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Rural Students' Postsecondary Transitions: A Human Ecological Perspective

Trang C. Tran Dayna Jean DeFeo

Our study examines how the relationships with various human ecological systems influence the transition by rural students from home communities to postsecondary institutions. Using phenomenological interview data with 14 students who are from rural Alaska and 14 postsecondary student service staff, our analysis identified characteristics of the postsecondary transition processes that seem particular to rural students—in navigating urban places and cultural norms, seeking institutional supports, advocating for self, and forming new social relationships. In all of these experiences, rural identities and community-oriented values emerged as a guiding force for students' goal-setting, decision-making, interactions, and adjustment. Our data suggest opportunities to reinforce connections and cooperation among human ecological systems to improve the postsecondary transition experience for rural students.

An emerging body of scholarship documents that rural students have different psychological and social needs for postsecondary education (Irvin et al., 2012; San Antonio, 2016). The literature identifies socioeconomic characteristics (Byun et al., 2012; Cox et al., 2014) and geographic isolation (Flora & Flora, 2008) of rural communities as limiting exposure of youths to different education and career opportunities (Koricich et al. 2018; Means et al., 2016), including systemic inequities in career pathways counseling and planning (Griffin et al., 2011; Nelson, 2016), rigorous coursework (Planty et al., 2007), dual enrollment (Zinth, 2014), and access to technology (Sundeen & Sundeen,

2013). Much of the literature indicates that rural students trail their urban and suburban peers in academic preparation (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018), postsecondary attendance (Byun et al., 2015), career aspirations (Irvin et al., 2011), and career self-efficacy (Corbett, 2007). However, while revealing broader socio-historical factors that impact rural student performance, the literature omits contextual and multidimensional characteristics of transition. With a conscious alertness to the developmental and interconnected nature of the human experience in general, and the transition processes in particular, we explore: *How do rural students and student services staff characterize postsecondary transitions?* Through phenomenological interviews with 14 rural Alaskan students and 14 postsecondary student service staff, we apply Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecological framework to study the interrelationship between student, family, school, community, and culture, and in turn, to present student agency in shaping the narratives of their own transitions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecological framework (HEF) regards development as a function of human subjects, their environments, and the interactions between and within those entities. The HEF organizes environmental attributes that impact human development into five "nested structures": the *micro-*, *meso-*, *exo-*, *macro-*, and *chronosystems*. The HEF asserts that individuals develop most

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potently from interactions with their immediate environments, referred to as *microsystem*, which includes the people with whom they share spaces and have face-to-face interactions (e.g., family, teachers, peers, coworkers). The *mesosystem* describes interactions between different microsystems (e.g., relationships between parents, teachers, and peers). The *exosystem* encompasses institutional structures and policies that are indirectly involved with the student's development, such as school, church, or community organizations. These experiences and interactions all take place within the *macrosystem*, the overarching societal structure (e.g., political systems and culture), and within a temporal context called the *chronosystem*.

In the context of postsecondary transitions, the HEF overlaps with the traditional notions of transition, briefly described in the introduction above, in documenting internal and external forces that characterize student experiences. However, deriving from developmental psychology and social ecological models, the HEF also considers dynamic student–environment relations and their reciprocity over time. In this study, the HEF provides a framework for better understanding of student roles and agency by recognizing how they navigate connections with family, in- and out-of-school contacts, and within and beyond the communities they call home.

AN ECOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF POSTSECONDARY TRANSITIONS

Postsecondary transitions involve academic, social, and cultural adaptive processes (Arnett, 2014; Benjamin et al., 2007; Bowman et al., 2019). Through the lens of the HEF, we analyzed the literature with particular attention to the social and institutional contexts. At the *chrono* level, college-going often coincides with a transition to adulthood in which students are

expected to take on greater personal and social responsibilities (Fischer 2007; Sanchez et al., 2010), autonomy, and self-discipline (Conley & French, 2014), while clarifying their own identity and beliefs (Azmitia et al., 2013; Meeus, 2011). Beyond a physical relocation, this includes sensitive and complex changes (Katz & Somers, 2017), with opportunities for personal and professional growth, but also presenting psychological tensions (Fromme et al., 2008).

