

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF URBAN STUDENTS ON A RURAL CAMPUS: A  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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by

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## **DEDICATION**

In memory of Kathleen Cockrum. You were the driving force behind my educational pursuits. I miss you, Mom. Also in memory of Tommy and Marjorie Cockrum. Thank you rearing your son to be the loving, supportive husband that endured years of fast food while I finished my degree. And thanks, Mark, for everything!

## ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study examines the experiences of seven participants from a Midwest urban city who attended a small Midwestern community college. The primary data are from comprehensive interviews which were analyzed and coded in accordance with the following research question: What are the experiences, challenges, and advantages of students from urban communities who are attending a rural community college? Six major themes were extrapolated from the study: sports, food, degrees offered, people, small campus, and activities. These themes were analyzed through the theoretical lenses of Astin (1999), Bourdieu (1977), Eaton and Bean (1995), and Tinto (1993).

This research revealed reasons urban students are unhappy attending rural campuses. The themes generalized from the data are examined. Recommendations to address each theme are offered for college and high school personnel who are in positions to guide students to prospective educational endeavors.

**KEY WORDS:** *Habitus*, Persistence, Phenomenological research, Retention, Rural college, Urban student,

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

The changing and often fluid population of schools warrants close examination, especially at rural college campuses that have increased the enrollment of students from urban areas. The fluidity of our nation's population, while a seemingly new phenomenon, is something that will remain so. This study was designed to observe the assimilation of the urban-reared student into the rural campus culture. Determining what causes these students to leave and ways to retain them were two primary goals of this study. The answer to these two questions was investigated by conducting personal interviews with urban students attending a rural campus to discover experiences and trends that promoted or inhibited their academic success and sense of belonging on the rural campus.

### **Background of the Study**

College enrollment has been on the decline in the past few years; enrollment has declined up to 16% in 2-year institutions since 2010 (College enrollment declines, 2015; Mangan, 2016). The loss of tuition revenue is only one of the side effects, albeit a major one, of declining enrollment. The loss of students could initiate a domino effect that could affect classes offered, which would determine the number of instructors and professors. Both lack of students and instructors to sponsor activities could lead to extra-curricular activities and academic clubs being downsized or eliminated; this in turn may cause students to transfer elsewhere for continued participation in their desired activities.

To combat the decreasing enrollment trend, colleges are furthering their recruitment efforts, often recruiting students outside their traditional service area. This

trend is increasingly bringing students who grew up in urban areas to college campuses located in rural parts of the country.

With the current downward trend of student enrollment, it is increasingly important to focus on retention to prevent the attrition of the students already enrolled in the college. Tinto (1993) has stated that passionate retention efforts can be viewed as a reasonable course of action that can stay the financial woes stemming from lower enrollment. Determining the views and experiences of the urban college student attending a rural campus will enable the institutions to better meet the needs of these students to both increase the recruiting efforts from the urban areas and to retain the urban students through their degree completion.

Astin (1999) ascertains that student involvement is critical in the retention of students. By conducting a phenomenological study on the experiences and perceptions of the needs of the urban student on the rural college campus, the institutional administrators may be able to enhance their retention strategies, perhaps by creating new programs to meet the needs of the urban students. Urban students attending a small rural college were interviewed for this study; their responses were used to ascertain the whys and wherefores of their retention or departure, as the case were, in order to determine what it would take to increase their desire to stay on the rural campus through degree completion.

### **Statement of the Problem**

With educational funding waning, especially in rural areas which rely mainly on student tuition and state funding, rural colleges are finding themselves with ever-increasing financial woes (Camera, 2016; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities [CBPP],

2016). The necessary tuition increases can lead to lower enrollment; thus, many rural colleges are expanding their recruitment efforts to increase, maintain, or regain their student population. Due to the recruitment efforts of a college in Southern Missouri (SMCC) that expand beyond the traditional service area, more students with an urban background are attending the SMCC campus. Attending college constitutes a huge change in students' lives; adding a change of environment (such as moving from urban areas to rural) adds another facet to the students' adjustment needs. If the students do not adjust well to the change, they will not stay to complete their program; colleges need to pay attention to the students' viewpoint of which services would help them stay to complete their programs (Croxon & Maginnis, 2006; Hlinka, 2012). The experiences and thoughts of urban students, or students who come from highly populated areas, as determined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), as they try to adjust to the rural campus in a less densely populated area, need to be examined in order to help colleges better serve the needs of this growing population.

The urban students attending SMCC seemed to have lower retention rates than the local students (D. Lancaster, personal communication, August 18, 2016). The process of recruiting students from outside the traditional service area is relatively new, so data were sparse. This observation was scrutinized further as data were collected.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of urban college students attending a rural junior college. The focus of this phenomenological study was to investigate various aspects of rural campus attendance for students from an urban background and to explore the perceptions and experiences of urban students on a rural

campus with the intent of understanding a connection between urbanicity and success on a rural campus. This study entailed the use of interviews and general observations. At this stage the rural campus experiences of urban students was generally defined as the lived experiences of students from urban areas as they attend college at SMCC and who chose to participate in the study.

### **Educational Significance of the Study**

All too often it seems that many of our students leave the college or university environment before completing their degree or program. Sometimes, these students are unhappy with the campus in which they have enrolled and simply transfer out, thus decreasing retention rates of the college. This research provided information on why students recruited from urban areas leave before completing their degree or certification program, and thus provided insights into ways to retain these students. Through this study I was able to provide further insight into program needs that could increase recruiting efforts from urban areas as well as increase retention rates of urban students. The findings from this study could be useful in providing an understanding of the experiences of urban students who are attending a rural campus. The research could be used to identify any needs for change in policy and procedures at SMCC and to justify said needs. The research could also be used to demonstrate needs for grant monies or reallocation of funds into different areas that were deemed important by the findings.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Habitus.* *Habitus* is Bordieu's (1977) term for the various social nuances and tendencies that guide one's behavior and thinking. It entails the social capital that one gathers from the society and culture in which one is immersed. Students from a college-

attending culture, for example, will possess the social capital necessary for navigating through the college search and admissions process as well be an asset to the students' assimilation to college life. *Habitus*, as it pertains to postsecondary education, consists of the internalized experiences, thoughts, and correlative process the students have had with the environment, which are then unconsciously applied to the thought processes students go through as they manipulate through the college experience.

**Phenomenological research.** This type of research refers to common concepts shared by *participants* as they experience something similar (Creswell, 2013). The *phenomenon* referred to in this study was the lived experiences of the *participants*, who were the urban students attending a rural campus. The *participants* were included on a voluntary basis.

**Retention and persistence.** Both *retention* and *persistence* refer to the continuation of a student in the same college from semester-to-semester. *Persistence* specifically refers to the students' success and continuation in the school, whereas *retention* is an institutional measurement (Hagedorn, 2006; Wyrick, 2014). These terms are often used interchangeably. *Attrition* is the lack of retention or persistence of a student from one semester to the next; in other words, attrition is when a student leaves college for whatever reason (Summers, 2003).

**Urban and rural areas.** The U.S. Census bureau has established that areas with 50,000 or more people or an area that has a density of 1000 people per square mile constitute urban areas (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a, 2015b). For this paper, the term *urban* also included *urban clusters*, which are

areas of 2,500 to 50,000 people that are attached to an urban area. *Rural* encompasses all the areas not included in an urban area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Astin's (1999) student involvement theoretical framework was applied throughout this phenomenological study. The student involvement framework was chosen because the attention is given to the motivation and the behavior of the student as opposed to the subject matter and/or the technique used to teach it. Astin (1999) supposes that the greater the student involvement on campus (including academic studies and interaction with faculty as well as involvement in extra-curricular activities) the greater the student learning and personal development. This single-campus research examined the urban students' experiences (and thus their involvement) on the rural campus. By doing so, educators could be able to examine the emergent themes in order to more fully understand the perceived needs of urban students in order to retain them through degree or program completion.

Tinto's (1993) theory of departure theoretical framework provided this study with another model of student persistence. It was included here because Tinto's theory of departure includes the role that institutions play in the attrition of their students. Tinto maintained that student departure from college does not necessarily indicate either shortcomings of the individual student or the presence of financial problems (although either could be present). Tinto's model takes these things into consideration yet also includes institutional attributes such as student-faculty interaction and student subcultures that may contribute to a student's retention or attrition.

Bourdieu's theories on *habitus* and social capital were considered as the students were interviewed. His theories include the concept of social capital, which includes the knowledge we have, the materials we have that can indicate one's social class, and the way society views an individual's social capital. These things could have come to light during the interview process, and are something of which to be aware (Sociology Live!, 2015). *Habitus* and the homogeneity of *habitus* within social groups, such as a student body on a college campus, are traits that can be discerned in a phenomenological study via interviews and observations (Bourdieu, 1977). Determining the students' social capital and sense of *habitus* could increase understanding of student persistence or attrition.

Eaton and Bean (1995) maintained that students' attitudes, life experiences, where they were reared, and their high school characteristics all influence college retention and persistence (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014). Eaton and Bean (1995) go beyond recognizing the background of students and the institutional contributions to student retention to include the choices that students make during stressful situations. The coping mechanisms or behavioral choices students make when encountering stressful situations in college, often determined by their demographic background and life experiences, can either improve the stressful situation or make it worse. Eaton and Bean's (1995) study pointed out that students' intentions pertaining to persistence is a good indicator of their actual persistence. They also maintained that social integration and academic integration are interrelated, which warrants an examination of each when studying the retention or attrition of college students.



There was no single theoretical framework from which this study was formed. Elements from the theories of Eaton and Bean, Bourdieu, Tinto, and Astin each have components that were deemed relevant to this study. Each theory was considered as themes and trends were sought in the conducting of the interviews.

### **Research Question**

This research was conducted in order to seek an answer to the following research question:

1. What are the experiences, challenges, and advantages of students from urban communities who are attending a rural community college?

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. The first limitation of this study was that of the population. Only students enrolled at SMCC participated in the study. The semester-by-semester variance in the student population was another limitation. Academic and non-academic variables, such as high school GPA, socio-economic background, at-home support system, first-generation status, college preparation classes taken, and others, were a validity concern. Primary language spoken at home and the age or maturity level of the students all could have affected the validity of the study. The transferability of the findings, if at all, was limited to other urban students attending other rural campuses; additional research will be needed to determine the transferability.

Another limitation was that the students surveyed participated on a voluntary basis. Only students that fit the criteria of an urban student attending a rural campus were included. Because of the voluntary nature of the study, the sample used may not have truly represented the population studied.

Internal validity could have been compromised if students told each other what questions were asked in the interview. This may have led to discussing the answers given thereby influencing future interview responses. Students in the study were asked to refrain from sharing the interview questions until the study had concluded.

Time was yet another limitation considered; recruiting urban students to the SMCC campus was a recent trend. The data gathered, therefore, was limited to semesters in which urban students had attended the college. Interviews were conducted until saturation of the data had been reached; no new information was discovered in the final two interviews.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations of the study included urban students attending a rural campus. The student population chosen focused on the students attending a small rural campus whose hometown was deemed urban by the U.S. Census Bureau as indicated on their County Classification Lookup Table (U.S Census Bureau, 2016). I chose to limit my study to this set of students because the administration at SMCC had indicated that the retention of these students was a concern on their campus. Data collection was therefore delimited to the SMCC campus and included only students currently enrolled at the time of the study.

### **Assumptions**

Two assumptions of the study were that SMCC would continue to recruit students to their rural campus from urban areas and that the *County Classification Lookup Table* was an effective tool for determining urbanicity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). It was also assumed that students responded honestly to the survey questions; to ensure this, the

students were assured of the anonymity of their responses and were free to leave the study with no adverse effects if they did choose to leave the study.

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is presented in a five-chapter format. The first chapter is an introduction to the phenomenological study contained herein. It begins with the background information to lay the groundwork for the study and the statement of the problem. Next are the purpose of the study and the educational significance. These are followed by the definitions of relevant terms, the theoretical frameworks around which the study is centered, and the research questions as well as the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions of the study.

Chapter II details a review of pertinent literature, which includes trends and themes associated with the urban student including retention, persistence, enrollment, attritions, and characteristics of the urban student. Other findings from the literature review include students' reasons for leaving college and the colleges' various retention strategies. Conflicting and inconsistent findings are also reported in this chapter.

Chapter III describes the methods used for this research. A brief context of the study is stated. A participants' section details the sampling frame and selection criterion of the participants. The instrumentation section details the reliability and validity of the research instrumentation. Sections on the collection and analysis of the data are also included.

Chapter IV is a discussion of the findings. This also includes implications for policy and procedures as well as suggestions for future research. Chapter V concludes the study with a brief summary of the findings including which, if any, were not already

discussed in the literature review. A discussion of to whom this information would be important and why so is also included in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

In the ever-growing efforts to provide diversity and to bring growth to campuses, the needs of the changing student population should be considered. If stagnant growth in a rural college leads to recruiting from the closest urban areas, the students may welcome the opportunity to attend school away from home or they may be lured in by the peaceful rural setting or a small student-instructor ratio. Once the students who were raised in an urban setting get settled in, however, they may soon anguish over their perceived desolation of the area or the lack of the amenities with which they are accustomed. If rural colleges are going through the effort to recruit the students from urban areas, the needs of these new students must be met to not only retain them for their college career, but to ensure that they are not miserable from unmet expectations. Because retention is key to any college, this paper examined the literature pertaining to the retention and persistence of urban students, the causes of attrition, and any literature pertaining to the experiences of urban students attending a college campus.

It was difficult to find literature focused on the experiences of students raised in urban environments who were attending college on a rural campus. Dyer, Berja, and Wittler (2002) came close to describing the experiences of urban students attending rural colleges in their study on student retention in colleges of agriculture. Their findings indicated that being reared in a rural environment, along with other factors such as being members of agriculture clubs (i.e. 4-H or Future Farmers of America), having previous agricultural experience, and having completed agricultural courses during high school

were indicators of completion of an agricultural degree. Degree sought and prior experience in the field seem to be correlated; the Dyer et al. (2002) findings indicated that almost five times as many agricultural students from urban backgrounds planned to change colleges and almost three times as many students planned to change majors as compared to those agriculture students raised in rural areas. Dyer et al. (2002), however, do not specifically address the retention of all urban students attending college on a rural campus, only those enrolled in an agricultural degree.

