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“To Be There is Important”: Place-Attachment in Rural Community College Students as Motivation for Staying Local

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Rural students who wish to attend college are often faced with the choice of leaving their rural communities or forgoing higher education. The rural community college can provide rural students with the opportunity to remain in their community and work toward a degree. This qualitative study explored how place-attachment may influence the college decisions of students attending rural community college. Place-attachment is conceptualized in this study as an affinity for a place and affection for the particular qualities of that place. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with community college students in rural Southern Oregon. Findings suggest that place-attachment is a significant influence on the choices of the participants in the study. The data indicate that place-attachment in this context includes the following elements: prioritizing family ties, valuing the qualities of rural communities and valuing closeness to the natural world.

Rural young people are faced with a particular set of decisions as they ponder their futures. Should they follow the route that so many have done since before the industrial revolution and strike out for the city? Should they settle further into their home places, prioritizing closeness to family over higher education and improved economic opportunity?

The literature concerning how rural young people make these decisions has often focused on students who leave their home places. Carr and Kefalis (2009) found that “the biggest question facing anyone who grows up in a small town is whether he or she should leave or stay” (p. xiii). Carr and Kefalis categorized the young people who they interviewed as *achievers*, who left their small community permanently in search of better opportunities; *stayers* who were unwilling or unable to leave home; *seekers*, who leave via the military or other non-college paths and *returners* who come home after a time away (Carr & Kefalis, 2009). Corbett (2007), in his comprehensive study of a Canadian fishing community used the categories of *stayers*, *those who went away* and those who stayed *around here* or went *not far*. Gibbs (1995) wrote that “half of all rural college attendees leave home and do not return by age 25” (p. 35).

There is a great deal in the literature about rural “brain drain” and the plight of those who remain in their rural communities and face desolate economic prospects (Brooke, 2003; Bryant, 2010; Burnell, 2003; Corbett, 2006; 2007; Duncan, 1999; Edmondson, 2003; C.W. Howley, 2006b; Carr & Kefalis, 2009, Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1999). Those who go away to college are typically regarded as the most successful and are given the most praise and encouragement for their choices. *Stayers* are regarded as those who couldn’t make it in the outside world. (Corbett, 2007; C.B. Howley, 2009; C.B Howley, A. Howley, C.W. Howley & M.D. Howley, 2006; C.W. Howley, 2006a; C.W. Howley, 2006b; Carr & Kefalis, 2009).

However, there is a group of students excluded from that binary framing of the post-high school choices of rural youth. That group is made up of those who choose to both stay close to home *and* to pursue higher education, often at a community college. The popular assumption about community college attendance is that it is the school of last resort, that students who choose it have no other options, due to financial constraints or poor academic

performance in high school. Another possibility, however, is that the opportunity to go to college without abandoning rural life and one's home place may be appealing to rural young people.

Rural Community Colleges

Community colleges exist in the midst of a complicated discourse about the purpose of higher education. Community colleges are often praised by politicians promoting job growth and yet are often the butt of jokes in popular culture that promotes stereotypes about community college students (Hawk & Hill, 2016). They can serve as a bridge to a four-year university; they can provide short term vocational training in the form of certificate programs or they can provide a path to a career through two-year degrees in health care, law enforcement etc. While community college may be the launching point of long academic careers for some, for others, it is where higher education begins and ends.

Katsinas (2007) called rural community colleges "the land grant-colleges of the 21st century" and found that for many students, they provide the most accessible and affordable college option. While some scholars and policy makers have worried that two-year colleges might divert students from four-year degrees, Mykerezi, Kostandini, and Mills (2009) found that what they called "the democratization effect" of rural community colleges outweighed any diversionary effect.

Research Question

This study addresses the following question: How do rural community college students describe choosing to attend college close to home and how might place-attachment influence that choice? This study focuses on rural Oregon community college students. Just as there is a gap in the literature concerning rural students who choose to go to community college in their home communities, there is a dearth of literature concerning education in the Pacific Northwest and Oregon in particular.