At the *macro* level, state and federal policies provide a range of programs and services to increase postsecondary participation. The transition literature draws attention to how students navigate collegiate norms, values, and expectations (Bowman et al., 2019; Conley & French, 2014), noting that this is more challenging for students from rural, low-income, and minority backgrounds (Inkelas et al., 2007; Stephens et al., 2014). Three decades ago, Astin (1984) and Tinto (1987) contended that students must acclimate academically and socially to college expectations, but critical scholars noted the hegemony in applying Western-centric practices to engage students from nondominant backgrounds (Kumashiro, 2001; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2017). In this vein, researchers present theoretical (Yosso, 2005) and empirical evidence (Inkelas et al., 2007; Stephens et al., 2014) that interrupts this attention to assimilation, compelling transition supports to connect values between home and postsecondary institutions.

At the *exo* level, much postsecondary readiness literature considers the difference between high school and postsecondary expectations, and the roles of institutional policies and practices (Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Tierney & Sablan, 2014). At the postsecondary level, the campus climate is integral in supporting sense of belonging, adjustment (Katz & Somers, 2017), and friend-making (Bowman et al. 2019), especially for minority students (Stephens et al., 2014). Extracurricular activities

can further support academic, social, and cultural adjustment (Bowman & Small, 2012; Mattanah et al., 2010).

In the *mesosystem*, the literature primarily investigates curated supports, including counselors working with parents (Mattanah et al., 2004), schools engaging local resources to meet students' academic, advising, and socializing needs (Leonard, 2011), and partnerships between secondary and postsecondary institutions to offer credit-based transition programs (Fowler & Luna, 2009). Most HEF-based studies focus on students' ability, self-efficacy, and coping skills to navigate the competing demands between immediate systems as they move through complex transitions (Arnold et al., 2012; Renn & Arnold, 2003).

At the *micro* level, the literature notes that transitioning students need to negotiate relationship disruption with parents and friends (Mattanah et al., 2004; Srivastava et al., 2009) and establish new social networks (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). As they move to postsecondary institutions, feelings of support from parents, family, and friends correlate positively with healthy adjustments (Azmitia et al., 2013), self-reliance, self-confidence, adaptive coping, and ability to regulate separation distress (Katz & Sommers, 2017).

RURAL STUDENTS' POSTSECONDARY TRANSITIONS

The literature on rural students' postsecondary transitions is scant, but details the process as complex and uncertain (Hlinka et al., 2015; San Antonio, 2016). For rural students who are Indigenous or from low-income backgrounds, the transitions may experience negative connotations rooted in structural inequities from earlier stages of their lives (Roscigno et al., 2006). Western and urban-centric educational norms emphasized in most postsecondary institutions often disadvantage students from

rural communities (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2019; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). A small corpus of research challenges the rural deficit perspective by attending to the home-grown values, networks, and priorities that are pivotal to student orientation and determination in new academic and social settings (Maltzan, 2006; Stone, 2014). Less recognized in the literature is how transitions align to individual students' unique trajectories and identities. Thus, understanding how rural students, with their complex identities (Maltzan, 2006; Tieken & San Antonio, 2016), navigate social, spatial, and temporal distances requires not only recognizing affordances and constraints within each ecological system, but also a careful analysis into how these factors interact and lead students in their perceptions and decision-making.

RURAL ALASKA

Forty-nine of Alaska's 54 school districts are considered primarily rural. Twelve districts have enrollments between 1,000 and 5,000 students, 32 enroll between 100 and 999 students, and 5 have enrollments below 100. The state's rural-urban achievement gaps persist in high school graduation rates (Tran & Hill, 2019) and post-secondary attendance (Hanson & Pierson, 2016). More than half of rural youth start working immediately after high school graduation (Hanson & Pierson, 2016), and many who attend postsecondary institutions return home before completing degrees (Knapp & Lowe, 2007). As of 2020, Alaska has 13 postsecondary institutions (Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, 2019). While some are located in rural hubs, the majority are situated in urban centers, meaning most rural students must leave their communities to pursue postsecondary education. This not only poses financial costs, but also carries broader social, cultural, and economic implications (Lowe, 2010). Although reviewing the intersectionality

of Alaska's rural students' identities and experiences is regrettably beyond the scope of this article, we acknowledge the geographic, historical, and cultural contexts that combine to form deep-seated tensions, trauma, as well as opportunities for the schooling of Alaska Native students who present the majority in both rural Alaska (80%) and our student sample (70%).