Biemiller (2016), Drewes and Michael (2006), and Steinken (1994) noted that students chose their college based on several factors, including location, rate that graduates could find a good job, and the academic reputation of the college. Other factors included tuition costs, availability of financial aid, the college ranking and reputation, class size and programs, and services, or amenities offered. Community colleges were chosen as a stepping stone to a 4-year college, to earn a one-year certificate or 2-year degree for job employment ground work, specific job training, or for personal enrichment (Bender & Richardson, 1987; Hammon & Mathews, 1999; King, 1993). Laanan (2000) indicated that the choice of college varied by race. More White students than minority students gave low tuition and proximity to home as the main reason for their choice of college; availability of financial aid and special programs were the choices given by more minority students than White students. This, although not specifically an urban versus rural student study, could lead one to question what programs students would consider when choosing a college or would consider as a need in order to remain in college for the duration of their program.

The emotional ties that students felt toward their family and homes and the difficult decision of attending college away from home were factors in both student attendance and student attrition (Hlinka, 2012; Mobelini, 2012). Although the Hlinka (2012) and Mobelini (2012) studies concerned students from Appalachia, emotional ties to home is a factor to be considered when studying student attrition. Adding the lack of urban amenities in close approximation, such as shopping malls, good cellular phone service, or familiar fast food restaurants to the expected difficulty of going away to college could have a negative impact on college choice; having these familiar items could ease the difficulty in transition from home to college life (Biemiller, 2016).

According to Mobelini (2012), students need to feel a sense of belonging, or *habitus*, on the campus of their choice to feel comfortable. They naturally gravitate to situations in which they feel comfortable. Lack of this *habitus* can lead to attrition. Establishing a connection to the college is an important step in establishing that sense of belonging. Successful college recruitment begins by establishing a relationship with high schools and students, ensuring that students feel the college will be a welcoming place (Foderaro, 1990; Mobelini, 2012; Thomas, 2002).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this literature review was to examine existing literature that pertained to urban students' experience on a rural college campus. Gaps in the literature are identified. Existing literature is organized and coded to identify trends and commonalities in the urban-student-on-a-rural-campus experience.

## **Educational Significance**

Open-door policies increase access to students, especially minority students from urban areas who have historically had disparity in college accessibility. These open-door policies and recruitment areas will get bodies in the seats of colleges, but this does not necessarily mean that their educational opportunity has increased. Filling seats is not enough; retaining those recruited is the true driving force of educational opportunity and access. It is pertinent to not only get the students there, but to examine what happens to those recruited once they have enrolled; their purposes for attending college vary and should not be judged by the same criteria as the retention and attrition rates of 4-year colleges (Gooden, 1991; Lane, 2003). This literature review was used to illuminate the current understanding of the trends and experiences of urban students attending a rural college campus.

## **Method of Literature Review**

**Databases searched.** The electronic databases searched in this review included those that cover multi-disciplinary academic journals such as Academic Search Complete, TOPICsearch, eBook Academic Collection (EBSCOhost), and Google Scholar. Databases specific to the field of education such as Education Source, Education Full Text, Education Index Retrospective, and ERIC (Education Resource Information Center) were also included in the search. Other databases searched include Humanities Source, Social Sciences Full Text, Teacher Reference Center, and Dissertations and Theses Full Text.

**Search terms.** The search terms used for this review included terms that were deemed relevant to urban students' experiences on a rural campus. The search centered



on the combination of the terms *urban students* and *rural campus*. Other terms used in the search were *minority students*, *small campus*, *habitus* (sense of belonging), *retention*, *attrition*, *community college* and *student services*; no matter the term used, the focus was on the rural campus.

### **Historical Context**

Rural college campuses often look to cities to recruit in an effort to increase diversity. The State University of New York college system (SUNY) is one example of a college system doing this. Various SUNY campuses are adopting an inner city high school; college instructors visit the high school to invite students to attend college on their campus. The frequent visits of a college's financial aid representative as well as their admissions representative to local high schools seem to have a positive effect on student enrollment ("El Paso", 2001; Foderaro, 1990). SUNY has reached out to provide opportunities for students to attend college in a safer environment than which they live, but recruitment efforts will be in vain if the students drop out of college.

Attrition can be viewed as a financial problem, an issue with campus effectiveness, which is then deemed an accountability issue, or merely an enrollment management issue. However perceived, student attrition is costly in both the political and the social arenas (Catterall, Gill, Martins, & Simeoni, 2003; Summers, 2003). These costs not only entail those associated with the implementation of strategies and programs to address attrition, but also include the expenses of determining the reasons for attrition. Often colleges implement costly programs such as peer tutoring or orientation programs to alleviate attrition. Catterall, et al., (2003), however, found that 75% of the students who left the program they investigated would not have been helped by these programs.

Although some of the programs are beneficial to some students, no difference in retention is achieved by other students.

One of the challenges faced involves getting students to attend college in the first place. Many students have some traits in common to those who do not attend college. These include coming from poor socio-economic background or having parents who did not attend college. A successful college will work with the community forming partnerships with various agencies and community programs. The college helps foster a college-attending community (Grant, Langenegger, Ramirez, & Sydnor, 2008).

One way that college administrators try to foster a college attending community is to provide classes for those students who are underprepared for college level work. Depending on placement scores, a student can be placed in one or more levels below gateway or entry level college courses. Although the premise is well and good with the intention of helping all students succeed, Baily, Jeong and Cho (2008) indicated that up to 40% of students placing below college level courses do not complete their developmental sequence of courses and thus do not fully enter the college experience. Student frustration from the necessity of taking courses that do not count toward their degree can have a negative effect on retention rates.

As I delved into the literature I was able to identify current as well as historical trends in student persistence, retention, enrollment, and attrition. The comparison of available literature with the dates they were written allowed me to illuminate gaps in the literature that needed to be filled by further study. Conflicting theories were identified as well as inconsistent research findings.

## **Gaps in the Literature**

One major gap in the literature seems to be the currency of the data. Many of the studies deemed relevant were written ten or more years ago. This study and future studies will help fill in these literature gaps.

Retention rates are always a concern for community and junior colleges who want their students to succeed and complete their degrees or certifications, or to successfully transfer from a 2-year institution to a 4-year institution. Data concerning retention rates by race, age, enrollment status (part-time versus full time), first generation status, traditional versus non-traditional, gender, race, immigration status, support system, and hours worked has been collected in various institutions across the nation (“Exploring Persistence,” 2009; Mason, 1998; Murphy, 2006). Data on the retention of students in various programs such as developmental education, nursing, agriculture (Croxon & Maginnis, 2006; Dyer et al., 2002), and business programs have been collected as well. Despite all the data concerning the retention by all these variables, a major gap exists in the literature concerning specifically the retention rates on rural campuses by the urbanicity of the hometown of the student.

Numerous researchers have discussed the difficulties of rural students attending college in a major city. The rural students often find it difficult to assimilate to the urban setting; disparity often exists between the students’ expectations and reality (Xiulan, 2015). Could the same findings be true in the reverse situation of urban students attending a rural campus? Could the differences in behavioral and aspirational cultures have as profound an influence on urban students in a rural setting as they do on rural students in an urban setting?

Recruitment requires more work for rural campuses as opposed to larger urban campuses. Sometimes remote colleges need to recruit brand names of popular items such as Starbucks or popular fast food chains to the campus to appeal to students from larger cities and suburbs. They may have success in getting one fast-food chain on campus, but the lack of variety in options is a negative that students point out (“El Paso”, 2001). In today’s technology infused world, it is difficult to believe that cell phone service would be unavailable at any college in the United States, yet some remote campuses have even had to campaign for cell phone services, the lack of which is a deterrent to many students (Biemiller, 2016). Some remote colleges have work-study programs which lead to free tuition for all their students. The free tuition will entice students to apply despite the small campus size or distance from major cities (Biemiller, 2016; College of the Ozarks, 2016). Not all colleges can do this, but many do offer discounted tuition.

### **Retention Approaches**

Research has been conducted to determine reasons for attrition and best practices for retention. Murphy (2006) discussed the need for positive acculturation, or the successful assimilation of a student into the new college environment with help from family. The students’ educational goals seem to be good predictors of college retention. Students who are unclassified need to be identified as soon as possible; programs and services should be offered to help these students determine or make their academic goals more specific and academic major oriented (Mohammadi, 1994). Tinto (1994) admonished educators to more fully study the longitudinal process of student attrition to develop a concrete plan for enhancing student retention. The research findings pertinent to this study which have been included were examined with this admonition in mind. The

attrition causes are presented as they related to the urban students on a rural campus; the best practices are discussed with the urban students to help determine what retention factors for the rural college.

### **Trends and Themes**

There are several trends that have been identified in the literature that can affect overall success and staying power of students. Having a basic understanding of these trends could have a positive effect on the ways colleges view the needs of students. These trends include persistence, retention, enrollment, attrition, characteristics of urban students, reasons for leaving, and retention strategies.

**Retention.** Retention, an institutional measurement as opposed to a student measurement of persistence, is another area of concern on which educators focus (Hagedorn, 2006; Wyrick, 2014). Retention is one of the major goals at colleges whose main objective is the graduation of happy, satisfied students. Other effects of retention include improved rankings and increased revenues (Lorenzetti, 2012).

Student retention is often perceived as a measure of student success as well as a measure of the quality of student services and instruction, and has been studied from various angles such as by first-generation status, gender, race, and socio-economic backgrounds (Barbatis, 2010). DeNicco, Harrington, and Fogg (2015) indicated that a statistically significant result was evident only between White students and Hispanic students in retention rates; no statistically significant result in retention rates was evident due to gender. There is no reason to believe that race or gender themselves are factors that can influence retention rates; however, by studying these variables in isolation, insight may be given into other variables such as a common socio-economic background

(DeNicco et al., 2015). DeNicco et al. (2015) indicated that the GPA students earn during their freshman year as well as the number of credits earned toward their degree are both statistically significant predictors of freshman year retention. They suggest that professors spend time at the beginning of their core classes doing a review of necessary skills for their subjects rather than have students take remedial courses. Hern (2012) explained that the more remedial classes required, the less likely a student is to be retained. For example, if five levels of remedial math are required, and 80% make it through all five levels, only about 33% of the original group will make it through the gateway sequence. She has had success in combining remedial classes; it would be interesting to compare retention of students who take a gateway course with a preemprory review during the first part of the semester compared to students who take a remedial course and then the gateway course.

Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2015) stated that urban students are more likely to stay continuously enrolled in college than their rural counterparts. Since rural students often attend their local community college, retention concerns are more problematic in a community college as opposed to a 4-year college. Mohamaddi (1994) indicated a possible reason for this retention concern being the higher enrollment of nontraditional students attending community colleges. These students often have lower grade point averages, lower degree goals, and more familial obligations than their traditional-student counterparts. Intent, or the students' reasons for attending college, also affects retention: students who plan on graduating or transferring to another college for a degree tend to have higher retention rates than students who are merely "taking classes" (Mohamaddi, 1994).

If universities want to increase retention, they need to seriously commit to the success and retention of their non-traditional students. Various measures can be taken to increase retention. These include things such as staff development to promote positive attitudes and methods of dissemination, the availability of social facilities and programs that meet the needs of all students, and the promotion of an inclusive environment that accepts all backgrounds of students (Thomas, 2002).

**Persistence.** Persistence, the measure of students' continuation in college, is an area of concern that receives a great deal of attention from educators (Hagedorn, 2006; Summers, 2003; Wyrick, 2014). Urban students attend rural colleges for various reasons which included getting away from the city, for sports, or because they were recruited by the rural college. Other reasons included proximity to home, reputation of the college, the availability of desired programs, the cost of said programs, and the availability of financial aid (Kelp Kern, 2000). Whatever the reason, several factors seem to have played a significant role in student persistence: self-determination, their purpose for attending college, peer relationships, family support, and psychological factors such as stress (Brown-Weinstock, 2009; Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014).

The first year of college is crucial in terms of persistence. The experiences students have during the first year of college play a major role in the subsequent persistence of the students (Tinto, 1993). Negative experiences, such as observing or encountering racism, can indirectly influence persistence by increasing the student's academic environment stress (Johnson et al., 2014).

**Enrollment.** Enrolling in college can be a difficult and daunting process, especially to students whose families are unfamiliar with the enrollment process

(Stephan, 2013). Students must pick and choose which colleges for which they apply and then maneuver through the admissions and enrollment process as well as the financial aid applications. Some student's lack of college related social capital can make the overall process a difficult hurdle to cross when trying to enroll (Stephan, 2013).

Seventeen percent of students entering college are merely enrolled part time to take a class that interests them or that they need, but that is not part of a degree program. Many part-time students simply do not enroll in a degree program (Tinto, 1993). The part-time status of some students and their lack of enrolling in a degree program can make it difficult to track them when students leave the institution.

Faculty can help with recruiting and enrollment efforts by touting their programs. They need to get to know the type of students being recruited. For example, if urban students are being recruited, it would benefit the faculty to know what programs have been offered in their high school, the students' GPA, and their placement scores. Faculty can then determine which programs are most likely to interest the students and "sell" their field (Olwell, 2009). Faculty can actively participate by talking to the students about what their programs offer during high school visits to the college campus; they could even arrange to visit high schools in the recruitment area. Promoting the various programs is an excellent way to get students to enroll.

Often students who are admitted to a college do not end up enrolling in the college. This is often the case when students have applied for and are admitted into more than one college. It is then up to the college personnel to help the student determine that theirs is the best fit for the students' needs. Often this entails invitations to various events, campus tours, and class visits. Numerous phone calls to students to follow up on their



event participation or visit happen; in short, the college must encourage the student to choose its campus for her or his educational needs (Gardner, 2015).

**Attrition.** Attrition, the failure of a student to enroll from one semester to the next, is another term often used when studying student enrollment (Summers, 2003). Although institutions keep accurate records of student enrollment, it is sometimes difficult to determine when a student, especially a part-time student, actually leaves college. Tinto (1993) argued that the uncertainty of whether students will return or not makes institutions underestimate the students who leave; students are still considered enrolled until it becomes obvious that they will not be coming back. The criteria for determining this may differ from institution to institution. This difficulty leads many institutions to only study the attrition of students enrolled in a degree-seeking program because they are easier to track (Summers, 2003). Utah State University (USU) has addressed this issue by implementing an improved withdrawal process which involves staff getting in touch with all students who do not re-enroll in order to find out why. The university then determines if the students are withdrawing or if they need a leave of absence. The university maintains contact with those granted leaves of absence and does not require them to go through a readmissions process when they are ready to come back to college (Santovec, 2005).