Theoretical Framework

Place

I conceptualize place-attachment as an affinity for a place that is rooted not in "ignorance of other places" (Corbett, 2007, p. 28) but in affection for the particular qualities of a place and of a desire to resist the hypermobility of the modern era that takes people away from communities and families of origin. Corbett (2007) notes that "attachment to any particular place is, in the face of post-modernity, a form of resistance" (p. 59). Place, in this definition, is more than a geographic term; it is more comprehensive and includes culture, family relationships and identities that are place-specific. I wish to note that I consciously choose to avoid the term *place-bound* with its negative connotation and implication of lack of agency. Place as a theoretical framework is present in many fields and the increased attention to "the place world" (Casey, 2009) in recent years has come to be termed "the new localism" by some scholars (Crowson & Goldring, 2009).

Rurality

Ching and Creed (1997) contended that scholarly attention to identity formation has “generally failed to address the rural/urban axis” (p. 3) and that while it is important to consider race, gender, economic circumstance, class, religion and other factors, the failure to consider place as an identity factor is a gross oversight.

Ching and Creed (1997) called for an attention to *rusticity* as an identity as well as rurality as designated by physical location. They critique the tendency to regard rustic as primitive and rural as marginal. While I identify rurality as particular and distinct, I do not position the rural as the *inverse* of urban. Rural education researchers have long argued that rural places are often described as places that *lack*—lack infrastructure, lack population, lack political clout, sophistication or resources.

Disembedding

One of the hidden curricula of rural education has been one of educating-to-export or, what Craig Howley (2009) called “a talent-extraction industry” (p. 539). Ironically, much rural education has the effect (if not the explicit intention) of encouraging outmigration from rural places and of emptying rural communities of their young people. Corbett (2007) called schools “travel agencies for those who can afford the ticket” (p. 271). In fact, “the further away a student went, the more pride teachers took in the part they played in the process” (Corbett, 2007, p. 3). He framed this in terms of Giddens’s (1990) concept of *disembedding*; the gradual disentangling of people from their extended families, traditional ways of life, and geographic ties.

Rural schooling can actually have the effect of destabilizing communities by “encouraging students to seek high-status jobs that require breaking the bonds—construed as bondage—to family and place” (Lawrence, 2009 p. 463). This idea conflicts with the desires described by several researchers (Burnell, 2003; Corbett, 2007; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; C.B. Howley, 2009) of some rural young people to create their adult lives close to their homes. Corbett (2007) argued that this may be rooted in a realistic cost-benefit analysis of higher education’s “pay-off” in a rural place rather than in disinterest in education. Nevertheless, Caitlin Howley (2006b) pointed out that “For some observers, the lesser [sic] aspirations of rural youth provide evidence of alleged deficiencies in rural life and people” (p. 64). This implies that those who stay in their communities are simply unable to go to college to gain the qualifications to do anything else.

However, this implication is challenged by some research into the aspirations of rural youth. Burnell (2003) found that many rural students saw college not as unobtainable, but as a “waste of time, effort and money and risk” (p. 108). Some rural youth wished to maintain ties to their home places and were unwilling to delay entry into the “real world” of work and community life by attending college in an urban setting (Corbett, 2007; 2009; C.W. Howley, 2006b). Haller and Virkler (1993) cautioned that “raising the occupational aspirations of rural youth” (p. 170) in order to close the educational aspiration gap between rural and urban youth could have the effect of exacerbating outmigration.

Some researchers have found that rural students who leave their communities can experience a deep sense of loss. Lawrence (2009), in her study of rural gifted students, described those who want to stay in their communities instead of leaving to find what they are told is suitable work. Educators encourage students to lead “fulfilling lives—lives made fulfilling by jobs available only in cities” (Lawrence, 2009, p. 465). This “colonial binarism in favoring the metropolis over rural life” (McLaren & Giroux, 1990, p. 155.) is so embedded in discourse over place that it is difficult to imagine it as anything but an objective truth.

Other researchers (Burnell, 2003; C.W. Howley, 2006b; Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutching, 2011) have investigated the aspirations of rural youth. Burnell (2003) found that rural students who did not anticipate attending college saw their choice to enter the workforce instead of pursuing a college degree as a practical choice to join the "real world" and begin adulthood. In light of this research, this study examined the choices and place-attachment of rural community college students at one community college in Southern Oregon.