METHODS

Our data were generated in 2018 from a broader project to improve understanding and communication between Alaska rural students and postsecondary staff. We served as external evaluators and most of our work was highly specific to the program implementation, as our primary role was to help Alaska EXCEL, a non-profit organization that supports postsecondary and career readiness for rural students, to identify practical and useful strategies to improve its programming. However, some data were more broadly applicable and suitable for an empirical audience. Thus, we disclose our positionality around this analysis (Fischer, 2009): Tran was a first-generation university student in Vietnam who immigrated to the United States to pursue graduate studies and a research career. DeFeo transitioned to college with many identities and experiences dissimilar to those of the students in this study: White, middle-class, suburban, and third-generation college student. While noting our "agent" and "target" identities (Harro, 2000), respectively, and how they affected our own experiences and schema for the phenomenon of a college transition, we also acknowledge that neither of us are from rural places.

Alaska EXCEL identified potential participants, and we purposively selected for maximum variation (Patton, 1990) on attributes of community, institution, major, and demographics while remaining mindful of negative repercussions in deselection (DeFeo, 2013). Our participants—14 students and 14

staff—represent 10 programs across 6 postsecondary institutions. For the reader's ease in interpreting this article, student pseudonyms start with the letter "S" and staff pseudonyms start with the letter "P". Though the number of participants was largely determined by practical limitations and available resources, Guest et al. (2006) note saturation typically occurs within the first 12 interviews. As we collected data over several site visits and engaged in preliminary analyses in the fashion of emergent research design (Pailthorpe, 2017), we found participants generated rich and adequate data for robust analysis.

We chose an interpretive phenomenological approach for the study design (Moustakas, 1994), as we sought to offer insights to how individuals make sense of the phenomenon: transitioning from rural Alaska to a postsecondary institution. We used semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) to guide students to reflect on their transition experience in three parts (Seidman, 2006): 1) retrospective (e.g., the community where they grew up, their high school, decision-making processes and preconceptions around attending a postsecondary institution); 2) procedural (e.g., process for leaving home, responsibilities as a student and outside of school, interactions with others at home and in their new institution); and 3) reflective (e.g., challenges and supports, relationship between postsecondary pursuits and future plans). Staff were similarly guided to reflect on their past (e.g., their own schooling and postsecondary experiences, and how they came to work in the current position), present duties and responsibilities with respect to serving rural students, and interpretations (e.g., how they characterize the rural student transition experience, institution's areas of opportunities, and components of the transition experience that seem unique to rural students). Interviews ranged from 28 to 86 minutes (average of 54 minutes), and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

	Home	Skills and activities that characterize the transition experience	Postsecondary
Macrosystem	Small, close-knit community; rural values	<i>Navigate new cultural & social norms</i>	Large community; urban culture & expectations
Exosystem	Institutions emphasize community responsibility & membership	<i>Seek out institutional supports</i>	Institutions support personal growth and emphasize individual accountability
Mesosystem	Integrated & curated by adults; organic as entities share close contact	<i>Advocate for self & manage communications across entities</i>	Microsystem supports do not interact naturally & sometimes policies restrict their communication
Microsystem	Face-to-face, familiar relationships & friends	<i>Maintain old relationships; Make new relationships & friendships with strangers</i>	New relationships & connections

FIGURE 1. The Rural Student Transition Experience in an Ecological Framework. For rural students, the transition to postsecondary is characterized by marked changes at all levels of the human ecological systems.

For coding, we first isolated significant statements about the transition experience (Riemen, 1986) and then used provisional codes (Saldaña, 2015) to assign these data to one of the ecological systems. We next used axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2019) to identify the fundamental essences of codes within each ecological system. To enhance credibility (Patton, 1999), an initial codebook was developed collaboratively, and we each independently reviewed transcripts in their entirety, crosschecking and refining coding schemes through discussion. We engaged in continuous reflexive bracketing through dialogue and member-checking preliminary interpretations with Alaska EXCEL's staff and students, participating institutions, and statewide educators whose work focuses on postsecondary access and workforce development. These sharing included open discussion, and we adapted our analysis to include their insights as we re-read,

re-coded, and reconsidered transcript meanings in an iterative hermeneutic process.

