending college, gaining knowledge about these students becomes key.

The United States Census Bureau defines a rural area as a place outside of an urban area, having a population less than 2,500 people (United States Census, 2016b). These areas are home to about 60 million people or 19.3% of the country's total population. The average graduation rate for high school students from rural areas is 81% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). The percentage of rural people aged 18-24 enrolled in colleges or universities, however, is only 29% (NCES,

2015). This percentage is much less than all other locales with cities having the highest percentage at almost 48%. Additionally, college students from rural areas have lower first to second year persistence rates than suburban and urban students (High School Benchmarks, 2016). Furthermore, only 19% of rural adults have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 33% of urban adults and the rural/urban education gap in achieving bachelor's degrees increased between 2000 and 2015 (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2017). Beyond this data by locale, high school and college completion rates are highly influenced by socioeconomic status and race in rural areas, with poorer people and people of color experiencing even less educational success (Lavalley, 2018; Showalter, Klein, Johnson & Hartman, 2017; USDA, 2017). For example, rural adults of color are half as likely to have bachelor's degrees than White rural adults (USDA, 2017). Thus, even though people from rural areas are graduating high school at a substantial level, few people from rural areas are completing college degrees, especially rural people with low socioeconomic statuses and rural people of color.

Rural people from the state of Georgia may face even more barriers to their educational success compared to what these

national statistics suggest. Showalter et al. (2017) reported that in the state of Georgia the rural student poverty rate and the rural student minority rate are among the highest in the country. In addition, the overall rural high school graduation rate in Georgia is 77% (Showalter et al., 2017), less than the national rural high school graduation rate of 81% reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) and less than the national high school graduation rate of 87% reported by Showalter et al. (2017). The high school graduation rates for Georgia rural students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and who are students of color, are even lower, both at about 71% (Showalter et al., 2017). Rural people in Georgia, therefore, have less chances of graduating high school, not to mention attending postsecondary education. Yet there are almost 380,000 rural school-aged students in the state of Georgia, meaning an understanding of the educational pathways of these individuals is particularly critical for educators.

Due to the lag in educational attainment of people from rural areas, particularly people with low socioeconomic status and people of color, the purpose of this article is to utilize critical race theory as a framework to explore the experiences of college students from rural areas. Through a review of relevant literature, a strategy for

critically exploring students' experiences from rural areas will be created. This article aims to contribute to scholarship by providing a promising practice that may be utilized to expand higher education's understanding of college students from rural areas. The article will begin, therefore, with an overview of critical race theory along with educational data about people from rural areas. Next, a strategy for critically exploring the experiences of college students from rural areas will be presented in the form of a table with key questions for educators to assess when working with students. A vignette of a student named Jean is then utilized to review the use of the strategy. Lastly, this article will conclude with final thoughts, practice implications, and recommendations for further research.

### **Critical Race Theory Applied to College Student from Rural Areas**

Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) noted the potential of critical race theory to add to the comprehension of student identity development as well as the need to further investigate "the ways that individuals and their environments interact in the social construction of both identity categories and individual identities" (p. 593). Critical race theory is defined as a movement involving activists and scholars who aim to study and transform the relationship among race, racism, and power

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Critical race theory began in the 1970s when a group of activists, legal scholars, and lawyers came to realize new strategies and theories were necessary because the advances made by the 1960s civil rights era were stalling, and in some cases reversing (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This original group included people such as Derrick A. Bell, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, and Kimberle Crenshaw (Taylor, 2009). The central tenets of critical race theory include: (1) racism is normal and the system prioritizing white over color serves many purposes for the dominant group, (2) since racism advances White people both materially and psychically, a large part of the population has little incentive to eliminate racism, (3) race and racism are social constructions, meaning they result from social relations and thoughts not biological or genetic reasons, (4) dominant groups racialize different groups of people at different times, shifting popular images and stereotypes over time as well, (5) no person has just a single, easily described identity, but has multiple and possibly overlapping or conflicting identities, and (6) people of color have a unique voice and assumed competence to speak about race and racism due to their histories and experiences of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Utilizing critical race theory as a theoretical lens to explore the experiences of

college students from rural areas, therefore, alters the “focus away from a deficiency model to explain educational disparities, to an approach that uncovers how inequities of access, power, and resources in the educational system perpetuate the achievement gap” (Hernández, 2016, p. 170). The central tenets of critical race theory applied to the field of education, create five themes directing perspectives, research methodology, and pedagogy (Hernández, 2016, Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). The five themes are: (1) understanding of individual experiences, (2) challenging dominant ideology, (3) commitment to social justice, (4) experiential knowledge and voice, and (5) interdisciplinary perspectives. These five themes can be applied to exploring the experiences of college students from rural areas. In the following sections each theme is defined, and examples from literature are provided. Note, however, some examples can be applied to more than one theme but are positioned generally in just one for purposes of this article.