Method

Setting

North Fork Community College (a pseudonym) is located in Madrone County (also a pseudonym) in Southern Oregon. The region is a combination of forested mountains, river-bottom farmland and small to mid-sized towns. The largest of these is the county seat which is situated along a major interstate and is, for residents of the county, the closest thing to a metropolitan area.

Madrone County is geographically large, (covering more than 1,600 square miles) but has a population of only 83,000 people, of whom, 34,500 live in the county seat. Heilman (1995) wrote that in some of the more remote parts of the region, "Neighbors living less than a mile apart, but separated from each other by steep ridges often have to travel forty or fifty miles by road to visit" (p. 7). The county has a median family income of \$38,035 which is significantly below the state median and the poverty rate is 17.8%. The demographics of the county are racially homogeneous. Eighty-eight percent of the population identified as White/Non-Hispanic, and 6.5% are of Latino/Hispanic origin. The remainder identify as multi-ethnic, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native or Black.

With the decline of the local timber industry has come a great deal of financial instability, unemployment and underemployment. Unemployment remains higher than the state average (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Logging and mill work, which were once reliable sites of employment have steadily contracted over the past twenty-five years.

Low employment and a shrinking tax base have resulted in local services that are seriously underfunded. The Sheriff's office operates with only bare-bones staffing and the prosecutor's office will no longer prosecute misdemeanor offenses. The county jail has periodically released dozens of inmates because of budget shortfalls and there are rumors of 911 services no longer being staffed around the clock. Madrone County is relatively politically and socially conservative, though this conservatism is often tempered with a typically Oregonian ethic of libertarian "live and let live" as well.

North Fork Community College. North Fork Community College (NFCC) is large for a rural community college and is made up of three campuses spread over two counties. The most rural of the three campuses is located on 84 rural acres, five miles outside the county seat. NFCC's enrollment is approximately 5,500 students. Nearly 30% of those students attend classes on the rural campus. The student body is approximately 43% male and 57% female. Of those reporting race or ethnicity, nearly 80% identify as White and 13% Hispanic (see Appendix, Table 1 for details).

Participants

I used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) to recruit participants for the study. Students who identified as rural and whose families have lived in Southern Oregon for at least two generations met the inclusion criteria. The five participants meeting these criteria

all self-identify as having had a rural upbringing (see Appendix, Table 3). Two identify as male and three as female. Three of the participants identified as “working class” and two as “middle class” (see Appendix, Table 2).

They range in age from 18 to 30, and all participants identify as White. One participant also identifies as multi-racial (see Appendix, Table 2). The demographics of the region are changing, but remain relatively homogenous. In light of the racial homogeneity of the research participants, I wish to avoid the mistake of leaving their racial identity unexamined and by doing so leaving it “invisible or unmarked” (Frankenberg, 1993).

While the focus of the study is not specific to racial identity, I take from critical whiteness studies the concept that to avoid discussion of whiteness is to privilege it and to give it status as the norm (Frankenberg, 1993; Moss, 2003; Perry, 2002; Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica & Wray, 2001). By calling attention to race in a primarily White context, I, somewhat paradoxically, wish to complicate notions of race and rurality and of rural places as uniformly White spaces.

While some participants’ parents attended trade school or completed some community college courses, none of the participants’ parents has completed a four-year degree (see Appendix, Table 4). Their parents are engaged in careers such as log-truck driver, forest ranger, bookkeeper, landscaper, homemaker and small business owner.

All participants commute to campus and their household makeup involves parents, siblings, children and spouses (see Appendix, Table 3). All participants receive federal financial aid and all either currently receive or have received assistance from entitlement programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (also known as Food Stamps) or the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program.

With one exception, all of the participants achieved high enough high school grades to have been accepted to a more selective college, but only one of the five applied to another institution. For the rest, NFCC was their first and only choice. All five of the participants plan to stay in the valley after college, even if they need to move away temporarily to complete a degree.