FINDINGS

Our data reveal that rural students' postsecondary transition experience is characterized by changes at all levels of the HEF. Throughout the data, the chronosystem context represented itself through significant changes within each of the remaining systems. This offers the unique opportunity to explore the interdependency of students' support systems. Figure 1 summarizes our analysis and findings.

Macrosystem

At the *macrosystem* level, the transition was marked by changing community characteristics and culture. One significant difference was community size. Shantel shared: "Villages like [mine], they're actually pretty small and you can

get to anywhere within walking distance. But [here] it's bigger and more spread out, so it was just a little bit overwhelming." Being in a more urban setting meant students had to learn new ways for comporting themselves and navigating the community. Pearl noted, "even safety things [like] walking down the street is different, using the bike path instead of walking in the middle of the road." Parker called it, "a very steep learning curve," and noted that accessing resources, knowing where to find the post office, and using a discount card at the local grocery store were a lot for rural students to take in.

Both students and staff noted another significant *macro*-level change was the crowded nature of urban places. Students said, "They're not used to being around a lot of people." Selena mused: "How do people spend every day with all these people around them? How do people live this life and this be their normal life? . . . It was just curious to me that . . . it'd be normal to be surrounded by so many people all the time." Staff referred to "culture shock," explaining the difference between students' home communities of "500, 600, 800 [people where] there is a bond and a closeness," and a new place where they have to "deal with strangers immediately."

The challenge for rural students was not only with adjusting to the new culture, but also missing major community events at home, such as deaths, celebrations of life, or holidays. Pearl described this as "emotional trauma" noting that, "when there's a death the whole village comes around and is helping and involved in the whole process." As a result, students grappled with being away from their home culture while simultaneously learning to navigate a new one.

Exosystem

Navigating between high school and postsecondary academic expectations is a structural adjustment that did present in our data. However, for students in our study, the *exo*-level

transition was less about academic adjustment and more on the shifting priorities of these institutions. Collectively, home institutions supported membership and trajectories for youth to contribute to the broader community. Local labor markets exposed youth to careers available at home, such as heavy equipment operator, welder, or paramedic. As a result, students pursued programs that suited their interests and aptitudes, but which would also lead to jobs in their home communities upon graduation. Tribes and local workforce organizations, other key *exosystems*, supported youth career development—and by extension, post-secondary planning—by helping students to attend "postsecondary school for some kind of industrial [training], something they can come back to the village and do." Recalling the resources received at home, Selena stressed, "It really depends on village to village. Each village is not the same as the next. They're very unique in their culture, in the way of doing things, how their tribal council is run, how their school is run." Altogether, students spoke favorably about the supportive nature of the communities back home and found their membership affirmed, even when they were away for school.

In transitions, students not only encountered a new institutional context for school, but also for community. In their orientations, besides introductions to campus programs, students were told about off-campus resources, such as churches, recreational programs, and civic organizations. During their brief introduction that was conducted in a "speed-dating" format, community entities expressed availability to support students in a variety of ways, stressing their structure as utilitarian. Students, as individuals, could access these resources to meet their personal needs if they initiated help-seeking. Patrick said that rural students often found it "uncomfortable . . . to ask for help" in this manner, as they were used to smaller communities where, as Pamela described, entities

routinely reached out to “help the student in one way or another.” While the new *exosystems* were structured to offer students opportunities and resources, students needed more guidance to approach and access them.

Mesosystem

Rural students' transitions were also characterized by changes in how support was coordinated. At home rural communities, students were accustomed to a *mesosystem* where players organically connected with one another. At postsecondary, because of geographical distance, campus size, or *exo*-level policy such as FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), many student supporting agents did not naturally talk to one another. As an example of these differing expectations, Phil noted that high school counselors—not students—often called him to make arrangements for students. Patricia explained how this was problematic, saying, “Even though these entities are helping, they could also be hurting in the long run if we're not allowing the student to be the person conducting the business.” Phil and Patricia's comments reveal the shifting nature in *mesosystem* relationships—that, as students entered a new life phase, they would be responsible for curating.