Another factor influencing retention is enrollment in developmental or remedial classes at the college level; some students are underprepared for college-level reading, writing, or mathematics. Most remediation occurs at community colleges, and developmental students are among those with the highest attrition rates (King, 1993; Pruett & Absher, 2015).

**Characteristics of urban students.** Although Berryhill and Bee (2007) found in their study of 237 full-time students that personality variables are not a statistically significant indicator of a student's psychological sense of community (PSOC) or their sense of belonging, student persistence is affected by the other characteristics of students as they enter college (Johnson, et al., 2014). It is therefore important to study the characteristics of the group of students in question. In this case, the characteristics possessed by urban students who attend college will be addressed.

**Demographic variables.** The demographics of urban students attending community colleges tend to be diverse in terms of race, gender, age, socio-economic status, and prior educational experiences (Hammons & Mathews, 1999). Urban students come from neighborhoods that are increasingly populated by minorities, immigrants, and those of low socio-economic status (Bender & Richardson, 1987). Thompson argued that the urban student, especially the Black urban student, has been subjected to severe educational, legal, political, economic, and social restrictions (as cited in Hammons and Mathews, 1999, p. 11).

**Race or underrepresented population.** Minorities are found in disproportionate numbers in urban areas, therefore it is prudent to study the racial heritage of urban students (Bender & Richardson, 1987; Gooden, 1991). Hammons and Mathews (1999) reported that statistically significant differences in mean cumulative GPA existed for the race of students attending a predominantly Black college in an urban setting. Their study included over 600 first-time freshmen. In their study, minority students received statistically significantly lower GPA than non-minority students; yet Barbatis (2010) found that successful students from an urban campus expressed how their success was

influenced by their culture, race, or ethnicity. Murphy (2006) agreed that students, especially immigrant students, who could keep in close contact with their families and with others with similar cultures (not necessarily the same racial attributes) had a more positive experience in college; they had the familial support necessary for a positive acculturation experience. Those students who do not have a positive acculturation experience tend to have higher levels of stress which can ultimately lead to attrition (Murphy, 2006).

*Gender.* Per DeNicco, et al. (2015), French Graybeal (2007), and Mitchley-McAvoy (20012), there is no statistically significant difference in first year college retention between genders. Females, however, tend to choose their college based on *habitus* or sense of belonging (Nora, 2014). This agrees with Berryhill and Bee (2007) who indicated that females have a higher sense of belonging on a college campus than do their male counterparts.

*Age.* A statistically significant difference in mean cumulative GPA exist for the age of students attending a predominantly Black community college in an urban setting. Traditional aged students tended to receive lower GPA scores than non-traditional aged students (Hammons & Mathews, 1999). French Graybeal (2007) indicated that age did not affect the fall-to-fall retention rates of first-time, full-time freshmen students.

*First-generation college student.* Urban students tended to be first generation college students. Most of their parents did not go beyond high school. It was also common for the parents of urban students to have dropped out of school either before getting a high school diploma or even before entering high school. The income of first generation students tended to be lower than non-first-generation students. Students

tended to go further in post-secondary education relative to their parents' post-secondary attainment (Bender & Richardson, 1987; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

First-generation students tended to enroll in different programs than non-first-generation students. First-generation students were less likely to enroll in a program that would take them beyond a 2-year degree; they tended to enroll in associate's degree programs or programs for certification. The programs students enroll in tend to be correlated with the amount of education the parents had; the higher the education level of the parents, the higher possibility of the students enrolling in a bachelor's degree program (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Many first-generation students delay college attendance. Research by Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) indicated that first generation students were more likely to be 30 years or older. These students also tend to be financially independent, often with dependents of their own. There is no correlation, however, between first-generation status and retention of full-time first-time students (French Graybeal, 2007).

*Financial aid status.* No statistical significance was found in the GPA of students receiving financial aid compared to those who did not receive financial aid at an urban, predominantly Black community college (Hammons & Mathews, 1999). French Graybeal (2007), on the other hand, did find that financial aid receipt and retention are significantly related. Her study, however, had a small effect size ( $\phi^2 = .02$ ).

*Socioeconomic status.* Although financial need is a leading issue in a college student's life, it can be argued that students from a lower socioeconomic status will have limited access to resources which would lead to a decreased opportunity for student success (Bender & Richardson, 1987; Hammons & Mathews, 1999). Financial need is a

barrier to higher education that often necessitates the need of the student to find employment. The working status of urban students is comparable to students on non-urban campuses, yet, while suburban students can continue their college education whether or not they have a job, urban students may not be able to continue their education unless they are working (Bender & Richardson, 1987).

*Academic variables.* A rigorous high school curricular program can be a strong predictor of college retention in minority students (Barbatis, 2010). Other researchers tend to agree. For example, DeNicco et al. (2015) indicated that to increase college retention, college preparation needs to be enhanced during high school.

*High school diploma.* Historically, minority students from urban areas have difficulty transitioning to higher education due to the inadequacies of their public-school education (Gooden, 1991). Gonzalez (2015) also stated that minority students (with low socioeconomic status) often attended schools that did not adequately prepare them for college. This history makes college daunting in the eyes of these potential students. Urban student are often afraid to give college a try, yet they have a desire to attend college due to social pressures.

French Graybeal (2007) found a statistically significant relationship between the type of high school attended and college retention. Traditional high school students in French Graybeal's study persisted at a higher than expected rate. The persistence rate of the students attending a traditional high school was 60.2%, which is close to the 63.0% persistence rate of students attending a private high school.

*General equivalency diploma (GED).* GED students tend to be more disadvantaged both socially and economically over their high school graduate

equivalents, with the poverty rate of GED students being twice that of non-GED students' families (Prins & Kassab, 2015). Students who earn their GED are less likely to attend college than their counterparts who earned a high school diploma even though no statistical significance in college GPA exists between the two groups (Hammons & Mathews, 1999; Prins & Kassab, 2015). Some urban students, however, indicated that they chose to attend community college because of their GED status; the open-door policy of community colleges, and the access to tutoring and developmental courses were critical factors in the urban students' access to post-secondary education (Bender & Richardson, 1987). College students with a GED status are more likely to enroll in certification programs and 2-year programs rather than a bachelor's degree (Prins & Kassab, 2015). French Graybeal (2007) found that students with a GED status persisted in college at a lower than expected rate. Of those with a GED status in her study, only 41.1% persisted for their first year of college.

*Enrollment in developmental courses.* No significant relationship between enrollment in developmental math or English and program completion exists when the completion rates of 659 freshmen at a Black urban community college were examined (Hammons & Mathews, 1999). It seems that whether the developmental programs were utilized or not, over half the students did not complete their degree programs (Hammons & Mathews, 1999). It does seem, however, that access to developmental education is what enabled students to enter college to begin with (Bender & Richardson, 1987). It is up to the college to find ways to retain these students.

*Grade point average (GPA).* When looking at the mean GPA of a cohort of students, those not completing their degree program tended to have a lower GPA than

those who did complete their program (Hammons & Mathews, 1999). French Graybeal (2007) conducted a study comparing the GPA scores of first-time full-time freshmen who persisted their first year from fall to fall. She concluded that those who persisted were inclined to have higher GPA scores than those who did not persist. Johnson, et al. (2014) also recognized the importance of high school GPA with freshmen students.

*Enrollment status.* Students from an urban Black college who were enrolled full time had no statistical difference in GPA than those enrolled part-time (Hammons & Mathews, 1999). The Mitchley-McAvoy (2012) study of students attending Iowa community colleges looked at retention rather than GPA. She indicated that there is not a statistically significant difference in retention rates of part-time college students compared to full-time college students.

*Internal variables.* In a qualitative study conducted by Barbatis (2010), certain internal pre-college characteristics and traits were found to exist in urban students who persisted to at least 30 college credits at a large, urban community college. These internal factors included cultural and racial self-identification, determination, faith, goal orientation, independence, resourcefulness, and sense of responsibility (Barbatis, 2010). Urban students who persisted also credited the positive influences of parents and faculty as contributors to their success. The successful students also viewed education as a means to improve their lives.

**Reasons for leaving.** It is often difficult to determine true attrition in small community colleges due to the unique nature of the college. These community colleges try to serve several functions: a starting point for those who wish to obtain a 4-year degree, the meeting of community needs by providing basic adult education, certification

programs to meet the needs of local businesses, and to provide various enrichment programs for personal or professional development. Community colleges are also perceived as institutions of social equalization by having those open-door policies that allow all interested citizens to pursue a secondary degree (Lane, 2003). All these purposes are well and good, but Lane (2003) pointed out that often these are not the criteria by which community colleges are judged; they are analyzed from the misconceived viewpoint that all students enrolling in college wish to obtain a bachelor's degree. This is problematic when retention rates are calculated without considering the reasons that students leave Academia.

The following variables have been cited as reasons that student's leave their college programs. Although each provides valuable insight into student attrition, Summers (2003) contended that an intricate correlation exists among the different reasons students leave and that a multivariate approach in the research is necessary in gaining a better understanding of the relationship between the variables. Reasons for departure from the community college can vary and do not necessarily denote failure of the college. Mohammadi (1994) mentioned the following as some reasons students leave:

- transferring to another college before program completion,
- enrolling only for a few technical courses such as computer training or accounting,
- taking only a few courses required for employment or by their employer, or
- taking classes simply due to curiosity or self-development and leaving when they have *learned enough*. It appears a high percent of students who



leave college began college with no intent on completing a degree or certification program. (Mohammadi, 1994)

There are also various other reasons that students leave college. It is imperative that colleges understand the characteristics and attitudes of students who do not persist to truly address retention strategies (Lorenzetti, 2012). Some of the underlying causes of attrition will be addressed below.

***Stress.*** All the reasons listed for leaving college lead back to stress and how well a student can handle the stress of the various factors influencing their life. Lewin (2009) indicated that the stress of trying to balance working and going to college was a bigger factor in dropping out than obtaining the funds for college. Johnson et al. (2014) indicated that various forms of stress influence a student's commitment to the college, which then would affect their willingness to continue at the institution. These stress factors include those related to the academic environment, which tends to influence students of color and stress related to the social environment, which tends to influence White students. Various experiences encountered on campus also influence stress levels and commitment to returning to the campus.

***Course preference.*** Sometimes students are unable to take the classes they planned. This can play a major role in student decision to leave the university (Catterall, et al., 2003; Lewin, 2009). Whether the student is unable to take the class due to scheduling conflicts or that the class is not offered does not seem to be a factor, merely that students are taking unwanted classes.

***Academic integration.*** Academic integration denotes a student's interface with Academia and their annexation of college life (Barbatis, 2010, p. 4). Some students who

do well in high school find it difficult to adjust from the rigid structure of high school to the less rigid college atmosphere which requires more self-motivation than was required in high school (Geddes, 2012; Hlinka, 2012). The underprivileged student often is deficient in math, reading, and/or writing; these students frequently lack the study skills necessary to succeed in college. Students' unpreparedness for this atmosphere can affect attrition and retention (Croxin & Maginnis, 2006; Gooden, 1991; Thomas, 2002). Advisors and faculty need to learn to recognize students who are having difficulty in transitioning into college life. They can then offer the needed assistance or guide students to the appropriate resources (King, 1993).

Pruett and Absber (2015) studied the records of approximately 400,000 students and concluded that academic engagement plays a statistically significant role in the retention of college students. Both Pruett and Absber (2015) and Thomas (2002) stated that students who persist actively participate in class by asking questions both in and out of class, tutoring their peers, engaging in conversations with students of varying backgrounds, and working with their instructors on non-course activities; faculty-student academic contact seems to be crucial (King, 1993). Students can become too far behind in coursework to catch up if they do not become actively engaged within the first couple of weeks of college (Pruett & Absber, 2015). Increased interaction between the student and the college professors can do much to alleviate stress the students may be feeling. Positive interactions also help foster positive attitudes about the campus environment (Johnson, et al., 2014).

***Travel time.*** The time required to travel to and from classes can significantly affect a student's persistence (Catterall, et al., 2003). Data gathered from the University

of Alabama at Tuscaloosa pertaining to retention indicated that attrition rates for freshmen who do not live on campus are higher than those of students who do live on campus (Rampell, 2008). This would especially affect students attending a community college as most enrolled are commuters (King, 1993). Some students can travel an hour and a half or more to attend classes, and bus services are often not available in the rural areas that the colleges serve; transportation grants that could help are often restricted to use in more urban areas (“El Paso”, 2001). The high cost of gas, wear and tear on a vehicle, and time spent traveling in addition to in-class time can be prohibitive, especially if the student is unable to carpool. The officials at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa have tried to curtail freshmen attrition by requiring that freshmen live on campus during their first year of college (Rampell, 2008).

Another factor to consider for commuter students, in addition to their travel time and associated costs, is the lack of sense of community. Kirk and Lewis (2013) have dubbed these students as “In and Out” students because they come in for class and leave out soon after class. These students often do not develop a “college sense of community” which may lead to student departure from the campus (Kirk & Lewis, 2013).

*Academic preparedness.* Academic preparedness, or lack thereof, is another contributing factor to student attrition in higher education. How prepared a student is for the rigors of college as well as how well the college addresses the needs of the underprepared student all factor into student withdrawal (Croxin & Maginnis, 2006; Thomas, 2002). Often a student comes into college as an ‘at risk’ student because her or his public education, for whatever reason, was unable to prepare the student for the transition from high-school to college and to provide the student with the necessary skills

for college success (Gooden, 1991). In 2001, one third of first-year college students were required to take developmental courses (Fusaro, 2007). Students who must take developmental classes tend to have higher attrition rates than students who do not require remediation (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2008; French Graybeal, 2007; King, 1993; Mitchley-McAvoy, 2012), yet students in need of remediation would not thrive without proper placement. It is therefore imperative that advisors consider students' placement test scores and other non-cognitive measures to ensure appropriate placement in developmental courses if necessary. Early intervention for at-risk students is a key component to helping them persist (Lorenzetti, 2012). Successful students who came to college underprepared, yet could persist, developed the skills necessary to help them do so. These included developing effective study habits, cultivating positive interactions with instructors, learning college expectations, and utilizing available resources (Barbatis, 2010).

Sometimes a student is ill-prepared as opposed to underprepared. This is due to their life choices and circumstances rather than their academic ability, per se (Hardin, 1998). These are the students who may not have planned on attending college and therefore did not take the necessary college preparatory classes in high school; they then changed their mind. At other times, students are coming back to school after time has passed during which some of their academic skills has been lost (McArthur, 2005).