Participant Profiles

Cheyenne. Cheyenne (18) has roots in the valley that go back several generations. She is a pageant queen who learned to drive by towing a 27-foot horse trailer and who describes hunting as “a huge part of my life.” She wants to finish college because “[I] watched my parents struggle” and she wants more financial security than her parents have had. Cheyenne had the grades to attend a competitive university, but chose NFCC because it was close to home and because she saw it as a “stepping stone” to her adult life and career as a nurse.

She is proud that she earned enough scholarship money to graduate from NFCC without debt. She hopes to get a job at a local hospital and to buy some land in the country. Her goal is clear: “I want to be somewhere where my future family could have the same thing I did as a kid. Nothing fancy, just a double-wide, maybe with some land.”

Amber. Amber (30) has lived in the valley her entire life. She grew up in a very remote area where her family was geographically and socially isolated. From an early age Amber knew that, “I wanted to go to college. I wanted to be more than what I was.” When she was 18, she left home, worked a variety of jobs and eventually found herself unemployed and a single mother to a young son.

Amber never considered a four-year university because, "Community college is just where you start." She hopes to finish a physics and engineering degree at the local university and to work as an engineer. She describes herself as a "country girl" and as "a homebody."

Evan. Like many students at NFCC, Evan (19) is simultaneously enrolled at both NFCC and at a local high school. Education is important to his family and college and "has always been part of the plan." He plans to transfer to a four-year university and then to come back to his hometown, or at the very least to "stay local." He said that while his parents encourage him, they "worry that there won't be jobs here."

Kylie. Even though her hometown is adjacent to the interstate, Kylie (24) describes it as "not a place you would go unless you knew someone. It's not on the way to anywhere." Kylie's family has lived on the same piece of land for generations.

As a student with disabilities, Kylie is skeptical that she would find support for her special needs at a larger institution. She is nervous about getting lost "at one of those huge lecture colleges where nobody knows your name." Kylie intends to transfer to the local university and then work as a special education teacher in Madrone County.

Jeremy. Jeremy (19) has lived in the valley since birth. His parents encouraged him to attend college and are pleased with his choice of NFCC especially as he was awarded enough scholarship money to cover his entire course of study at NFCC. He is ambitious and entrepreneurial and intends to major in business and pursue his MBA. He plans to own the grocery in his hometown because "everybody needs to eat" and he predicts that the grocery business will be stable.

Jeremy is protective of his hometown and feels a sense of responsibility and gratitude toward NFCC, his hometown and his home state. "I want to give back to this community. Do something when I'm older. I would like to contribute."

Data Collection

Data collection began with an e-mail, and demographic survey of the participants. It covered age, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, level of education, family background, geographic location, and a geographic location history.

Following this, the survey semi-structured, focused interviews were conducted. Merton & Kendall's (1956) four criteria were used to guide the interviews: *non-direction*, *specificity*, *range*, and "depth and personal context on the part of the interviewer" (p. 79). Following these criteria, the first interview covered research participants' life histories and education histories. The second interview covered how the research participants chose to attend NFCC, what they reported as influencing that decision and how they envisioned their futures in relation to their community and education.

The final interview covered questions of identity and was prompted and driven by the photographs that participants shared with me as described below. This methodology comes from Harper (1994) and is used to encourage participants to construct nuanced answers. Flick (1998) called this "a concretization of the focused interview" (p. 153).

Following photo-elicitation methods described by Dabbs (1982) and Flick (1998), the participants also spent one week recording images that they felt contributed to their identities and illustrated important elements of their lives. These photographic artifacts functioned as sources of data and as points of discussion in follow-up interviews.

Finally, as a concluding activity and member check, I employed an online focus group. Marshall and Rossman (2011) wrote that the focus group method assumes that "an individual's attitudes and beliefs are socially constructed: They do not form in a vacuum" (p. 149).

Challenges

It quickly became apparent that conducting research with rural participants, some of whom live quite remotely, was a logistical and scheduling challenge. Oregon consistently has some of the highest gas prices in the continental United States (Lundberg Survey, 2014) and participants all bemoaned the cost of transportation. While there is limited public transportation available to NFCC, a bus line is not helpful if the closest bus stop is a 16 mile walk away.