Though the shift in relationship management is ubiquitous for adolescents, students from rural communities also needed to learn protocols for communicating in a larger institutional context. Phil gave an example:

I'll have people call from small villages and they'll say, “Hey, it's John. I just wanted to see how this was coming along. Give me a call back.” So many people are applying named John, so many. I don't know who he is, and he didn't leave his number. But where he comes from, he's John and everyone knows how to get a hold of him.

Students acknowledged efforts put forth by postsecondary personnel in forming relationships

with community partners to accommodate their needs; however, the responsibility and self-reliance to manage *meso* relationships and intrasystem communication themselves remained as significant adjustments—both in needing to do it and in developing the skills to do it effectively.

Microsystem

For the students in our study, postsecondary transitions were marked by the changing nature of their *microsystem* relationships with family, friends, instructors, and community members. Staff noted that there are no roads to most rural Alaska communities, meaning that the trip to college entailed a series of flights, starting on small planes, and easily totaling more than \$1,000. Parents from rural communities were usually unable to afford the “overbearing” cost of accompanying their students to “send them off.” As Patrick said, typically, “You'd have your parents drive you to the school and say goodbye. That's not gonna happen [for rural Alaska students].” This not only changed the nature of the “drop off” for the students, but also affected parents' relationship to the institution. Parents did not see the campus and community where their young-adult child would be residing and learning. As Parker said, “They don't have so much of the buy-in” to the place, or a shared schema for what happened there.

Rural students' transition experience was also characterized by missing family; Shantel struggled with “go[ing] to school without seeing my children or hearing from them every single day.” While attending postsecondary, students maintained relationships with family and friends, but it was different from what they were accustomed. Sally recalled frequent phone calls with her family: “My mom [and] my sisters . . . made me think back of how motivated I was to learn . . . and I pushed myself through.” Though the postsecondary institutions promoted videoconference technology as a means to stay in

touch with home, this did not work for rural students who noted spotty Internet connectivity in their communities. Shay said, “Where I lived, there was like no Internet at all. One of the [only] areas you can get Internet was . . . at the high school.”

Another significant part of the transition experience was about developing new *micro* relationships. The close-knit context where rural students learned friend-making skills often did not translate well to urban settings. Selena explained, “You were going to classes with the same people from kindergarten to high school. You don’t really have to become familiar with unfamiliar people. So, it’s harder to become comfortable in a classroom in college.” Phil noted that meeting new people is a skill, and that for many rural students: “They haven’t had a lot of practice in making new friends, meeting new people, engaging in a community that’s not their own.” For many students in our study, postsecondary transitions marked the first experience of building and nurturing social relationships in a new place.

Staff were aware that rural students’ distance from home—both physically in miles and figuratively in culture—meant a different transition experience, and they provided extra support. Several staff mentioned working to build relationships as soon as students were admitted through regular “check-in” phone calls. As a recipient of this practice, Sasha noted,

[Those calls] made me feel comfortable when I first met them, . . . I never ever met them before, only talked to them on the phone, never seen how they looked, and when I met them, I was like, “Oh, now I know you.”

Pearl said, “I try to do some personal get-to-know you and I can usually pinpoint students that [have] . . . the potential to be really homesick,” and Patricia would facilitate introductions between students and other campus staff “so

[they would] feel less scared.” In addition, the staff were aware that students needed to make friends with peers, thus organized social activities (e.g., pizza night, talking circles, and sport tournaments) for students to connect with one another.

Students recognized these efforts and credited staff with facilitating their adjustment, and noted that having a support system was a critical turning point when assessing their potential *fit*. Sean described how he instinctively understood the need to make new friends, and attributed campus engagement as central to his positive experience: “Through these activities, I got to meet a lot of new people and meet new friends . . . That’s what really helped me, because then . . . I wasn’t feeling out of place here.” For students in our study, meaningful relationships with campus personnel and peers helped to mediate the striking differences between their well-acquainted ecological systems at home and the new postsecondary environment.