*Academic boredom.* Students can become bored with classes if they do not understand the rationale behind the class. It is imperative that instructors not only give the logic for having a particular class required, they should also strive to illustrate how the class will be useful to the students beyond the college classroom (King, 1993).

Academic boredom can also occur if students are not in a class that challenges their intellect. Correct placement into courses should alleviate academic boredom; these can be determined by placement tests and other non-cognitive measures (King, 1993).

***Cultural differences.*** Often students leave college because they do not have a sense of belonging. The racial climate of a college can be a determining factor in a students' development of *psychological sense of community* (PSOC) or *collegiate sense of community* (CSOC). This PSOC or CSOC can be alleviated when the college has an atmosphere of acceptance; instructors can help students realize the importance of their own ideas and values (Berryhill & Bee, 2007; Kirk & Lewis, 2013; Wlodkowski, 2008). Persistence and commitment to the college increases when there is community and acceptance across the racial and ethnic groups on campus. Students who experienced incidences of stereotyping of their ethnic background and racism tend to experience higher levels of academic environment stress, which indirectly affects a students' desire to persist; even negative perceptions of the racial climate of the campus can affect a student's persistence (Berryhill & Bee, 2007; Johnson et al., 2012).

Colleges need to proactively find ways to accommodate and affirm the various cultures of the students, thus creating a positive racial climate. Faculty and staff should consider the needs and characteristics of a diverse student population as policies and procedures are considered and adopted (Berryhill & Bee, 2007; Dedeaux, 2011). When both the rural and the urban cultures are accepted and respected on the college campus, thus allowing the students to recognize their cultural value and maintain their cultural identities, the academic success rates tend to increase. Acceptance and respect of varying socio-economic backgrounds as well as of the distinctive ethnic cultures also contribute

positively to academic success rates. (Croxon & Maginnis, 2006; Thomas, 2002; Tierney, 1999; Xiulan, 2015).

***Personal life and first-generation college student status.*** Often the reasons students leave college are due to personal conflicts or familial obligations; lack of family support is often a contributing factor in a student's attrition (Barbatis, 2010). Frequently students, especially the adult student, is attending college in addition to all their other obligations; often these external forces conflict with college participation (McArthur, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Students have been taught the value of continuing education, yet they have not truly embraced Academia as a priority. This would especially be true of first-generation college students whose families lack the ability to instill the notion that education should be a priority (King, 1993; Mobelini, 2012). Many colleges are starting to utilize personal life coaches to help students deal with these issues. The life coaches work with students on a personal level teaching them how to manage their time to better integrate personal lives with rigorous demands of college; life coaches help students make the transition from high school to college (McClure, 2006).

Bender and Richardson (1987) found that some students had taken just enough college classes to be able to gain employment. The students then left the college to take a job. These students would come back later to fulfill their long-range goals of earning a degree. It seems that some students are not actually leaving college per se; they are merely postponing their post-secondary education.

***Financial issues.*** In addition to personal obligations, financial issues can affect a student's retention rate and subsequent academic success. Students can become too worried about the cost of higher education, not realizing how much debt they would incur

when obtaining a degree. Many students need to work at least part-time, often juggling conflicting work and school schedules. Working can interfere with study time. Although the pressure of working and trying to maintain acceptable school work can make students consider withdrawing, Thomas (2002) found that most students have accepted the debt and long working hours necessary for obtaining their degree. These findings correlated with the Hammons and Mathews (1999) findings that financial aid status did not affect students' final GPA (and ultimate success).

Often a student can be enticed to attend college with a little financial incentive. Full scholarships are not feasible for everyone, but small scholarships for various reasons can help a student decide in favor of enrolling or re-enrolling on campus. One college offers \$1000 scholarship for the most fun photo of a prospective student with their admissions package uploaded on the university's Facebook page (Gardner, 2015). Another offers \$100/month off housing costs for returning (Oregon State University, 2016). Free parking for returning sophomores at community colleges is a small but satisfactory perk that can be offered at little expense. Students required to take developmental education can be offered the corresponding gateway course for free if the developmental level is passed; likewise, some colleges offer developmental courses for free as they would the high-school equivalency classes. Not every college can offer extravagant amenities, but little perks can be a welcome incentive for students to return.

Making internships and scholarships a priority is an important way to retain as well as recruit students (Bugeja, 2013). H. Lunday, Dean of Student Services of MSU-WP, stated that he spends a majority of his time fundraising (H. Lunday, personal communication, September 30, 2014). By doing so, his college has amassed 65 endowed

scholarships in addition to the 40 endowed scholarships available for the athletics program (Board of Governors, Missouri State University [Board of Governors], 2008). His college offers an incentive package for students which includes medical services, free flu shots, legal services and counseling services (Lunday, 2014). Many need-based federal programs are available for college students. These include both subsidized and unsubsidized Direct Stafford Loans, Pell Grants, federal work-study programs, and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants. State programs are available as well. Missouri students, for example, have the following assistance available: the A+ program, Missouri Returning Heroes Education Act, Access Missouri Financial Assistance Program, Higher Education Academic Scholarship (Bright Flight), Marguerite Ross Barnett Scholarship, and other various state programs (CollegeCalc, 2014).

*Uncertainty about school major and career goals.* Students frequently change their majors. Up to 80% change their majors at least once (King, 1993; Ramos, 2013); college students on average will change their majors three times. About one half of students enrolled in a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) major will switch majors to a non-STEM major (Chen, 2013).

One reason cited for dropping out of college is the inability to decide on a career goal. College counselors and advisors can work with students to help guide them through the important process of deciding a major and career path (King, 1993). Colleges need to have career counseling be a major part of the students' academic experience starting from the freshman year. This career counseling can include not only an introduction to the numerous jobs open to them for the various degrees, but also teach students how to recognize when they need to upgrade skills as well as how to do so. Colleges need to not



only teach them how to do interviews and write resumes, but they need to teach students how to direct their own learning throughout their educational and vocational careers (Selingo, 2016).

***Transfer.*** Sometimes a student begins his or her education at one college and transfers to a different college or technical school. Even though transfer or ‘trading up’ to another college does not seem to highly affect retention, it still warrants consideration (Lorenzetti, 2012). Although the number of students doing this will indeed increase attrition numbers, it is problematic to place these students in the same category as others who leave college altogether. It is a positive activity when students transfer from a community college to a 4-year college. A goal of the community college should be to help ease the transition to the 4-year college by encouraging campus visits and having contact people from the universities interact and stay in touch with the prospective students (Mobelini, 2012). Students may transfer before they have earned an associate’s degree, but this could be considered a positive attrition.

**Retention strategies.** Although less than one-third of community colleges have a retention plan (“Steps,” 2006), various retention strategies have been utilized in some colleges in an effort to help students fulfill their academic potential. What works at one institution may not necessarily be successful at another. Creating programs to increase retention for specific groups of students seems like a good idea; however, these retention strategies work best when they are created for individuals as opposed to the group, which can lead to further segregation of those who have been labeled for a specific group. The best practices are those aimed at students as individuals (“Steps,” 2006; Tinto, 1993).

This can be accomplished better by systematically monitoring student satisfaction and education progress (“Steps,” 2006).

Various retention strategies utilized by different institutions include college sponsored activities, counseling services, and tutoring services. The more involved a student is with campus life, the higher the possibility that he or she will be retained (Brooks, 2010). This involvement increases a student’s sense of belonging, something to which colleges need to pay more attention. Colleges also need to discern the various student support services that their student population deem necessary (Croxon & Maginnis, 2006). One of the most important components of retention in a college is the expression of genuine interest in the whole student, above and beyond their tuition and stats (H. Lunday, personal communication, September 30, 2014).

*College sponsored activities.* Colleges often sponsor activities to help foster students’ sense of belonging on campus. Sometimes these well-intended programs do not have the desired effect. Students visiting one of the State University of New York (SUNY) campuses, for example, stated that although the campus sponsored many minority-oriented activities, a lack of integration remained prevalent (Foderaro, 1990). Pruett and Absher (2015) indicated that college sponsored activities can sometimes have a statistically significant effect on retention rates; they further indicated that retention decreased in relationship to the time spent in college sponsored activities. Pruett and Absher (2015) maintained that variables such as academic and environmental variables and background are better predictors of retention than social integration and participation. The programs in and of themselves are not enough to ensure retention; they need to be integrated throughout the college community rather than be marginalized or segregated

from the rest of campus life (Tierney, 1999; Tinto, 1993). Student service programs need to be focused on supporting students and providing the students with a great college experience; any programs that are not working may need to either be revamped or replaced (Mills, 2014).

The programs, however, can help students find friends with similar interests. Building a social network of good friends can be crucial in a student's decision of whether to continue or to leave university. This social network can help students overcome the problems they encounter at school (Thomas, 2002). It is especially imperative to promote social programs during the first few weeks of the freshman semester because this is often a critical transition period during which students decide whether to stay or leave (Brooks, 2010).

Touting the advantages of the college is always a good practice. Bugeja (2013) stated that it is important to make sure that the local schools have student information packets containing graduation and placement rates of the college. Alumni can be highlighted in the packet as well. For example, various business men and women or professionals from around the community who began their careers in the college can be spotlighted in the packet. Social media can be utilized by introducing faculty, staff, and highlighting various programs and activities on a college website or blog; faculty need to tout their programs (Olwell, 2009).

Some college-sponsored activities should include parents and family members. Often the lack of familial support is cited as a reason to leave the college; by including the family in college activities, the student can retain their family support system which would otherwise be lost. Family inclusive activities need to go beyond the one-time pre-

enrollment activities; often community college students still live at home – the family members are still an integral part of their life and want/need to be involved in the students' college experience (Barbatis, 2010).

*Social opportunities.* The more involved students are on campus, such as with clubs, interacting with their other students, and interacting with professors outside the boundaries of the classroom, the more likely they are to persist (Barbatis, 2010; Berryhill & Bee 2007). One complaint of students from a rural Kansas college was the lack of on-campus things to do after class (Mills, 2014). One Arkansas university was dubbed “a suitcase campus” by its president because many of the students left for the weekend due to lack of social opportunities (Williams, 2003). A way to encourage students to remain close to campus on weekends is to tout the advantages of the rural university's setting. This can be done by forming outdoor groups, such as the Ozarks Outback group of the University of the Ozarks which sponsors hikes, canoeing, rock-climbing, and various other outdoor activities available close to campus. This same university has started hosting more weekend sports events and activities such as dances; the food service offers a nice dinner three Saturday evenings each month (Williams, 2003). Other universities offer similar events. One college in Washington runs its own outdoor center complete with equipment necessary for various outdoor adventures; one southern Missouri college offers a yearly back-to-school BBQ for students and faculty, multicultural mixers, and a variety of student clubs; one Michigan college has its own ski resort; and a college in California offers beach days (Hoeller, 2014; Lunday, 2014, personal communication). Not all universities can offer all amenities, but it is prudent to create opportunities for students to connect with their campus.

When faculty can interact with students outside of class, the students can become more comfortable in class. An important contributor to student persistence seems to be the quality and the amount of time in student-faculty interactions, therefore colleges need to maximize the opportunities for student-faculty contact and encourage proactive faculty outreach (King, 1993; McArthur, 2005). Successful university presidents have taken it upon themselves to create opportunities to interact with students outside of the campus; many offer their home for student events or for student gathering places (Santovec, 2005; Williams, 2003). The president of the University of the Ozarks hosts yearly events at his home including dinners for incoming freshmen, a good-bye dinner for seniors, pumpkin-carving parties, and Super-Bowl parties (Williams, 2003). Other universities do similar activities including ice-cream socials, inclusion dances, and more (Bugeja, 2013). These interactions impress upon the students the idea that the faculty are genuinely concerned and interested in the students.

All available social activities need to be made known to prospective freshmen, which is why many campuses have fun days to introduce them to the college life experience. The potential students have major decisions to make; they are deciding not merely where they will go to school and get a degree, but they are deciding where they will live and spend the next two or more years of their life (Gardner, 2015). They need to know if the prospective college or university is a place they fit in or wish to spend that part of their life; they need to have a psychological sense of community with the college or university (Berryhill & Bee, 2007). Once enrolled, freshmen need to be immersed in the college life experience; colleges need to actively try to increase student engagement and involvement (“Steps,” 2006). Some colleges help students transition to college life by

having freshmen come a week early to campus. During this week students attend required programs and lectures; they are also given nightly opportunities to interact with other students and connect to the university during social activities (Brooks, 2010).

Even distance learners can become actively involved on campus. Campus events can be broadcast via the Internet to make them accessible for students who are unable to personally attend an event (Dedeaux, 2011). Online communities are a wonderful way for students to interact with one another. Virtual communities can be set up for individual classes, for majors, extracurricular interests or clubs, for graduate cohorts, or for study groups. Virtual communities, blogs, broadcasts, and online resource portals contribute to the students' sense of belonging and makes them feel a genuine part of the college life despite their inability to physically be on campus often if at all (Crawley, 2004; Dedeaux, 2011).

*Academic advising and counseling services.* Academic advisors have long been used by universities to help guide students through educational processes. Mandatory advising is a contributor to student retention; thus, they need to be well organized and propagated (Dedeaux, 2011; "Steps," 2006). As far back as the 19th century, students were paired with an advisor or counselor to give students the opportunity to interact with a college representative who is concerned about their progress (Dedeaux, 2011; King, 1993). Counselors can do much to validate the students' college decisions such as giving encouragement, affirming that they can do the work, and simply engaging with students; this has an impact on student success. A caring counselor-student relationship that provides positive reinforcement of a student's academic success and confirms that the students are equal participants in the college counseling interrelationship are essential in

helping build confidence in students and to affirm their ability to succeed (Xiong, Allen, & Wood, 2016).

Although counseling has a vital role in the encouragement of our students, counseling alone does not play a statistically significant role in the retention of students (Boylan & Saxon, 2005; Pruett & Absher, 2015). Students may not be comfortable or may be distrustful of someone from a different ethnic background, especially if the student has had previous encounters of prejudice and racism; this distrust may prevent students from utilizing needed advising and counseling services. Counseling services are more utilized when conducted by someone of like ethnicity or background (Dedeaux, 2011; Tinto, 1993). These like-person role models can have positive effects on students, especially on students who feel out of place in their college environment; the role models or advisors have a strategic role in guiding students, fostering their integration into the educational and social facets of college life, and nurturing in them a desire for success (Dedeaux, 2011; King, 1993).