The participants work between 20 and 40 hours a week while carrying full-time course loads. Additionally, family obligations often took precedence over time with a university researcher to whom they had no family ties. Respecting the limited financial and time resources of my participants required patience and recognition that the time to voluntarily participate in uncompensated research is, itself, a form of privilege.

Another challenge I faced was that of confidentiality. Every effort was made to preserve the anonymity of the participants; however, due to the nature of the research it cannot be guaranteed that the *site* of my research will not be discernible. To thoroughly disguise the individual features of the locality and community in the service of anonymity would defeat the purpose of the thick description of a specific place. The question of confidentiality in rural settings is a challenging one. Anderson and Lonsdale (2014) acknowledge that confidentiality is sometimes difficult to achieve in small communities. For example, ‘the school’ in a research project may well be the *only* school in the community. Similarly, “it does not matter how well a researcher tries to disguise...the people involved in it by using pseudonyms...it is more than likely that everyone in the community will know to whom [they] are referring” (p. 196).

Green and Reid (2014) went so far as to argue that “anonymisation of place in qualitative research washes out the specifics of geography, environment, history and social relations that have produced the particular form of rural social space that forms the actual object of our inquiry” (p. 34). The concern is that in anonymizing the place in a study *about* the role of place, might be exchanging one ethical conundrum for another. It might preserve the site’s anonymity, but by excluding or disguising details vital to a real understanding of the research context, it could be doing a disservice to the very community that is being studied.

Analyzing and Coding Data

The seven phases put forth by Marshall and Rossman (2011) were utilized for analytic procedures: organizing the data, immersion in the data, generating categories and themes, coding the data, offering interpretations through analytic memos, searching for alternative understandings and writing up the findings.

In order to classify and winnow (Luttrell, 2010) this data, I employed both theory generated codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and *in vivo* codes. After transcribing the interviews, each participant’s transcript was color coded, first for theory generated codes, then for themes that emerged *in vivo*.

In illustrating the themes identified in the data, I have deliberately chosen to quote the research participants extensively. I have gathered these quotations into thematic sections, but I wish to avoid aggregating their stories and their words into generalized responses. Each of these students has a unique lived-experience and generously chose to share their opinions, memories and images with me. While I must preserve their anonymity, I wish to offer them the respect of honoring the individuality of their stories.

Results of the Study

Place-Attachment

The primary finding of this study is that place-attachment is a significant influence on the college decisions of these students. As I analyzed the transcripts of the interviews some themes emerged quite strongly. The most prominent of these is place-attachment. Additionally, participants were very explicit about their desire to live near their families and to maintain familial ties. Another theme is of closeness to the natural world. The last of these themes is that participants value the qualities of small, rural communities.

All of the participants expressed attachment to their home places and a desire to make their futures in Madrone County. I am aware that rural research is sometimes accused of privileging a whitewashed, nostalgic and romanticized version of rurality. Even as I wish to avoid such romanticization, I also am conscious of the danger of disrespectfully "explaining away people's emotional attachments to place and to the networks they represent as nostalgia" (Bartholomaeus, Halsey, & Corbett, 2014, p. 64).

The research participants were all clear-eyed in their assessments of their home places and expressed feeling a strong, emotional bond to their homes despite their flaws. For example, Kylie, despite having what she described as "kind of a rough childhood," found comfort in the familiar landscape of her family's property. Her attachment to the land is generational and rooted in family history:

My grandfather built the house for him and his wife when my dad and his brothers were born. Then he moved next door and he built that house too. We've just always lived here. That tree right there has a block of wood nailed to it to give me a step up into the tree. I would sit up there whenever I was frustrated or mad. I would crawl up and sit there for a while and just hang out. Then, eventually I would start to feel better. It was kind of my thinking tree.

They described deep attachment to the landscape of their home communities, to the valley and to Southern Oregon as a whole. Amber recalled childhood horseback rides into the mountains near her home:

We would take our horses sometimes and go up to the mountains...Get away from things. If I moved away I might have wanted to come right back... I do *love* living here...I could never be the person who doesn't have a place to come back to. I like having that foundation, that stability of having that place I call home. It's important to me, it's important to my sanity. I'm not a nomad. I want a home...a permanent home for my son and my family.