### **Understanding of Individual Experiences**

The first theme centers the importance of race and racism in the understanding of individual experiences. This theme also includes the intersection of other forms of subordination and oppression, such as classism



the rural college students from their studies (Hand & Payne, 2008; Hlinka, 2017; Hlinka et al., 2015). Family members may have a limited understanding about college and its requirements, yet they desire to support their students with love and excitement through their college experiences (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). People from rural areas with lower family incomes often have lower high school graduation rates (Provasnik, 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001), lower college enrollment rates (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Provasnik, 2007), and lower college completion rates (Byun, Irvin et al., 2012; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). In fact, the overall lower socioeconomic statuses of families from rural areas versus families from urban areas was found to be a major contributor to the rural/urban discrepancies in college attendance rates (Byun et al., 2015). Family structure also influences rural high school students' educational aspirations and attainment with students from two-parent homes having higher aspirations and attainment compared to single and other family structures (Byun, Irvin et al., 2012; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006). Additionally, higher parental education levels are also associated with higher enrollment and completion rates for rural students (Byun, Irvin et al., 2012; Byun et al., 2017; Schonert

et al., 1991). Due to the many intersecting individual, family, school, and community characteristics all individuals possess and how these characteristics impact educational attainment, it is important to remember rural people are not one homogeneous group.

### Challenging of Dominant Ideology

The second critical race theory theme in education is challenging of dominant ideology in education. Critical race theory applied to education sees the assumptions of objectivity, neutrality, and equal opportunity as false (Hernández, 2016, Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Relating this theme to the first, this means people may not have the same opportunities for educational success based on their multiple identities even though more than half of high school students from rural areas aspire to obtain two- or four-year college degrees (Meece et al., 2013, 2014). For example, literature suggests the characteristics of peoples' high schools may be one way of promoting or demoting the educational success of college students from rural areas. Schools with smaller class sizes (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011), schools with lower poverty and lower minority rates (High School Benchmarks, 2016), and schools with higher rigor of the curriculum with incorporation of advanced coursework and college preparation programs (Byun, Irvin et al.,





fusing and students from rural areas, especially first-generation students, may not have the additional supports necessary to navigate the complexities of higher education (Ardoin, 2018; Hand & Payne, 2008).

### **Commitment to Social Justice**

The third theme of critical race theory applied to education involves a commitment to social justice by working to eliminate multiple oppressions and empowering marginalized groups in educational contexts (Hernández, 2016, Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). One common theme about college students from rural areas involves their struggles with their connection to home, both positively and negatively. Several of the college students from rural areas perceive college as a means to not be “stuck” in their home communities (Ganss, 2016; Walker & Raval, 2016) or as an opportunity for “a better life” (Ardoin, 2018). Some students mention a lack of career and social opportunities in their home areas as reasons for not wanting to return home (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). On the other hand, many students feel a strong connection and loyalty to their families and their communities and wish to return home or stay close to their home after graduation or later in life (Hand & Payne, 2008; Hlinka et al., 2015). These feelings are complex and may impact the educational and career choices students make, impacting their

college experiences. For example, students may choose majors based on the career options they see available in their home areas. Much of these struggles, however, are rooted in the power dynamics much greater than individual experiences. They result from influences from urbanormativity, defined as viewing urbanism as the standard and ruralism as inferior (Thomas, Fulkerson, Lowe, & Smith, 2001). For instance, students may not want to return to their home area because many young, talented rural youth are groomed for leaving their hometowns to find success (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Higher education institutions, instead of requiring rural students to conform to dominant urban culture, could increase their involvement in rural communities to promote congruence of students’ experiences between their rural lives and their college lives to assist these students (McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010). Critically addressing not only individual but structural power dynamics, therefore, promotes the potential for social justice for this group of students.