Sadly, if the person assigned to the student does not interact positively with the student, negative feelings toward the university may arise in the student (Dedeaux, 2011). For this reason, student advisors should not necessarily be drawn from the faculty pool. Faculty members tend to view the world from their area of expertise or subject matter, and may not have information about or enthusiasm toward the campus beyond their own department. Faculty members, who are busy with their various classes, students, and other campus duties, may not be as available for counseling as students need, or may not be up to date on information disseminated to the students. Faculty members may also not have an accommodating personality necessary to guide struggling students through their

academic endeavors. These various reasons may prevent students from utilizing the advising services that would promote student success (Dedeaux, 2011).

Often a student is unaware of the rigors and fortitude necessary to obtain one's educational and career goals. They can become disheartened when college is not what they expected; often they cite advising as one of the things they are not happy with on their campus (Freeman, 2008). It is especially pertinent to have career counseling and advisement services available to give students realistic expectations of college life and to encourage them to take advantages of unique college experiences that will enable them to explore their life goals, educational goals, and career goals (Bender & Richardson, 1987; Freeman, 2008).

Distance and time is something that would prevent many students, especially on a rural campus, from meeting with counselors. Online counseling, where the student chats online with the advisor, is a viable option to help meet the needs of distance learners (Cockrum & Datray, 2014; Crawley, 2004; Dedeaux, 2011). Some of the counseling services offered online by various institutions include orientation, personal counseling, help with financial aid, career planning, academic advising, and tutoring (Crawley, 2004). Services offered online can ease the burden of rural students who commute only weekly, biweekly, or evenings; online services are beneficial to those who have jobs, and for distance learners.

***Tutoring services.*** Tutoring has been utilized in colleges for years. The need for tutoring is necessary to support a wider range of ability in an ever-increasing diversity of the student population (Saxon & Boylan, 2001; "The Future," 2010). Whether provided by peer tutoring or professional tutors does not seem to matter (Boylan, 2002). Pruett and



Absher (2015) pointed out that the amount of peer tutoring or other tutoring received was not statistically significant. It appeared that an important factor was that the tutors were well trained (Boylan, 2002).

***Mentoring programs.*** Mentoring by upperclassmen, staff, or faculty, who have successfully maneuvered through the same type of situation as a student (such as being a Black student on a predominantly White campus) can have a positive influence on students (Tinto, 1993). Relationships between students and faculty affect student attitudes toward their educational problems. When faculty exhibit faith in students' ability to complete their program as well as show genuine concern for the students, the students' self-confidence increases, which leads to greater motivation; if students are having difficulty, they are more likely to talk to faculty with whom they have connected. It would be especially beneficial to prioritize positive relationships with under-represented groups, such as by learning the students' names, to enhance their sense of belonging on the campus (Thomas, 2002).

One program is not necessarily more effective than another as a retention strategy. It seems the individual students must be considered when determining programs to offer or to suggest to students; and no program can replace individual attention. No program can be as effective as the individualized attention that can be given by caring and committed faculty and staff (Boylan, 2002; Croxon & Maginnis, 2006; Tinto, 1993).

### **Practical Significance Reported in Studies**

Students, no matter their background, need to feel welcome on the campus. Universities that embrace and value diversity tend to have better retention among their non-traditional students than a campus that does not embrace and value the diversity of

the students. Students need to feel comfortable enough with the faculty and other students to be willing to ask for help when needed; students need to be free to be themselves rather than feel forced to conform (Croxon & Maginnis, 2006; Thomas, 2002).

### **Reconciliation of Conflicting Theories**

At first glance it can seem as though some of the data concerning counseling conflict with one another. On one hand, Xiong, Allen, and Wood (2016) maintain that a positive student-counselor relationship is essential. Others agree with this premise and indicate so by pointing out that pairing students with advisors and counselors is a long-standing practice and that it should even be a mandate for students to work with their academic counselor (Dedeaux, 2011; King, 1993; “Steps,” 2006). On the other hand, Boylan and Saxon (2005), as well as Pruett and Absher (2015), indicated that counseling alone does not play a statistically significant role in the retention of college students. This by no means is in opposition to Dedeaux (2011), King (1993), and others who maintain the essentiality of counselors. Boylan and Saxon (2005) and Pruett and Absher (2015) merely indicate that counseling *alone* is not statistically significant. Dedeaux (2011), King (1993), and Xiong, et al. (2016) all indicated that students need to be paired with a *caring* counselor who interacts and develops an equal participant interrelationship with the students. The counselor must also be a person that the student trusts, which may mean, due to the student’s background, a person with similar ethnicity or background (Dedeaux, 2011; Tinto, 1993). There is no conflict of theories here when taking into consideration that the student and the counselor need to *fit*.

Dedeaux (2011) stated that faculty may not make the best advisors due to various reasons including limited time affordable to counseling brought about by the faculty’s

various campus duties, their classes, and the time needed with students taking their classes. However, faculty advisors can be essential to retention (McArthur, 2005). Both may be completely valid. Time constraints would be a major factor in faculty being an advisor; advising adds more to an already busy schedule. Overworked professors may find it difficult to work quality advising time into their schedules. Faculty who wish to be advisors, however, would be excellent advisors; they would be those who have worked with the students and who see them more regularly than a traditional advisor.

### **Inconsistent Findings**

Tierney (1999) claimed Tinto's (1993) model of *habitus* requires cultural suicide for students to be academically successful. It appears, however, that Tinto's model is in line with Tierney's in that both encourage cultural programs integrated into college life that will increase students' sense of belonging. It would be prudent to examine the issues from the individual students' points of view, thus ensuring their voice is heard rather than merely studied from an outsider's perspective (Mobelini, 2012).

Another inconsistent finding exists among gender research. According to Berryhill and Bee (2007), women tend to have a higher sense of belonging on a college campus than do males. The DeNicco, et al. (2015) study indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in first year college retention between genders which would imply that *habitus* does not have a significant role in freshman retention. Berryhill and Bee (2007) and Nora (2004) both appear to conclude that *habitus* does influence a student's satisfaction with their college experience, which would help increase retention.

Students and college campuses are in a constant state of evolution. Colleges need to, in essence, be a living entity that can change and grow according to the needs of the

students. If recruitment of urban students becomes crucial for the diversity and growth of a rural campus, that campus must determine the needs of the recruited students, which may be completely different than the needs of the traditional population of the campus. Neither the college nor the students can benefit if the new students do not remain to complete their degree or program. It is therefore imperative that colleges assess the perceived wants and needs of newly recruited students to determine what feasible changes to the curriculum or school environment can be manipulated to serve these needs. Once done, those changes can be touted as a recruiting tool for another cohort of urban students.

### **Summary**

It seems increasingly important that campuses increase their recruiting efforts in addition to their retention efforts. When the recruitment takes on a new direction, such as expanding beyond the normal service area of a college, the retention efforts also need to take on a new direction. Traditional retention strategies may need to necessarily change and evolve as the student body changes, evolves, and becomes more diversified.

The literature contains a plethora of information on student characteristics and reasons they leave college. Studies have been conducted on retention strategies utilized in various colleges. What is missing, however, is information pertaining specifically to urban students attending a rural college campus. To gain a better understanding of how best to serve these students, it would be prudent to consider their psyche. This will assist the rural college in their endeavor to not only recruit more students from outside their traditional service area, but to discover what students regard as a necessary component to remain on the rural campus to finish their degree. This study endeavored to uncover the

trends and themes in the students' college experiences that would enable the rural college to determine the best recruiting and retention strategies. This would not only help recruiters grow and enrich the college's student population, but would also better enable faculty and staff to help the urban student succeed on the rural campus.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of urban college students attending a rural junior college. This was accomplished using one-on-one interviews. A phenomenological study was chosen because it provided the interviewees with an opportunity to share their experiences with the phenomenon of being an urban student in a rural setting. Moustakas (1994) noted that a phenomenology is used when there is a desire to explore a group who has not been studied and to give that group a voice.

This chapter is divided into six main sections: (a) participants, (b) instrumentation, (c) trustworthiness, (d) researcher bias, (e) data collection, (f) data analysis, and (g) a chapter summary. The participants section details the population and selection criterion as well as the sampling frame. The instrumentation section discusses what was used to collect the data, the trustworthiness section details the reliability and validity of the study. The data collection and analysis sections indicate how the interviews were conducted as well as how the data collected was analyzed. This is followed by a chapter summary.

Prior to beginning this study, the researcher received IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval from two universities. First, IRB approval was obtained from a midsized university in Texas where the researcher was attending her doctoral program. Next, an IRB from a 2-year college in Missouri, where the research was conducted, was procured.

### **Research Design**

I carefully considered the research design for this study as I reflected on the purpose of my research which was to describe the experiences of urban students

attending a rural community college. I considered both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to coincide with my purpose and to answer my research questions. A qualitative approach seemed to be the best fit for this study.

Quantitative research design falls into four primary categories: descriptive, correlational, causal-comparative, and quasi-experimental or experimental. Data gathered using these approaches is based on statistical data analysis. Because my purpose was to describe the experience of the phenomena of urban students attending a rural community college, statistical analysis would not adequately answer my research question nor allow me to describe the phenomena. However, a qualitative research design was more appropriate to address my need for describing the participants' experiences.

This study was conducted per the transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology focuses on describing the common experiences of the participants, which, in this case, was being an urban student attending a rural community college (Creswell, 2013). Because phenomenological research is focused on describing rather than explaining some phenomena, I needed to bracket my experiences with the phenomena under study. I had to set aside my prejudgments about the phenomenon (known as the Epoche process) in order to complete the study free of any preconceptions, previous knowledge and experience, and thoughts about the phenomenon. By doing this I was able to study this topic without any presumptions or predeterminations (Moustakas, 1994). Once IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval was obtained, interviews were conducted with participants focused on answering the following research question:

1. What are the experiences, challenges, and advantages of students from urban communities who are attending a rural community college?

### **Participants**

This study included seven participants. Recruiting continued until saturation of data was achieved. The participants were current community college students attending SMCC (Southern Missouri Community College). Each participant was from an urban area as determined by the U.S. Census Bureau's *County Classification Lookup Table* (2016), which determined the rurality or urbanicity of the students according to their hometown zip-code. The U.S. Census Bureau (2015b) stated that areas of 50,000 inhabitants are considered urban. Participants were purposely selected to include both male and female, both freshmen and sophomores. The participants were recruited to represent as diverse a group of students as allowable, therefore purposeful sampling was utilized.

The participants were recruited in person and by invitation e-mailed individually to those who met the criteria. The letter informed students that urban students on campus were needed to participate in a study. The flyer included information about the study and its importance, the importance of the students' participation, and the contact information should they have wished for more information concerning the study. Those interested in participating either emailed or contacted the researcher in person to schedule a day, time, and location to meet for the interview process.

### **Instrumentation**

Participant interview responses and demographic information compromised the data collection of this study. Demographic information included questions to ascertain



age, employment status, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, relationship status, and year in college. A semi-structured, open-ended interview that included five grand tour questions was used to conduct the interviews. The following served as the grand tour questions:

1. Describe your experience being on a small rural campus.
2. What are your needs being here on a rural campus?
3. What is necessary for you on this campus to keep you here through your degree or program completion?
4. What activities and student services do you need on this campus?
5. What are the challenges that you face being on a rural campus?

The above questions were based on the literature review and were designed to answer the research question. Follow-up questions were used to complete the data collection process.

In keeping with Moustakas' (1994) assertion that the interview questions illuminate the essence of the participants' experience, the grand tour questions were devised to elicit responses that were both personally meaningful and socially significant to the participant in order to passionately engage and keep them involved in the interview. Another instrument that was utilized was the use of observations and field notes (Creswell, 2013). The researcher acted as a participant observer by asking questions during interviews (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher was considered an instrument in this qualitative study. The researcher observed and made detailed notes during the interviews. If some of the students had been hesitant to participate in interviews, a focus group would have been

conducted utilizing the same base questions as the interview. All collected data were de-identified in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

Ethical standards as described by Moustakas (1994) were maintained throughout the study. Participants were provided with details about the nature and purpose of the study. Clear agreements were established between the researcher and the participant after which informed consent was procured; participants were told that they could withdraw from the study if they so wished with no repercussions. The questions in the interview did not solicit any identifying information of the participants and for the individual interviews participants used pseudonyms. If identifying information arose, the researcher de-identified the information to retain the anonymity of the participants.

### **Trustworthiness**

Each interview took approximately one-half hour. Member checking (Maxwell, 2005) interviews, either in person or by phone, were conducted to verify data collected and lasted last no more than 15 minutes. This prolonged engagement with the interviewees helped increase the trustworthiness of the data collected (Maxwell, 2005). Other methods of trustworthiness included the researcher collecting rich data (Maxwell, 2005) that was focused on maintaining a consistency of the topic discussed during the interviews. Data triangulation (Creswell, 2013) was utilized to increase the internal validity of the study. Data from multiple interviews were combined. Cross checking the interpretation of the data was done with a colleague to ensure consistency in coding.

The internal validity could have been affected by the interviewer's characteristics and potential bias. For example, the interviewer's race and status as an instructor on a rural campus could influence the nature of the data collected causing an unconscious

distortion of the data. To try to avoid this, the interviewer deliberately asked the questions the same way to each participant. Those being interviewed were assured that their responses would be de-identified and only presented using the pseudonym and other aggregate data. No personally identifying data was used. The interviewer tried to remain neutral, or disinterested, as she conducted the interviews.

**Researcher Bias.** Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins (2008) and Creswell (2013) described researcher bias as the experiences the researcher has about the phenomena under study that clouds the judgment of the researcher and could invalidate the results. To overcome this, Maxwell (2008) and Moustakas (1994) described the use of bracketing as one way to overcome researcher bias. Bracketing is the process of describing the relationship of the researchers to the study so that they can work to avoid having a biased view of the data. The primary researcher also underwent an interview about the study both before and after the interviews as recommended by Onwuegbuzie, et al., (2008).

Currently, I, Cleo Fawn Cockrum, am an adjunct professor at a rural 2-year campus of a mid-sized suburban university. I have been in education for 33 years, 14 of which are in higher education. Additionally, I have lived and taught in both urban and rural communities. My educational career began at the rural community college level where I now work. I also attended urban universities, including both inner-city and suburban locations, for continuing education. My research interests revolve around student success and I have spent my higher education career working with underprepared students to help them reach their educational potential.

Dr. Richard Henriksen Jr., Dissertation Director, has been a college professor for 17 years and has taught in urban, suburban, and rural universities. Dr. Henriksen is also a

graduate of an urban community college and completed a certificate program at a rural community college. He is from a major metropolitan city and currently lives in a rural community. His research interests involve diversity and multicultural issues. He has been involved in helping minority students complete high school and enter college for nearly 25 years.