Family ties. Under the thematic umbrella of place-attachment, there were several other prominent themes that emerged from the data. The first and most prevalent of these is that of family ties.

Amber said:

My family is here. They wouldn't tell us not to go or anything like that. But they wouldn't want us to. You would still feel it on that emotional level that says "we don't want you to." We are very family oriented.

Cheyenne worried that the transition to living away from home *and* starting college might be too much and "wanted to be able to get oriented by still having family support. Go home and cry if I need to." She, like Amber, described herself as "very family oriented."

Jeremy described his ties to the valley in familial terms as well. He was especially concerned that he be present in the lives of ailing or elderly family members.

My grandma isn't doing so good. My girlfriend's dad isn't doing so good.

It's really partly family situations that keep me out here. None of them would say "Oh stay" but it's just the way I feel. I wouldn't *want* to leave.

Kylie has both the deepest roots and the largest number of family members who live in the valley. Her mother's seven siblings (and their families) all live locally. She worried that if she left the valley, she would be "emotionally isolated."

I didn't feel like I could break off from, my family since we were so close.

My sister has three kids, two, five and ten. I wanted to stay and be a part of their lives. Because I figured if I moved away, I wouldn't be able to come back for like six years. That's why I decided to stay locally. The largest factor is that my family is here. I don't think my family would stop me from going; they just wouldn't like it and would get upset over it.

This sense of responsibility to family and the desire to maintain closeness for one's own sake was a strong theme in the interviews. Gibbs (1995) framed returning home due to family ties as a choice that could have negative repercussions for rural students. In contrast, these students see their families as sources of support. They also feel strongly about their roles as members of extended families and the responsibilities that come with those roles.

Making sense of this finding requires what Amy and Craig Howley (2014) describe as an, "understanding of a world in which family trumps individual accomplishment" (p. 9). These young people are not sacrificing their future success to stay close to home; they simply do not wish to achieve a form of success that requires them to endanger familial ties.

Closeness to nature. Another theme that emerged from the data was the participants' appreciation for nature. Evan reported that some of what keeps him in rural Southern Oregon is the "mountains, lakes [and] outdoor activities." He would hate to have to drive for hours to be in the woods.

Amber said, "I love trees and nature. Everywhere I have lived, everywhere I would like to live is going to have those big trees." Cheyanne said:

I have a really significant appreciation for nature and all of the things it provides for us...I don't spend nearly as much time interacting with technology as most people do. There is always something to see or do outside. I'm not stuck inside.

Jeremy, too, spoke in his interview about his attachment to the natural world:

We're never house-bound. We could always go mudding [driving ATVs]...You can drive 10 minutes and be at a river...Drive 15 minutes and be fishing. I like to get up on the roof and look at stars. I couldn't do that if there was a bunch of streetlights.

Kylie expressed that she wants to be able to "take off when I need to, to the mountains, the lake, get away from concrete...too much concrete makes me feel itchy".

Community qualities. A final theme that emerged from the data was that of the quality of rural communities. They saw their rural lives as quieter, safer and slower paced than they perceived city life to be. Amber said:

I'm really friendly with my neighbors. I walk into a store and I know five or ten people and you have that relationship with everyone. You go to the gas station and you know all the people there. My son walks down the street and all of them say 'I saw your son.' Smaller communities, the tight-knit closeness of them is important... Most people I know who live in town, they don't know their neighbors. I

know every neighbor. I can ask any one of them for a cup of sugar or to babysit my dog. I love all the people. If you move someplace else you have to start over. I'm 30 and I don't feel like starting over.

Cheyenne's home is fairly isolated, but neighbors help each other and communicate when "Dogs run away or cougar is around". She describes her neighbors as people who are "down-to-earth, good-natured and community-oriented" but who "like to be left alone." Evan appreciates the small town parades and festivals and said that growing up in a smaller, slower-paced environment made him a more patient person.