### **Experiential Knowledge and Voice**

The fourth critical race theme in education, the centrality of experiential knowledge, gives marginalized people voice to attest to the effects and consequences of racism by valuing their lived experiences (Hernández,

2016, Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). The voices of people of color and women are crucial in the understanding and teaching of racial subordination. This theme encourages listening to the experiences and goals of college students from rural areas to determine what they think is best for their development. College students from rural areas may be struggling academically, socially, and/or emotionally, inhibiting their college success. McDonough et al. (2010) “argue that ‘the rural life,’ being qualitatively different than urban and suburban cultures, is unattended by higher education” (p. 191) because institutions do not align with rural students’ specific concerns and lifestyles. College students from rural areas may be excited as well as anxious about college due to the sizes of their campuses, the sizes of their classes, the close proximity of people in the residence halls, and the surrounding college communities (Schultz, 2004). College students from rural areas may also struggle with making new friends. Some students lack experience having to make new friends due to attending small elementary and secondary schools with the same cohort of students (Ganss, 2016) or simply having friends as a result of convenience and few peers where they grew up (Buote et al., 2007). In addition, students from rural areas may find it to get involved in campus activities. The rural students interviewed by Ganss (2016) said

overwhelming amounts of options and lack of direction on where to start, inhibited their involvement activities.

Some college students from rural areas also struggle at college because of social and emotional factors relating to their families and communities. Some students describe being connected to their hometowns because individuals are supportive of one another as well as know who the other people in their town are (Walker & Raval, 2017). In spite of this encouragement, when these rural students attend college, they may also become aware of a lack of diversity in their home communities (Walker & Raval, 2017) and become aware of their lack of experience with diverse members of the campus community (Schultz, 2004). The college experience can also highlight how the rural students are different (or become different) from their family and community members, and even if students anticipate a change in their relationships, the feelings of difference may be upsetting for them (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Some students have even expressed feeling like one person at school and another person at home, separating their identities based on place (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Thus, even though the connections these students have with their families and communities can be positive, challenges can arise due to these relationships as well. Hearing the voices of

these individual students, therefore, is the best way to understand what they are experiencing and how educators may best help them with their individual needs.

### Interdisciplinary Perspectives

The fifth, and final theme, is utilization of interdisciplinary perspectives by analyzing race and racism in education in historical and current contexts through interdisciplinary methods (Hernández, 2016, Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Multidisciplinary methods involve gaining an understanding from two or more perspectives. Alternatively, interdisciplinary methods involve “the practice of holding different ways of knowing *in relationship*” (Dreyfuss, 2011, p. 75). It requires people to hold different, sometimes contradictory, ways of knowing simultaneously. Interdisciplinarity, therefore, recognizes that all knowledge and tools are partial, subjective, and evolving (Dreyfuss, 2011).

An interdisciplinary approach is especially appropriate for the study of experiences and identity because understandings of “identity” differ depending on the discipline, epistemological worldview, and historical context that the perspectives were developed (Jones & Abes, 2013). Many of the identity theories in higher education are rooted in psychology, sociology, social psy-

chology, or human and developmental ecology (Torres et al., 2009). Identity theories that draw from psychology emphasize the individual, focusing on personal identity and understandings of the self (Jones & Abes, 2013; Torres et al., 2009). On the other hand, sociological identity theories view identities as situated within social contexts, with “self” developing out of interactions within groups. Social psychology identity theories combine psychological and sociological perspectives, resulting in identity theories which include both individual and social processes. In addition, identity theories situated in human and developmental ecology look at how individuals are situated in their environments, impacting their development (Jones & Abes, 2013; Torres et al., 2009). Student identity theories, moreover, have also been influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism (Torres et al., 2009). Key within these viewpoints are the beliefs that identities are socially constructed as well as bound by temporal and cultural contexts.

Combining several of these perspectives to explore identity can enhance understanding of college students by altering attention to different key aspects within each of the disciplinary roots. In the case of college students from rural areas, their identities can be understood as individual, as influenced by social groups, as the interaction between individuals as social groups, as impacted by

environmental factors, and as changing based upon contexts. Each of these understandings can potentially uncover new insights about the students which may be neglected with a narrower approach. It is advantageous, therefore, to question assumptions within different perspectives to best assist students in their educational journeys.

### **A Strategy for Exploring the Experiences of College Student from Rural Areas**

By using the themes of critical race theory and data from literature outlined above, a strategy for exploring the experiences of college students from rural areas emerges as illustrated in Table 1. This table can be used to support the investigation of rural students beyond a constructivist perspective of reporting individual experiences, to a critical perspective which additionally incorporates the questioning of institutional and structural factors. Each of these five areas (understanding individual experiences, challenging of dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, experiential knowledge and voice, and interdisciplinary perspectives) provide additional knowledge about students and their contexts. Example questions are provided within each of the sections to encourage thinking within each of areas of the table.