### **Data Collection**

Before beginning this research study, I submitted a proposal to the IRB of a mid-sized university for their rural campus in the southwest United States. After receiving approval, I began the study. The data collection for this research began with identifying participants using criterion sampling as stated previously. Once prospective participants were contacted, I arranged a neutral meeting place of the participant's choice to conduct the interview. Locations included classrooms and my office; confidentiality was insured by meeting in these locations. One interviewee wanted to interview during lab time in the classroom; this was conducted quietly at my desk as other students worked on their computers. I conducted each interview, none of which lasted over 45 minutes.

At the beginning of each interview, I obtained informed consent from the participant. Together we discussed the rationale and purpose of the study and I answered any questions the participant had about the study or the interview. Following the informed consent process, I gave each participant the demographic and background questionnaire and had him or her complete it before the interview began.

I recorded each interview using a secure password protected device. I am the only person with access to this device and its password. This device remains in my possession except when it is behind a locked door. The participants could ask any questions after the

interview to make sure they had clarity up to that point. I then transcribed each of the interviews. Student phone numbers and email addresses were deleted from my computer once the member checks had been completed. All participant contact information was saved in one password protected computer file which I deleted at the end of the study.

Had it been decided that a focus group was necessary for data collection, a similar process as that above would have been conducted; the participants in the focus group would have been different than those who participated in the individual interviews. I was able to obtain all the needed data without the need for the focus group.

Once the interviews had been conducted and transcribed, emergent themes were identified as the data was analyzed. Once finished with that process, I conducted member checks by emailing each interviewee an email document that listed the emergent themes of the study. The participants were asked to examine the list in order to decide if the themes matched the experiences detailed during the interviews. Finally, the data were triangulated by reviewing the transcribed interview, demographic and background information, and the field notes as previously described.

### **Data Analysis**

Once data were collected for this study it was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) revision of Van Kaam's (1959, 1966) method of analyzing phenomenological data. This involved a seven-step process that was based on the analysis of each research participant's interview as recorded in the transcription. The first step in this data analysis process involved listing the initial or preliminary grouping of the data. During this step, I made a list of every phrase relevant to being an urban student attending a rural community college. Moustakas (1994) referred to this as *horizontalization*. I completed

this step by reviewing each transcript individually line by line to create the preliminary or initial grouping of the data.

During the second step, I used reduction and elimination strategies to further analyze the data. Here I checked each expression listed in the data for two conditions deemed necessary: Is enough of the moment included in the expression that it can be clearly understood? Secondly, is it possible to summarize and give the expression a label? If expressions did not meet these two requirements, they were eliminated from the data analysis process (Moustakas, 1994). I completed this step by reviewing each transcript as well in efforts to eliminate or reduce the amount of expressions to be considered for further analysis if they did not meet these two requirements.

With the third step, I began clustering and thematizing the invariant or never changing themes. I clustered the invariant themes of the experience, as described by the participants based on the transcriptions that appear to be relevant to the thematic label identified. These clusters became the primary themes of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The fourth step involved the final documentation of the consistent elements (component part) and themes by application; this process is also known as *validation*. During this step, I checked the transcript of each participants' interview against the invariant constituents and their accompanying themes. I then considered two questions as part of the validation process: (1) Are the themes clearly recognizable in the complete transcription? (2) If the themes are not explicitly expressed, are they compatible? If the themes were neither explicit nor compatible, then they were deemed irrelevant to the core

researchers experience and were deleted (Moustakas, 1994). I reviewed each transcript of participant interviews to complete this step.

The fifth step in this analysis process involved using the confirmed and applicable invariant constituents and themes to create individual textural descriptions of the experiences for each participant (Moustakas, 1994). This is where I included verbatim examples of each theme from the transcribed interviews to complete this step. I also used this data as part of the results section (Chapter 4) when discussing the outcomes or results of the study in detail.

The sixth step involved compiling individual structural descriptions of the selected experiences based on the previous step's individual textural descriptions created. I brought together the different parts of the data analysis so the story of each individual participant could be told. During the last step, the invariant constituents and themes were utilized as I created a textural-structural description of the significance and crux of each researcher's experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This was the main focus of the outcomes of the study that will be presented in Chapter 4.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I described the methodology and design of my proposed research study. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of urban college students attending a rural junior college. I designed the semi-structured interview grand tour questions with opened ended questions. Using a phenomenological design, data was collected from the criterion sampling of urban students attending a rural community college. Participants were recruited on the campus of a rural community college in Missouri. Moustakas (1994) modification of the Van Kaam (1959, 1966) method of

analysis of phenomenological data was used to analyze data based on the complete transcription of each research participant interview.



## CHAPTER IV

### Results

#### Introduction

A fairly recent trend of recruiting outside the normal recruitment area of a small rural college in Missouri has increased the attendance of urban students on the campus. This research centered on Tinto's (1993) theory of departure. It is not merely enough to encourage students to *start* college, but once recruited, colleges should help their students obtain their educational goals. Tinto (1993) upheld the belief that the college can play a crucial role in the retention of students. Various student sub-cultures and the interactions between the instructors and the students beyond the boundaries of the classroom can be contributing factors to student success and *habitus*. Bordieu (1977) maintained that understanding a student's sense of *habitus* could lead to a greater understanding of student attrition or retention. Another factor considered is the students' fortitude and determination in terms of Astin's (1999) student involvement theory. If greater involvement on campus leads to greater retention as Astin (1999) supposed, it is prudent to consider various ways that urban students are involved or, contrarily, detached from campus activities. This phenomenological study was designed to help administrators at a rural campus determine the role of various interactions, activities, and student resolve in the retention or attrition of urban students.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with voluntary participants who met the following criteria: they were attending the SMCC campus, their hometown was deemed by the U.S. Census Bureau to be an urban area, and they were not a student athlete. This chapter includes participant responses to demographic questions as well as

responses to semi-structured interview questions. The demographic and interview questions were presented to address the following research question: What are the experiences, challenges, and advantages of students from urban communities who are attending a rural community college?

The interviewer explained the consent form, which the interviewees signed. Once the consent form was explained and signed, the participants completed a demographic questionnaire. The semi-structured interview took place during which the following open-ended questions were asked:

- Describe your experience being on a small rural campus.
- What are your needs being here on a rural campus?
- What is necessary for you on this campus to keep you here through your degree or program completion?
- What activities and student services do you need on this campus?
- What are the challenges that you face being on a rural campus?

### **Demographics**

Eight students volunteered to be interviewed. One student did not meet the criteria; he misunderstood and thought the research concerned non-urban students. Seven full-time students volunteered for the study—three males and four females. All were single, African-American, traditional students. Of the participants, three were sophomores, four were freshmen; three had jobs in addition to their studies. Qualified were given pseudonyms to keep the results anonymous and to protect their participants' identity. The demographics questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

**Aliesha.** Aliesha was a teenage African-American freshman. She was a traditional single college student who was attending full-time immediately after high school. She did not have a job in addition to her schoolwork.

**Desiree.** Desiree was another traditional freshman who was not married. She worked approximately 22 hours per week in addition to taking five college courses (15 credits). Desiree was an African-American teenager who aspired to go into fashion design. She had been accepted into a fashion-design school in Chicago, but did not attend due to the cost. When recruited, she was told that her degree was not offered; she attended thinking some classes would be offered in her field. She was ready to transfer at the time of the first interview. When I talked to her again, Desiree had discovered the main campus of SMCC offered her degree. She decided to stay at SMCC to finish her general education and transfer to the main campus for her major.

**David.** David was a single African-American teenage male. He devoted his time to his studies, and he was not employed at the time of the interview. David was a full-time freshman whose desire was to obtain an engineering degree. He was in the pre-engineering program and he wanted to transfer to a large engineering university when he completed his associate's degree. David grew up in a two-parent household. Although his father did not attend college, his mother holds a degree.

**Matthew.** Matthew was another African-American freshman. This teenager was a full-time student, and he did not work outside of his studies. He was willing to interview and answer the questions, but he would not elaborate on his responses. His was the shortest interview at approximately eight minutes.

**Oliver.** Oliver is a traditional sophomore, who transferred to SMCC from another small college. He began college directly after high school and did not work beyond his studies. He was a single African-American teenager who came from a single-parent home, and he was a first-generation college student. Although he was attending college as a student athlete at his previous college, Oliver qualified for the study because he was not a student athlete on the SMCC campus.

**Tammy.** Tammy was a 21 year-old African-American woman. This student was a full-time sophomore who also worked full-time. She, too, was single. Although Tammy said she was happy with the campus and the educational opportunity afforded, she was ready to transfer to a campus in a larger city. Tammy was having some medical issues and felt the quality of care she would receive from professionals at a larger city hospital would surpass that of professionals at the rural hospital near SMCC. She was determined to transfer to an urban campus even though she was close to graduation.

**Karla.** Karla was a single African-American, full-time student. This 19-year-old sophomore worked approximately 20 hours a week. Karla was ready to transfer at the time of her interview, but she was continuing at SMCC because all her credits would not transfer to the new campus of her choice. Karla was outspoken and defiant, had issues with authority on the campus, and had been on disciplinary probation. Her interview was the longest at approximately 32 minutes.

The phenomenological qualitative research method as outlined by Moustakas (1994) was utilized when conducting the interviews, which varied in length from 8:09 minutes to 32:49 minutes ( $M = 16:27$ ). The interviews were recorded on the interviewer's iPad, which was password protected and kept in her home office. The interviews were

then transcribed, and the transcriptions are maintained in a separate area than the recordings. The transcriptions and the recordings were temporarily stored together to double-check the accuracy of the transcriptions. This procedure was followed to maintain the confidentiality of the students and the security of their information.

### **Emergent Themes**

As significant themes emerged, they were extrapolated and coded according to Moustakas' (1994) qualitative research protocol. Six major themes emerged from the interviews. These six themes stood out because of the frequency they were mentioned, and because of the passion that was evident when the students discussed them. The six themes extrapolated from the interviews were:

- Sports
- Food
- Degrees offered
- Campus activities
- People
- Small classes

**Sports.** The first theme that emerged from the interviews is that of sports. Four of the seven participants mentioned that more sports were necessary for them to want to remain on the campus through degree completion. Three of those four indicated they wished for a track team. Two students desired a football team; one wished for a wrestling team, and one for a baseball team. All wished for regular teams as opposed to intramural games. In Table 1, I listed statements from each interviewee that were deemed a determining factor for this theme.

Table 1

*Significant Statements for Theme 1: Sports*

Pseudonym	Statement
Oliver	[I would stay to finish my degree if] you had my sport: wrestling. That's what my scholarship to (the other school) was.
Matthew	[I would want to stay to finish my degree here] if they had more selection of sports: football, track, baseball.
Tammy	They need more sports, honestly. This is a really good school, but I feel like they need more sporting besides basketball and volleyball. Like, for instance, track is so many sports in itself. . .if I was to run track right now, that would give me another reason to make straight As or straight Bs.
Desiree	[I would like to see] more sports. I feel like we should have a track team, maybe a dance team.

**Food.** Five of the seven participants mentioned food in the interview as something that would help them to feel more comfortable on campus. One student stated the food on campus was not diverse enough; for example, if fish was served and one was

allergic to fish, she maintained there were no other options provided. Matthew mentioned specific restaurant chains he missed; he wished for a variety of foods other than the “typical food chains.” Aliesha said, “We like to eat a lot; we’d like to see different kinds of food.”

Below are the significant statements concerning food that I pulled from the interviews. Variety and familiarity were the main ingredients that students longed for. Table 2 contains the significant statements from the interviews involving the students’ ideas about the need for a wider variety of eateries.

Table 2

*Significant Statements about Theme 2: Food*

Pseudonym	Statement
Aliesha	We like to play a lot of card games, so we’re needing like a coffee shop up here.
Tammy	The food is ridiculous for them to be paying \$3300 every semester. They take all that money even if you don’t eat there. [If I’m allergic to fish] you’ll have no other options. They took all the money and if you don’t eat there, they say it’s on you.

(continued)

Pseudonym	Statement
Matthew	[I would like it] if they had more food places: Chick-fil-et, Kings. Get a Canes. It's called Raising Canes. [They have] chicken strips; they are great. You get Cane sauce. [Dairy Queen] don't taste the same.

*Note.* Although five participants mentioned food, only three statements are given due to redundancy.

**Degrees Offered.** One complaint the students had was that their major was not offered; four of the students mentioned this in the interviews. One student felt that nursing received too much attention, and there was not enough of a variety of classes. When asked what the campus could do to get him to stay here, one student simply said, "Have my degree."

Oliver did not know his degree was not offered; he chose this campus because a friend was attending. Desiree knew her degree was not offered, but she did not understand there would be no classes specific to her degree. She thought a class or two would be available in her field and would be offered even if a degree was not. Reasons for attending the SMCC campus varied from students wanting to be away from home, yet not too far, to trying to remain in school with friends. Two students attended the SMCC campus because they had friends who were attending. One of the interviewees chose this campus because the college was suggested by her school counselor. From the statements pulled from the interviews, included in Table 3, it is clear some of the students did not realize their intended majors were not offered.



Table 3

*Significant Statements for Theme 3: Degrees Offered*

Pseudonym	Statement
Oliver	[I would stay here if you] have my degree. What else can you do?
Tammy	They have limited degrees. As far as nursing and stuff like that, that's really good. And generals is really good. But if you want to go into something like engineering and do some hands-on things, then you really couldn't here.
Desiree	I feel like we should have diverse majors. I feel like we only have the main fields that people go into. What about people that don't want to be a nurse, don't want to be a doctor, don't want to be a teacher?
Matthew	I wish they had more architectural classes, more degrees. They only have certain general studies degrees.

**People.** Another common theme prevalent during the interviews was that of the townspeople. Five of the seven students interviewed endorsed this theme. SMCC is located in a town with an approximate population of 13,000 (Onboard Informatics, 2018). The students interviewed were all from areas with a population of at least 50,000 people; they had varied perspectives on this situation. Although I thought that race difficulties would be a prevalent theme, this was only mentioned by one student who felt her issues with authority on campus were due to racial differences. No one else mentioned racial tensions during the interviews; however, race was mentioned by one other student who missed seeing a diversity of people. This student said she would like to see a wider range of ethnicities on campus because she was used to that at home.