Jeremy feels that "People are really nice" in his "tight-knit" community and that they are "more laid back people who are not constantly striving to succeed or fit in." He feels that rural people "See you for you" and that it is easier to "be yourself" in a rural place. His work at the grocery store allows him to:

[Make] great connections with each person. I get to know people on an individual basis, I run into the same people all the time. [I can] build a relationship with each person. I'm an introvert, but I love to make connections. Of course there are people who aren't the greatest, but that's with anywhere. I like the people that are out here. They are always really friendly. It's a family, a community that everybody really knows everybody and talks to everybody. I would hate to see that change. You get into bigger areas and it's hard to make those close relationships with people.

Kylie expressed feelings of regret about the changes that she perceived in her community. She described her community as having been very tight-knit, the kind of small town where everyone knows everyone.

I knew the person who rented videos by name; she knew me since I was a baby. The guy at the pizza parlor, I called him by his first name; he saw us growing up. People would see you and tell your parents what you were doing. As I grew older, a lot of people moved away. It's more commercialized nowadays but I feel like it's still what a place to grow up should look like. It's old and rustic. It's not exactly in good shape, but it works. It's what I want my kids to grow up in...a great environment.

They also thought of rural places as safer and more peaceful. Amber, for example, praised the quiet and peace of small town places.

I don't mind interacting with people but I like to have a serene place to call home. I don't have to worry about someone talking to my kid or there being a drive-by. Kids are allowed to be a little more free to do a little more of what they want. My son can grow up to be more independent, since he won't be coddled so close.

Evan said that while his hometown is "kind of boring sometimes," that the "people seem nicer" than in the busier county seat, or if not nicer, just "not as high-paced...not too rushed." Jeremy said that growing up in a small town, "You pretty much knew who you should avoid" and that he generally feels safe.

Two of the young women in the study expressed that they felt safer carrying their firearms since "by the time the Sheriff gets here, you are already dead or robbed or raped." River City (site of NFCC) seemed much too urban to some of the participants, and they worried about "urban crime" even in a town of 35,000 people.

Despite concerns over safety in town, Kylie likes what she describes as "the open country feel" and the ability to leave "doors wide open even if you're home by yourself."

She also feels that her childhood was safer in a small town than it would have been in a city, “There would have been more strangers. I would have been more wary... more danger.”

Negative Findings

Interestingly, one theme that did not appear in the data in a significant way was that of *disembedding*. None of the participants reported being encouraged, either implicitly or explicitly, to abandon their rural lifestyles. If anything, the data indicate the opposite—families, educational structures and the availability of scholarships all helped encourage these students to go to college at NFCC.

Summary and Analysis

The data collected during this study suggest that place-attachment is a strong influence on those students who have family roots in the community. These rural young people all feel affection and responsibility towards their home places that is intertwined with their closeness to their families. They do not see a local community college experience as a second best choice. They see it as a choice that fits with the lives that they want to lead, in the communities and landscape to which they are emotionally tied.

What this suggests is that when local opportunities are available, rural young people with strong attachments to their home places *may* choose to pursue higher education and will choose to pursue careers that are valuable to their home communities. The financial barriers to attending more selective and expensive institutions were certainly of concern to these students. They were skeptical that attending a more expensive, more distant four-year university would result in tangible advantages. They chose to begin by attending a less-expensive community college where they will incur less debt (in some cases no debt at all) for two years. They see this as an entirely reasonable, practical course of action, not as a second-best choice.

This sense of pragmatism also informs the participants’ career goals. All of the participants are realistic about the difficulty of making a living in rural Southern Oregon. They were aware that their communities were often perceived as doomed, but they explicitly stated that they wished to improve the prospects of their home places through their labor.

These students expressed that, in choosing a college major, they considered not only their own aptitudes, interests and economic goals, but also the needs of their communities. Amber hopes to work in engineering. Cheyanne intends to be a nurse, Kylie a special-education teacher. Jeremy plans to own and operate a grocery store. They have chosen career paths that are of value not only to them as personal livelihoods but are valuable to their communities.