To use the table, individuals should prepare answers for the provided questions (and any additional relevant questions for the

theme). After inquiry is completed for the first four themes, the final theme, "Interdisciplinary Perspectives," encourages users to think about the other themes again within a new disciplinary lens. Once these multiple perspectives are considered, the similarities and differences between the original and new views should be highlighted. This strategy can be utilized within different student affairs functional areas, such as residence life, new student services, student conduct, and student activities, as well in classroom settings. The questions provided in Table 1 are intentionally broad to be useful in multiple settings, but more specific questions may be added for specific uses of the strategy within a particular setting. For example, in residence life you may question how a student's multiple identities (e.g. their race, gender, class, and place of origin) influence their relationship with their roommate.

Because examples are often helpful when utilizing a new tool, I will demonstrate the strategy using a scenario involving a fictitious student. As you read the vignette, imagine you are a higher education administrator working with first-year undergraduate students:

*Early in the fall semester you are approached by Jean who is having difficulty adjusting to college. Through conversation, you learn Jean is from a rural area about an hour from your campus. Jean*

identifies as a Latina female. She appears to be a traditional aged college student, about 18 years old. She tells you she is the first in her family to attend college. She has a younger brother who is three years younger than her. She lives with both of her biological parents. Her mother is an administrative assistant and her father is a mechanic. Both of Jean's parents are supportive of her attending college. Additionally, many of Jean's teachers and commu-

nity members showed support of her educational choice as she was always one of the top students in her town. Jean feels pressure, however, to make her family and community proud by succeeding in college and is worried if her preparation is adequate compared to the other students. Jean also mentions she attended a K-12 school with a class of about 30 students. Thus, she is feeling a little nervous about making new friends and getting involved.

Table 1. Strategy for Critically Exploring the Experiences of College Students from Rural Areas

<b>Understanding of Individual Experiences</b>	<b>Challenging of Dominant Ideology</b>	<b>Commitment to Social Justice</b>	<b>Experiential Knowledge and Voice</b>	<b>Interdisciplinary Perspectives</b>
<p>What are the individual characteristics of these students (e.g. race, gender, class)?</p> <p>What are the family, school, and/or community backgrounds of these students?</p> <p>What are the unique college needs of these students?</p>	<p>What are the possible barriers to educational success of these students (remembering that "success" should be defined by the student)?</p> <p>What are the benefits or drawbacks of the institution relating to the success of these students?</p> <p>How are students' opportunities for success influenced by their multiple identities?</p>	<p>In what ways do these students have privilege and in what ways are these students oppressed?</p> <p>How are these students influenced or affected by urbanormativity?</p> <p>How can inequalities be eliminated in order to empower students?</p>	<p>How do these students understand and make meaning of their identities and experiences?</p> <p>How do these students express their identities (e.g. language, actions, dress)?</p> <p>What are the goals of these students?</p>	<p>What perspectives are currently being used?</p> <p>How may the identities, experiences, and stories of these students be understood using different perspectives?</p> <p>What are the similarities and differences between these understandings?</p>

Note. For each of the central tenets of critical race theory example questions are provided to guide critical exploration of the experiences of college students from rural areas.

Table 1 can be used to guide thinking to help Jean with her college transition. Beginning with the critical race theme of “Understanding of Individual Experiences,” there are several things already known about Jean. As far as individual characteristics, Jean is a Latina, traditionally-aged, female student from a rural area. For family characteristics, she has a younger sibling, two parents who support her education, and may be from a working-class background. In addition, relating to community characteristics, Jean is from a small community with a K-12 school that seems to be supportive. From the information provided, it seems Jean may be struggling to adjust to college socially (due to her nervousness of making new friends and getting involved) as well as academically (due to feeling pressured and possibly inadequately prepared).

Next, for the critical race theme of “Challenging of Dominant Ideology,” there are a few possible barriers to Jean’s educational success. To begin, however, it is helpful to clarify what success means to Jean. For instance, what outcome is Jean hoping for by attending college (e.g. a certificate, a two-year degree, a four-year degree)? Next the extent of Jean’s academic preparation and college knowledge, especially as a first-generation college student, should be explored. Also, since Jean mentioned being

nervous about making friends and getting involved as well as support yet pressure from family and community members, it would be useful clarify if Jean is struggling with her social support networks. Within this topic area, it is important to also evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of the institution for helping Jean. Maybe the institution has resources that can assist Jean like a program to assist first-generation college students or a strong residential first-year experience program or a student organization similar to one of Jean’s interests. However, it is also important to honestly evaluate some challenges for the institution such as large class sizes or a student population predominately from urban locations or low first- to second-year persistence rates. Jean’s other identities should also be explored to determine how they may be influencing her opportunities for success. Since this task overlaps with the next theme, more of Jean’s multiple identities will be included in the next paragraph.