DISCUSSION AND SIGNIFICANCE

A growing body of literature acknowledges the wealth of knowledge in rural communities and the unique way of how location, people, ethnicity, and culture intersect and empower youth (Alleman & Holly, 2013; Gram-Hanssen, 2018). However, around postsecondary transitions, the experience of rural students are typically neglected (Meece et al., 2014) or portrayed through urban normalization critiques that promote acclimation (Corbett, 2015; Tinto, 1987). Our study notes the importance of endorsing students’ home and community in their postsecondary planning by regarding transitions as embedded in larger and interconnected systems of social and cultural relationships. In our study, student participants time-traveled to the past, present, and future, recollecting sources and interactions that carried important implications for their own transitions. In their own voices,

students and staff told stories of navigating urban places and cultural norms, advocating for themselves, and forming new relationships. While previous research concentrated on partial components of the HE systems (Bowman et al., 2019; Renn & Arnold, 2003) or used quantitative analyses to detect relationships among them (Byun et al., 2017; Demi et al., 2010), our phenomenological interview method and descriptive analysis reveal a more dynamic, fluid, and interconnected process than typically construed. This suggests an opportunity to re-conceptualize rural student positioning and agency in transition literature.

Changes at All Levels of the HEF

Transitioning from high school is among the most difficult developmental challenges confronting adolescents (Lapan et al., 2003). Our analysis found that rural students' transition experience is marked by changes at all levels of the HEF. This resonates with previous HEF-based research on immigrants and international students whose transition processes are also riddled with demographic shifts, incremental challenges, and complex needs to adapt academically, logistically, emotionally, and socially to new environments (Stebbleton, 2011; Zhang, 2018). Although documenting a different student population compared to the one in our study, Stebleton (2011) and Zhang (2018) also applied the HEF to explore a comprehensive approach to interpret the interactions between students and their environments (Stebbleton, 2011). Aligned to these literatures, our data suggest that because rural students' identities are intermixed with community membership and cultural affiliation, their transition experience is more identity-disrupting, and hence differs from students who have more urban familiarity.

Temporary Nature of the Transition Experience and its Implications for Career Technical Education (CTE)

Characterized through the lens of tension and conflict, rural students are often portrayed choosing between their future prospects and their "roots," a choice wrought with guilt for leaving home and concerns for family and community during their absence (Hlinka et al., 2015). Our study recruitment yielded a large number of CTE students, who chose career pathways correlated with home labor markets. Though experiencing challenges with the transition itself, these students were resolute in their plans, often reflecting on the relationship between their intended community-based employment plans and their postsecondary education. Students in our study tended to view this transition as a temporary separation—a segue that would allow them to later return to home communities or gravitate towards the rural places that resonated with their personalities and worldviews.

Contrary to assertions that higher education creates a "brain drain" from small and rural communities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Sherman & Sage, 2011), our findings highlight postsecondary personnel's acknowledgement of home relationships and how they leveraged those strengths to improve their practices of supporting rural students. Our study offers suggestions for a coherent career development framework (Crain, 2018)—one that connects students' career choices to their community membership and values, and considers the role of rural identities in harmonizing their post-secondary experience with their future plans.

Collective Resilience and Strength

Though rural schools and communities are diverse (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016), rural students' postsecondary pursuits are often represented as a process permeated with individual

and contextual barriers (Irvin et al., 2012). Our analysis underscores the jarring changes and challenges that rural students experience during their postsecondary transitions, but more importantly, documents their resilience and use of supports. Connection with home community, while significantly influencing rural student's transitions and how they perceived challenges, was a motivator—not a detractor—and our data show the potential and wealth of locally-based resources that can act as a “cohesive force” (Alleman & Holly, 2013, p. 7) by offering mentorship, positive relationships, and career development opportunities (Isernhagen, 2010). An ecologically-informed approach emphasizes the relationship between an individual and multiple levels of their environments, but its principal characteristic lies in the relationship's reciprocity. Our study not only adds to the growing literature that challenges deficit paradigms around rural students' social and cultural capital (Petrin et al., 2014; Schmidt-Wilson et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005), but frames their successes as a collective accomplishment (Sommerfeld, 2016).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our analysis offers some considerations for policy and practice. In the HEF model, policies are generally developed at the outer systems, but our data provide insight to how those policies should correspond with the inner-system context of family, school, and community. These include investing in local school-based supports, and local control around which broad-based policies are implemented. As it pertains to postsecondary preparation, supporting students in career exploration that suits their personal aspirations and is harmonious with their home community and cultural context are just as important as supporting them academically (Lapan et al., 2003). We recommend

that policymakers promote the vibrancy of rural communities by increasing the visibility regional and local employment opportunities in career development curricula, allowing those with desire and aspiration to live in their home communities with viable and visible pathways to do so (Wright, 2012).