Some students liked the small-town atmosphere. Although Tammy missed the urban areas, she thought more people would be a distraction to her studies. The fact that everyone seems to know each other was a bonus for some students who felt more comfortable around people they know. Aliesha even mentioned the fact that everyone waves at everyone, which was a new phenomenon to her.

Some students were nervous about the small population because they preferred the anonymity; while others simply wanted the experience of constantly seeing new faces. David did not like the idea of everyone knowing each other. He felt that if, perchance, he did something wrong, then everyone would know it was him. He thought it would be easier to move past mistakes if living in an area with a larger population. Tammy also disparaged the idea of seeing the same people and knowing everyone. She simply said that she wanted to experience *more*. In Table 4, I presented the students' statements in support of the theme *People*.

Table 4

*Significant Themes for Theme 4: People*

Pseudonym	Statement
Matthew	I like a lot of people. There's not enough people to get to know for me.
Tammy	[I'm not nervous on this campus] because you know everybody and everybody knows you. [But] you just go to work and go to school, work and school, you want to experience more.
Aliesha	There's not a lot of black people out here, or any other types of race out here. It hasn't been a problem because I'm a nice person. Cultural and area difference: that's probably the biggest challenges.
Oliver	[I need] more people. I don't like the small. I see the same people every day. I'd rather see more people.

(continued)

Pseudonym	Statement
David	<p>Everybody out here knows each other.</p> <p>You can't say it's a good thing, because if you accidentally make a bad name for yourself, everybody knows that you are that person.</p>

**Small campus.** One major bonus of a rural campus is the small campus size. Five of the seven participants endorsed this theme. Matthew enjoyed being able to walk everywhere on campus; money was saved when he did not need to drive his car to get to needed destinations. Oliver appreciated that he quickly became familiarized with the campus because of the small size.

With a student population of approximately 1900 students (MSU-WP, 2017), class sizes tended to be small. Students seemed to appreciate the accessibility of instructors because they could talk to instructors without an appointment. It seemed easier to schedule an appointment when needed than on a larger campus. Also, the smaller campus allowed easier access to student services, such as the advisors and tutors. Students' statements concerning small campus size are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Significant Statements for Theme 5: Small Campus*

Pseudonym	Statement
Matthew	They have good services just 'cause [they're] small; it's more manageable.
Tammy	[Instructors are more apt to help here than they did in St. Louis because] that's a lot of kids. Like a lot, lot of kids. I don't even know how they knew them. They [weren't] able to help every single one. So, I have more of an opportunity and chance here.
Desiree	I always wanted to go to a small campus because I feel like I have a better way of getting more resources. I can get in touch with my teachers faster. I feel like a small campus will give me that push because I have so many people that are around and willing to help.

(continued)

Pseudonym	Statement
David	<p>I can focus instead of being in a class with a whole bunch of students where there's like 70 students. You can talk to the professor instead of [him] having 3000 students compared to 300 students. You know what I mean?</p> <p>[I can] talk to him more instead of having to make an appointment and wait for the appointment. You can make the appointment any time you want.</p>
Oliver	<p>I experienced everything fast because it's <i>small</i>.</p>

**Activities.** Beyond the educational needs, five of the seven students interviewed expressed a desire to have more activities available. This ranged from wanting scheduled activities with transportation to simply having places available for students to create their own activities. If food was involved, that was even better.

SMCC offers several get-together activities for the students such as a Hawaiian BBQ, a dodgeball game, and movie nights. Oliver went to the BBQ dinner, but firmly stated that he was not “into dodgeball.” Recent campus activities included an Oz Con art show where students were able to show off their art work, a late-night breakfast get-together during finals week, and a charity poker tournament.

Matthew despaired that the *only* activities the town offered were movies, bowling, and the gym; he missed malls, carnivals, and amusement parks. David claimed he did not know about town activities such as the skate park and monthly car shows. In Table 6, I have given the significant statements pertaining to activities; *hanging out* is considered an activity by the researcher.

Table 6

*Significant Statements about Theme 6: Activities*

Pseudonym	Statement
Aliesha	Freshman and sophomore college is basically 'hanging out and chillin'.' [I would like to see more places to hang out].
David	There could be a nice little tour to see what [stuff is around]. You know, it would be crazy to have a circus or like a festival where everybody, the town itself, you know what I mean, puts it on.

**Summary of Results**

Although the students were from urban areas, all the results were not what I had envisioned. Because many of our urban students are African-American, I expected racism to be prevalent in the reasons for leaving campus. I was able to set aside this bias thinking as I interviewed the students and was pleasantly surprised as the students divulged the

various reasons other than racism that attributed to their desires to transfer away from our campus.

First, I addressed the minor theme of racism, since Karla did mention this. She was happy during her freshman year, yet at the time of the interview she was planning to leave before finishing her degree. She believed the college hired new dorm leaders that did not meet the qualifications specified in the job description and that the new people hired were prejudiced against Black students. Her main issue was that the new leaders were not familiar with the Black culture; therefore, they did not understand the various nuances happening, which led to “writing-up” the Black students. One cultural difference mentioned was that Black students talk loudly to each other and she felt the new freshman leader was intimidated by this form of communication. This student felt isolated when it came to having someone in a position of power that understood her Black culture.

Results from this qualitative study revealed six matters of concern urban students had related to their attendance at SMCC. These were listed as major themes in this chapter. One major concern the students addressed was their need to participate in favorite pastimes. Some students longed for participation in their favorite sports, which were not available on the SMCC campus. Others reminisced times spent *hanging out* at a mall or coffee shop with friends. It seems students want to continue doing the same familiar activities they participated in back home.

Familiarity was a key component in another theme extrapolated from the study—food. Students pined for their favorite hometown eatery. They desired a larger variety of



options because they were accustomed to a large variety of restaurants near their hometown.

Students were also accustomed to living within a large population. The small population on SMCC and its surrounding communities do not facilitate the anonymity with which students were afforded in their hometown. Although small population size bothers some students, other students find comfort in being able to recognize most of the people encountered throughout the day; and others, who may prefer being in larger crowds, presume the larger crowds would be a distraction to their studies.

The degrees offered on a small campus, or rather a lack of degrees offered, was another major theme extrapolated. Some students applied for admissions at SMCC because they wanted to attend where they had friends were attending, again longing for familiarity. It did not occur to them that their intended degree would not be offered.

In the next chapter, I discussed the information gleaned from the interviews. I then examined possible implications for practice at personal, institutional, and societal levels. In addition, recommendations for possible research stemming from this study were identified.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Summary, Discussion, and Conclusions**

#### **Introduction**

The presentation of this phenomenological study and the analysis of the data collected were reported in the previous chapters. Chapter V contains a summary of the purpose, framework, and findings of the study. The major findings, which have been expounded to give further insight for counselors and recruiters of higher education, are discussed in relation to the theoretical frameworks utilized during the research. This chapter also contains implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

#### **Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of urban college students attending a rural junior college. The perceptions and experiences of the students as they acclimated themselves to a small campus were gathered via one-on-one interviews. Data were scrutinized using the theoretical frameworks of Astin (1999), Tinto (1993), Bourdieu (1977), and Eaton and Bean (1995).

Seven students attending the SMCC campus who grew up in urban areas were interviewed using open ended questions that centered on the following research question: What are the experiences, challenges, and advantages of students from urban communities who are attending a rural community college? Follow up questions were asked, as needed, for clarity's sake.

#### **Discussion of the Findings**

Six major themes emerged from the data collected during the interviews. They were sports, food, degrees offered, people, small campus, and activities. Each of the

themes was discussed in terms of the theoretical frameworks of Astin (1999), Tinto (1993), Bourdieu (1977), and Eaton and Bean (1995). The minor theme of racism as perceived by one of the interviewees was also addressed in this section. A connecting factor to most of these was *familiarity*. Students wanted to play familiar sports. They wanted to see familiar places and people. They wanted to eat familiar food. As an instructor of college freshmen, I have perceived difficulty of students in leaving the safety of home, family, and friends; this would be difficult whether going from an urban setting to a rural setting or vice versa. Findings from this study confirmed those of Biemiller (2016), who stated that simply being surrounded by the familiar can ease the transition from home to college life. Familiarity may increase retention.

**Sports.** Even though student athletes were excluded from this study, sports emerged as a major theme, with students claiming that more sports opportunities would help in their decision to remain at SMCC through degree completion. Astin (1999) maintained that extra-curricular activities, among other things, can lead to increased student learning and personal development. This phenomenon, in turn, can lead to higher student retention.

Three students specifically mentioned cross-country and other track sports during their interviews. Cross-country as well as other track and field sports are popular in the area. All the surrounding rural schools have track teams, and members of those teams vie for positions on the local high school team. It is so successful that one newspaper article mentioned that the high school coach had built up a cross-country dynasty (Sanders, 2016). From participant responses, having a track team would be beneficial in helping recruit from the local population as well as recruiting from urban areas.

With their knowledge of the area, local students who wish to be on a track team in college realize that the sport is not offered locally and look elsewhere for a college that has a track team. The same holds true for the local students who play baseball or football and wish to continue in their sport during college. Although the local population may realize what sports are offered at the local college, students from outside the normal recruiting area do not possess this social capital. Never having attended college, the prospective students may be unfamiliar with collegiate sports, especially if they are first-generation college students. They may feel that a college would be like a high school and offer various sports throughout the year to accommodate the various interests of the students. Looking at the results in light of Bourdieu's (1977) theory on *habitus* and social capital, administrators can gain new insights into student attrition. Knowing that the urban students lack the social capital and *habitus* pertaining to the sports programs at SMCC, administrators can examine the recruiting efforts used and tweak them to help prospective students be made aware of the limited sports accessibility at SMCC and other colleges, especially if the students are sports oriented. Students should be taught how to navigate through all the post-secondary propaganda to determine which schools offer the sports they desire. Students should be made aware early in their high school career how to begin the application process for college sports.

Colleges can try to accommodate the sports-craving students by offering various sporting activities. Small Midwestern Community College could organize various sports activities throughout the semester for those wishing to play sports, thus increasing the students' chance for extracurricular activities in which the urban students may be inclined to participate. For example, two or three football games for the students throughout the

semester could be a welcome extracurricular activity that might entice students to become involved.

A track team at SMCC could be a popular endeavor because track and field are popular sports in the local schools. Given the opportunity, some of the urban students stated they would enjoy participating in track. Again, however, is the issue of starting a new team in a college when they already have their sports programs in place. One remedy would be to offer a track team or running organization. The students interested in this type of organization could have their own activities. Also, they could volunteer to help at the local schools during practice or during meets. Community involvement is an element that helps increase retention as students increase their *habitus* and social capital pertaining to the local community as well as the SMCC campus.

Although increasing social capital and *habitus* in the realm of Bourdieu's theories is not necessarily a conscious decision on the part of the student, college admissions personnel and high school counselors can make increased efforts to expose students to the nuances of various college related facts. Students need to be increasingly exposed to a college prep environment, which will enhance the students' chances of increasing their *habitus* and social capital pertaining to college.

Admissions personnel should emphasize the sports offered at the SMCC campus. First generation college students may lack the social capital and *habitus* pertaining to attending college; therefore, they may be unaware that different colleges offer different sporting opportunities. The college can be a catalyst for decreased departure by recognizing that a sporting subculture exists, and then making reforms aimed at increasing student involvement of the members of this subgroup. For those students not

accepted onto the college sports team, activities and organizations to fill a sporting void would be welcome perks for helping students become involved with other students.

**Food.** Food is a comfort item. Many of us have a comfort food that we eat when we are feeling a bit down. This may be mom's meatloaf or grandmother's brownies. It may be chicken strips from the Dairy Queen where you went after each speech debate or where your family took you for special treats. Going to a familiar food chain may create a sense of peace and comfort for those who are away from home for the first time; it may help increase that sense of belonging. Eaton and Bean's (1995) theoretical framework pertaining to coping mechanisms can partially be grounded in these findings. Students' behavioral choices may depend on the internal coping mechanisms that students hold in their social capital. If a key component of that mechanism (a.k.a. eating familiar food at a favorite restaurant) is missing, the behavioral choices could be negatively affected.

Many small towns boast an array of familiar fast-food chains. Urban areas, however, can boast an immense variety that a small town can never hope to obtain; students want a variety of options ("El Paso", 2001). Although I may find my favorite local chain in numerous towns across the country, urban areas may boast homegrown chains that, although numerous in that area, are not found beyond the boundaries of the local suburbs. People tend to gravitate toward the familiar (Fiske, 2007). To the urban students, few things are familiar in the rural area. Even the food is different from their acquired culinary tastes. It seems if the college is going to recruit heavily from a particular urban area, college personnel may wish to survey the students to determine popular eateries in their hometowns. Matthew and Karla, for example, pined for a Cane's restaurant. Even allowing students access to their food money for off campus food would

help. Some students feel they are trapped into eating the food service menu because they pay for each meal whether they want that meal or not. As indicated by “El Paso” (2001), having more variety, especially if it includes hometown favorites, could be another simple way to increase the student’s satisfaction with the campus. I have often eaten on campus and have enjoyed the meals offered, but some of the students disparage the lack of variety and even the taste of the campus food. “It’s bad,” lamented Karla, shaking her head. “It’s bad.”

A restaurant seems to be more than a place to eat. The students implied they longed for more places to *hang out*. Aliesha apparently spent time with her hometown friends at a coffee shop where they could visit and even play cards. Coincidentally, the SMCC campus is in the process of building a new facility that will house student services and will boast a coffee shop. A coffee shop or longed-for food chain could be the bridge that helps the urban student connect to the rural campus.

**Degrees offered.** The results of this study indicated that many urban students do not possess the social capital or *habitus* necessary to persist on the rural campus. The degrees offered are clearly listed in SMCC’s catalog, and there is a university web page called *Degrees and Certificates Offered* (MSU-WP, 2018). Recruiters are available to answer possible questions about degrees offered. Some of the students are now beginning to realize some educational realities, such as the fact that not all colleges offer all degrees. This can be a major exit point in the pipeline to graduation: leaving to transfer to a school that offers the desired degree (Catterall, et al., 2003; Lewin, 2009). The important thing now would be for counselors to work with the students to explain how their basic degree from SMCC can be applied toward the desired degree. The counselors

can teach students how to look for colleges that offer their intended major, and then work with the students to make an educational plan to help the student work toward transferring to a 4-year college or university with an associate's degree.