Transitioning to “Commitment to Social Justice,” Jean’s situation can be evaluated in terms of privileges and oppressions relating to her identities. Jean, being a student of color, is a member of a marginalized group. She is also both privileged and oppressed as a woman because as discussed earlier rural women are more attend and complete college, however, Jean may still be impacted by patriarchy. Jean may also face

additional challenges due to her first-generation status. Depending on her family's income, she may also struggle economically to pay for her college education. Beyond individual factors, this critical race theme pushes thinking towards larger institutional and structural issues by examining urban normativity. In Jean's situation, for example, she said she was one of the top students in her town, yet she is nervous about her academic preparation. Does Jean lack skills because of inadequate preparation from high school or does Jean just worry about this because she assumes her education was inferior to other schools because of urban normativity? Further clarification in this area is warranted rather than assuming one reason or the other. This may, moreover, be an area to provide empowerment to Jean. For instance, if the case is that Jean is a top student, providing her with opportunities such as study groups or tutoring may increase her confidence and satisfaction with her classes as well as connect her with other students.

For the fourth critical race theme, "Experiential Knowledge and Voice," getting to know more about Jean becomes key. For this case study only basic information is available about Jean, but in a real-life situation it would be advantageous to have an extended conversation (if not several) with Jean to grasp more fully who Jean feels she is, what she feels she needs, and what short-

and long-term goals she has. Gaining additional information about Jean, therefore, would provide greater alignment of her needs and the assistance necessary to aid her in her college transition period.

Finally, for the fifth critical race theme of "Interdisciplinary Perspectives", the initial thoughts about Jean should be evaluated and pushed to in new directions. For example, from an ecological development perspective, what other environmental factors have influenced Jean's development? The introduction to Jean mentioned a younger brother. Maybe Jean is very close to her brother and misses him or feels she needs to be a role model for his educational attainment. Maybe being an hour away from home Jean is going home often on weekends, inhibiting her ability to make friends on campus. Questioning the similarities and differences between these different perspectives may lead to new views about how to best provide services for Jean.

This example of the fictitious student named Jean, was provided as an illustration of how to use the strategy provided in Table 1. The strategy uses the themes of critical race theory in education to guide exploration of rural college students in practice settings. It is important to note, however, this example was brief for purposes of this article. Much more questioning and investigation into Jean's situation would lead to even greater





Beyond practice, more research on the experiences and identities of rural students and their perceptions will further affect the development of this topic in the future. Qualitative research in the form of observations and in-depth interviews will allow for greater exploration about rural college students from various areas and who attend various higher education institutional types. More quantitative research on this group of students would also provide a greater understanding of this group of students. Many of the largest student surveys and data tools in higher education do not collect demographic data like high school name or zip code, which

could be used to investigate place as a variable. The strategy presented in Table 1 of this article should also be empirically tested in future studies. Once there is more data on college students from rural areas, colleges and universities can then begin to better align campus student services and curricula to meet these students' needs. Higher education owes it to these students to acknowledge its dominant ideological thoughts and practices, giving rural college students a voice and representation in literature and on campuses. This strategy for critically exploring the experiences of college students from rural areas seeks to be a starting point for these future conversations.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY & CONTACT INFORMATION



**Elise J. Cain**, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership (Higher Education Administration) at Georgia Southern University. She studies both postsecondary and secondary education with her primary area of research focusing on college students from rural areas. Her interest in studying this student population is centered in questions of equity and social justice for rural people and educational institutions. Her previous roles include almost a decade of professional service as a student affairs administrator in functional areas such as residence life, leadership programs, and campus activities. She holds a doctorate from Binghamton University as well as a master's degree and bachelor's degree from St. Bonaventure University.

Email: [ecain@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:ecain@georgiasouthern.edu)



**Natesha L. Smith**, Ph.D., an Assistant Professor in Student Affairs Administration at Binghamton University, is a military veteran with more than 16 years of combined experience in workforce analysis, personnel management, and higher education (student affairs). Having worked in Middle Eastern, East Asian, Caribbean, and North American higher education settings, her research examines how organizational culture influences and shapes the identities and experiences of individuals within the organization. In particular, she studies the influence of military culture on veteran student identity. She also explores the impact of internationalization initiatives on the academic experiences of students and faculty.

Email: [nlsmith@binghamton.edu](mailto:nlsmith@binghamton.edu)