From a practical standpoint, a range of empirical research demonstrates that students' educational outcomes improve when they receive assistance to solve challenges outside of classroom, addressing the “little-things” or “day-to-day” needs (Howley et al., 2013). Our analysis highlights the value of supports provided to students as they prepare to move to postsecondary institutions, relocate, and adjust to their new environments, particularly those that help students to make social connections and establish a sense of belonging (Nora, 2004) prior to and during the move. Previous research encouraged institutions to be more culturally responsive in how they support students in navigating the complex and inequitable geographies of postsecondary by realizing, accepting, and celebrating their values and identities (Hlinka et al., 2015; Petrin et al., 2014). By parsing the intersection of the HEF levels to the transition process, we provide some context for responsive and flexible planning (Howley et al., 2013), and note that, though in tight fiscal circumstances institutions often cut nonacademic programs and services, these are crucial for rural students.

Our data underscore the value of strengths-based, multi-level supports. To help students cope with the new cultural norms and expectations during the transitions, we recommend institutions and staff to keep in mind the roles of family, high school contacts, guidance personnel, and the new network of support, such as new classmates, churches, and community members when developing strategies. During member-checking, participants reminded us that families whose young adult children move for postsecondary also experience an ecological

transition of their own, suggesting supports and trust should run vertically throughout the HEF.

LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Though our data are rich, our study contains some significant limitations. First, data were collected as part of a broader project to explore how students and staff characterize rural students' postsecondary transitions and to identify practical and implementable changes for participating institutions. The interviews delved into immediate systems, and we did not set out to ask students about *meso*-, *exo*-, or *macro*systems; had we designed our instrument with an ecological framework in mind, we would have better probed relationships at other HE levels. Because our phenomenological interview approach yielded organic sharing of stories that readily presented different HE influences, we are encouraged that our work is "on to something," but there is an opportunity to inquire these levels more deliberately in subsequent studies.

Because of the original applications intended for our data, our study includes only the viewpoints of students and postsecondary staff. How other members—especially those in students' home communities—perceive and navigate students' transitions is an area of research opportunity. We recommend a more comprehensive data collection with other stakeholders (e.g., family members, high school personnel, and community members) to truly illuminate the transition experience within a HEF, and better understand policy, community, and cultural aspects of postsecondary transitions. The context in which we structured data collection also limited our ability to probe how intersectional aspects of identities (Terman, 2020)—within and beyond rural identities (Metzler, 2020)—affected students'

experience. Given the scant literature considering Alaska's history of colonialism including boarding schools (Barnhardt, 2001), this is a significant area of further research opportunity.

Recruitment for the study was facilitated by our community partner, resulting in potential sampling biases: most of our student participants attended CTE programs and community colleges. Additionally, the postsecondary institutions and staff within them volunteered for the study, and this reflects their preexisting commitment to better serving rural students. Though our participants' insights are encouraging, there is an opportunity to look at the experiences of students who have less support, those who are nontraditional-aged, and those who pursue academic programs that do not readily translate to employment opportunities in their home communities. There is also an opportunity to study the experiences of staff and students at larger institutions that are less able to personalize student services. Despite these noted limitations, the depth and volume of our data shed light on some aspects of the rural student transition experience; we hope that the details provided allow readers to adequately ascertain the context for our analysis and to apply our findings in service of students, communities, and future research.

CONCLUSION

Career aspirations for rural youth are often characterized dichotomously as a struggle between attachments to family and place versus desire for educational and career mobility (San Antonio, 2016). Our study notes that these ambitions are not always mutually exclusive, and our ultimate question, therefore, lays in how schools best support students' educational and professional development in alignment with their personal values and individuality as they begin to articulate who they have been, and decide who they are becoming. In our research and our own

journeys as an immigrant to the United States and a “transplant” to Alaska, we are coming to regard *belonging* and *connection* not as a “pull and push” (Demi et al., 2010; Hlinka et al., 2015) between the spaces we inhabit and have inhabited, but rather as experiences to be continually negotiated in the context of our own ecological development. In this reflection, and the struggle that it entails, we find beauty and meaning in the experience itself.

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