Although students may wish for the college to simply add their degree program to the schedule, the number and diversity of degrees offered cannot be easily changed. However, degrees offered could be more adequately publicized to prospective students. Yes, there is a website. Yes, the list of degrees offered is in the schedule; yet the students are still somehow missing the information. The institution could endeavor to create an atmosphere that would help students increase their *habitus* pertaining to SMCC (Bourdieu, 1977). When recruiting students, college personal should ask students' their intended degree. If the intended degree is not available, this fact needs to be emphasized. A General Studies degree can often be applied toward other degrees not heretofore offered, but students should be taught the nuances of how this degree can help them. They need to know that classes specific to their intended majors are *not* offered. Students can be told how the General Studies classes can be applied to their intended majors. Also, students should be taught how to find a college with their intended major as well as how a general studies degree can be applied to their intended major when they transfer to a 4-year college or university. As helpful as a General Studies degree can be to new students, it is imperative that recruiters and counselors emphasize the fact that degree-specific classes are *not* part of the general studies curriculum; those classes will come after the basics are completed. Disappointment in classes offered is a negative factor in retention of students (Catterall, et al., 2003; Lewin, 2009).



**People.** Students had mixed responses concerning the theme *people*. David, for example, longed for the anonymity afforded by a more populous area, whereas Tammy enjoyed not being surrounded by strangers. She enjoyed the comfort of being with familiar people. According to Eaton and Bean (1995), the background and life experiences of the individual influence the students' perceptions of the college and town population in which they have become immersed. Also, Eaton and Bean (1995) indicate that the social integration of students in their educational environment plays an important role in student retention. Although the coping mechanisms employed by students is an internalized part of the students' *habitus* and would be difficult to predict, possible indicators of persistence can be determined during the admissions process. Non-cognitive variables can be important indicators of student persistence and retention, especially with minority students (Sedlacek, 2004). Some of the relevant variables can be assessed by use of a non-cognitive questionnaire as well as interview questions during the admissions process. Variables to assess may include student perceptions of varying populations, positive self-concept, and community involvement. Although racism was not a major theme extrapolated from this study, how students handle racism or perceived racism can be a crucial part of their social capital that would affect their persistence on campus. The non-cognitive interview can determine whether the potential student takes a self-confident approach to dealing with racism without becoming contentious or whether racism is used as an excuse for failure (Sedlacek, in press).

Karla felt the college had no one in authority who could relate to Black college students. Her observation brings up a valid point. If a student leader is a new student who has never encountered diverse populations of students, as is suggested by Karla, then

issues can arise simply due to lack of cultural awareness. Administrators at SMCC could solve this problem by ensuring that diverse students have someone in a position of authority who understands their culture. One possible solution could be to hire a student leader who could communicate with urban students and understand their various cultural nuances.

The College Life course is a required part of the curriculum. The course could be altered to be SMCC specific. Students are tasked with activities to familiarize them with the campus; this could include activities to help familiarize students with the community activities. To address the student concerns about RAs that are unfamiliar with the urban culture, simply ensure that at least one of the student leaders is both familiar and comfortable with the urban culture. For all RAs, mandatory cultural sensitivity sessions can be scheduled with students, both leaders and non-leaders, bringing their questions and concerns to the table. This could be a part of the College Life course, as all the students are required to take it. This sensitivity session would be an excellent time for rural students to learn the nuances of the urban culture and vice versa. By informally discussing ethnic differences, such as loud talking, students may gain a new awareness and understanding that will help bridge the cultural gap between urban and rural students. Encouraging open communication can induce better feelings in the students. Hopefully new friendships will blossom from the sensitivity sessions, which will lead to increased sense of belonging, thus increasing retention.

**Small campus.** The first of the perks offered on the SMCC campus is the small class size. Although studies pertaining to academic performance in higher education in relation to class size are inconclusive (Toth & Motagna, 2002), students appreciate being

able to readily make appointments or to stop by the instructors' offices with no appointments. The small class size affords the professors more time to interact with students. When comparing the SMCC campus size to those of colleges in her hometown, Tammy said "[The professors weren't] able to help every single one. So, I have more of an opportunity and chance here." David claimed, "I can focus instead of being in a class with a whole bunch of students where there's like 70 students." The small class size may be beneficial in the acclimation to the community; Tinto's (1993) theory of departure can be grounded in this perk. By attending small classes which allows students to more easily get to know each other, students may be able to work their way into the fabric of the small community. Students will more readily mingle with others, as opposed to remaining in separate cliques. This type of interaction can lead to friendships or study groups that may go beyond the classroom, which plays into Astin's (1999) student involvement theory. According to Eaton and Bean (1995), social integration is interrelated with academic integration. Increasing the students' sense of belonging may positively affect their grades, and both of these social interactions may have a positive impact on retention.

**Activities.** Although SMCC is located in a small town, the town does host various activities. Some are monthly activities such as car shows, square dances, and quilt clubs. Others seasonal activities, such as the outdoor swimming center and the Friday night walks around the square, occur during the summer months. Although students may become familiar with activities at the Civic Center because it is a college affiliate, other activities need to be touted. The town boasts public tennis courts, a skateboard park and two walking parks. The city maintains a public golf course which is in close proximity to

the disc-golf course. The town hosts two festivals: The Old-Tyme Music Festival and the HOBA Bluegrass Festival. The town also hosts a yearly fair that offers various entertainments in addition to the carnival. Rodeo's, and horse shows abound. A small circus comes to town every year, and the hospital hosts a health fair. Various clubs, both in the community and in the college, have activities. Numerous churches in the area host activities that students may enjoy. The issue here is lack of advertisement. The local Chamber of Commerce maintains a list of various community projects and programs. The activities are often announced on the radio or in the newspaper. The area Welcome Center touts the various activities to those who stop by. Billboard marquees of the fairgrounds, Civic Center, and church centers advertise their activities. These advertisements, however, are often missed by college students who remain on campus or who do not venture where the signs can be read, who do not listen to the local radio station, or who do not read the local newspaper. If students do notice the activity, they may be unaware that students would be welcomed. To help the students become more aware of local activities, a college public relations person can reach out to the community in order to learn about activities. Doing this could also be a duty of the student leader. All the upcoming activities can be highlighted on marquees throughout the campus and living quarters of students. The activities can be given a prominent position on the university web page or social media page. The college should endeavor to increase each student's psychological sense of community as explained by Berryhill and Bee (2007). Administrators must realize that no matter how many community and campus activities occur; students will not participate in activities unless they know about them.

The town is in close proximity to many outdoor activities; local residents enjoy fishing, hunting, hiking, and golfing. Students from urban areas may have had limited access to outdoor activities and may not know where to go to do these things, nor would some of them know how to go about doing the activity. One cost-free solution would be to invite the Missouri Department of Conservation to host activities for local college students. The education department of this organization will provide free hunter safety courses, archery courses, and fishing classes (Dufur, 2012). They will teach student how to shoot skeet and provide all the necessary paraphernalia needed for the classes. The public library offers fishing poles for patrons to check out. Canoe rental services, although not free, will give crash courses in operating a canoe when going on a float trip. Roundtable discussions, including students, could be hosted to familiarize students with the community. Dennis mentioned having planned activities to join. If a float trip or a skeet shooting day is planned, the college vans could possibly be used to provide transportation to the river or to the shooting range. Trout fishing on free-fishing day could be advertised with someone coordinating rides to the hatchery, where the trout are released; this makes for a great fishing experience for those new to fishing. With increased student involvement and the possible formation of an activities organization, planning weekly or bi-monthly activities for students would not be difficult. An array of unfamiliar activities is available, simply not the activities to which the students are accustomed. If students are invited to try new activities, participation might increase their sense of *habitus*, which will, in turn, help with retention (Astin, 1999; Barbatis, 2010; Berryhill & Bee 2007; Bourdieu, 1977).

The major themes of: (a) sports, (b) food, (c) degrees offered, (d) people, (e) small campus, and (f) activities have been highlighted along with suggestions of how each may be addressed. Some suggestions pertaining to the minor theme of racism have also been considered. Recommendations are given for college and high school counselors and college recruitment personnel. These themes have been viewed and presented within the theoretical frameworks of Astin (1999), Bourdieu (1977), Eaton and Bean (1995), and Tinto (1993). Next, I will address the implications for practice at the institutional, individual, and societal levels.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study have implications for positive change at the postsecondary institutional level. This study could influence students to make wiser decisions pertaining to their academic endeavors, thus creating a catalyst for positive change at the individual student level. In addition, other positive implications could possibly be seen at the community level.

At the institutional level, the results of this study could have implications for positive change in the recruiting practices of rural institutions across the nation. As both high-school and college counselors as well as recruiters talk to students, they could purposefully emphasize how to determine which prospective colleges offer the classes the students both need and desire. Using research, we have learned that although the students may know that the classes offered are beneficial toward their potential degree, many are disappointed that classes they *want* are not offered. Attrition due to disappointment from classes not offered will decrease as potential students are told clearly and logically what courses are and are not available toward an intended major.

Other institutional level implications for positive change could be derived from changes made on campus to help increase students' sense of belonging. With this study, I have learned that simple menu changes may help students acclimate to the campus. Having student leaders that understand the nuances of urban students can help alleviate frustration urban students feel when they perceive that no one in authority understands their wants and needs. Actively searching out local activities, planning activities (or encouraging the formation of new organizations), and possibly providing transportation to said activities might also be the catalyst that increases student retention.

Positive implications for urban students may result as students are made aware of what to expect from the recruiting rural campus. Increased contentment and positive attitudes may result from students' knowledge and awareness of degrees and campus activities offered. These items can be highlighted during the admissions interview to ensure that students are made aware of the degrees and activities offered or, conversely, not offered.

Positive societal change could tentatively result from students learning to navigate through the postsecondary educational pathways; they can be recruited to guide the next cohort of students. Also, the experienced students will theoretically guide younger family members and friends through the college-search process. This could help create a positive educational environment in their families and within their neighborhoods, which, in turn, could increase the social capital of the students' acquaintances (Bourdieu, 1977).

Another step toward positive societal change could occur as the community becomes more involved in helping the urban students acclimate to their new environment. As the college actively promotes community events to the urban students

and they begin to join said activities, both the urban students and community members will get to know one another. Urban students will hopefully make friends and carve out a niche in their new community. As community members get to know the urban students, they may develop a sense of pride and accomplishment for the new members of the community, thus helping dispel negative stereotypes of outsiders.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The goal of this study was to examine the experiences of the urban student attending a rural campus within the constraints of the theoretical frameworks of Astin (1999), Bourdieu (1997), Eaton and Bean (1995), and Tinto (1993). Data were collected to help illuminate the experiences, challenges, and advantages of students from urban communities who are attending a rural community college. Although reasons for attrition of the urban students from the rural campus were determined, a limitation of this study was that it consisted of data from one campus only. Further research could be conducted on other rural campuses across the state to further illuminate reasons urban students fail to persist on rural campuses.

Further research into this subject could also include quantitative studies to compare the attrition and retention rates of the recruited urban student compared to those of the local student attending a rural community college. Studies examining the non-cognitive indicators of success, as they pertain to urban students on a rural campus, should be conducted to bring further enlightenment into the reasons some urban students acclimate and remain for the duration of their degree and why other students leave before degree completion.



Each area of concern can be addressed in further studies. If other rural colleges have higher retention rates of the urban students, each of the factors leading to attrition discussed in this study can be scrutinized for their effects on the retention of urban students on other campuses. A qualitative study can be conducted to determine why another rural college may have higher retention rates of their urban students.

Although one student perceived incidences of racism on the campus, others failed to mention that phenomenon. Supplementary research can be undertaken specifically dealing with the students' experiences with racism. It is possible that all the students experienced situations similar to Karla, yet they possessed the social capital necessary to deal with and move beyond the incident. A qualitative study should be designed to determine the students' perceptions of racism on the campus and their coping mechanisms. "How one learns to handle the circumstances with which they are confronted tells us much about their ability and potential" (Sedlacek, in press). How students handle their circumstances can be the foundation for further qualitative research.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this study reveal the qualities of the rural campus enjoyed by some urban students as well as reasons that some urban students attending a rural college campus fail to persist. Some urban students find the rural campus lacking in various areas. These include the availability of a variety of sports and other activities on or near the campus as well as a lack of cuisine choices. Another deficiency of the campus as perceived by the urban student is the unavailability of their intended degree. The population of the community was perceived differently by students; some miss the anonymity afforded by urban areas with a large populace. Other urban students

appreciated perks afforded by a small campus, such as the availability of instructors, the small class sizes, and the ease of setting appointments with the counselors and tutors.

The literature suggested various reasons for student attrition. This study confirmed that course preference is a factor for leaving. Student involvement was also confirmed as a factor in student attrition; however, the students indicated they would be more involved if their favorite sport was available. A new theme for student attrition also emerged—food. Students long for the comfort of familiar food. They also long for the familiarity of favorite pastimes.

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**APPENDIX A****Demographics Questionnaire**

1. Gender                      male                       female
2. Age
  - a. Below 20 years old
  - b. 20-34 years old
  - c. 35-54 years old
  - d. 55 years old and older
3. Education
  - a. freshman                       sophomore
  - b. Full time                       Part time
4. Race
  - a. African American/Black
  - b. White
  - c. Asian
  - d. American Indian
  - e. Hispanic
  - f. Self-Identification of Race/Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_
5. Are you a student athlete?    Yes                       No
6. Are you employed?                      Yes                       No 
  - a. If yes, how many hours per week? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Marital Status
  - a. Married
  - b. Single

## VITA

### EDUCATION

Doctoral student in Developmental Education Administration at Sam Houston State University, May 2013-present. Dissertation title: "Perceptions and experiences of urban students on a rural campus: A phenomenological study."

Specialist Certification (January 2014) in Developmental Education, Appalachian State University/Kellogg Institute of Developmental Education

Master of Science in Education (May, 1987) in elementary education, Southwest Missouri State University. Project title: Games for the social studies classroom.

Bachelor of Science in Education (May, 1986) in Elementary Education, Southwest Missouri State University.

### PUBLICATIONS

Cockrum, C. F. (1990). *Using Writing to Enhance Reading Comprehension*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

Cockrum, C. F. (1989). Mouse Paint Activity. In Kent State University (eds.) *Whole Language Activities*. Kent, Ohio. Kent State University.

### PRESENTATIONS AT PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

Cockrum, C. F. & Datray, J. L. (2014, October). *Digitizing advising: Increasing the quality of online student services*. PowerPoint presentation at the Midwest Regional Association of Developmental Educators, Lake of the Ozarks, MO.

### PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

National Association for Developmental Education

Midwest Regional Association for Developmental Education

Textbook and Academic Author's Association