I recognize that some scholars might look at these choices and see only the reproduction of unequal class and economic structures at work. I argue that these interpretations are often colored by a metro-normative orientation. My contention is that when we make the mistake of viewing life choices through such a lens, we flatten contextual and individual lived experience. Jeremy’s desire to own and operate a small-town grocery store, for example, could be interpreted in several different ways. Has he set his sights too low and is he, therefore, perpetuating his own disenfranchised place in the economic hierarchy? Is he merely leveraging himself into a better position within that hierarchy? Or has he emancipated himself by seeking more education than his parents had access to?

Unfortunately, we have devalued the rural for so long that wishing to remain a rural person seems, by definition, to be a choice that is deluded and self-defeating. I resist this

interpretation. I wish to reiterate here that I write from the perspective of one who wishes to do “the kind of rural education research that actively privileges rural outlooks on the meaning of life” (Howley, C. & A. Howley, 2014, p. 8) and who resists the view of rural as deficient.

From one perspective, these students could be seen to be reproducing their marginalized, economically depressed condition by consciously choosing rurality. However, these are choices made with agency. Rather than accepting the spurious claims of the wider culture that mobility results in prosperity and happiness (Marré, 2009), they have chosen another path. Not because they are naïve but because what they value most is already present in their lives and they wish to preserve it.

Unless rural places, rural cultures, and rural communities are recognized as culturally legitimate and richly diverse rather than as obsolete, marginal, and backward then it is difficult to understand why people might choose to remain in them. While in my research design I anticipated that the majority of the participants in this study would be White, I wish to avoid letting this go unmarked. The population of rural Southern Oregon is majority White and the population of NFCC is as well. However, rural spaces are not and have never been exclusively White spaces and I do not wish to perpetuate that. The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) students, undocumented students and Indigenous students are not reflected in this small study either. Future research in this area should include a broadening of scope to include rural students marginalized by race, sexual orientation, immigration status and other factors as well.

Final Thoughts

As I conducted this research, I engaged in conversations with colleagues and community members about my preliminary findings. Inevitably, they would ask, “shouldn’t we encourage rural students to get out and see the real world? Shouldn’t we encourage them to go live in the city for a while? They need to see something other than their own small town.” I find that my response to this question is complicated. On the one hand, I am in favor of *anyone*, rural, urban or suburban, expanding their horizons, traveling, experiencing new and different places. On the other hand, underlying this question is still the troubling assumption that to be rural is to be provincial, small-minded, unaware of and uninterested in the rest of the world—that the urban world is the *real world*.

While we may encourage them to travel, we typically do not assume that students from New York, or Los Angeles who have not experienced rural life are missing out on something vitally important to their development. The inverse is, of course, not true for rural students. The assumption still exists that if rural young people remain in the countryside, they don’t know any better or can’t handle the “real world.”

Unfortunately, this assumption colors how rooted young people are perceived and treated by schools, colleges and the wider culture. Examining the motivations of rural students who wish to stay in their rural homes can, I hope, help to dismantle this assumption and help us encounter rural students on their own terms.

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Appendix

Table 1

North Fork Community College Race/Ethnicity (NFCC Master Plan, 2011)

<u>White</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>Native American</u>	<u>Multiracial</u>	<u>Asian</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Pacific Islander</u>
80%	13%	2%	2%	2%	2%	>1%

Table 2

Demographic Information (Self-identified)

<u>Name</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Class Status</u>
Cheyanne	Female	18	White	Working Class
Amber	Female	30	White	Working Class
Evan	Male	19	White	Middle Class
Kylie	Female	24	White	Working Class
Jeremy	Male	19	White/Multiracial	Middle Class

Table 3

Residential Information

<u>Name</u>	<u>Household Composition</u>	<u>Rural Residence</u>	<u>Commute to NFCC</u>
Cheyanne	Student, parent and sibling	X	30-45 minutes
Amber	Student, spouse and child	X	10-20 minutes
Evan	Student, parents and siblings	X	30-45 minutes
Kylie	Student and partner	X	10-20 minutes
Jeremy	Student, parent and siblings	X	30-45 minutes

Table 4

Parent Education Status

<u>No Post-High School Ed.</u>	<u>Some Post-High School Ed.</u>	<u>4-year degree or more</u>
Cheyanne	Amber	No participants parents completed a 4-year degree
Kylie	Evan Jeremy	