Theoretical Exploration

Rural Transition Theory:

A Theory for Rural Midwestern Students Moving to College

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*Students from the rural Midwest who are preparing to enter college do so with a unique combination of challenges stemming from the fact that many rural students are first-generation and low-income with little exposure to diverse populations (Howley, 2006). To best explain and explore their transition to America’s college campuses, Schlossberg’s transition theory, Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction, and Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson’s White Racial Consciousness Model are used as a framework to propose the rural transition theory. This theory provides student affairs practitioners with a deep understanding of the population so that rural students can be best supported.*

Each day in the United States, elementary school children are taught that America is a land of prosperous progress. Textbooks illustrate and reinforce this idea of progress by using examples that demonstrate how American society has evolved from a nation of rural farming communities, to a nation of urban manufacturing communities (Theobald & Wood, 2010). While urban and suburban students may feel empowered to be on the progressive side of these illustrations, rural students reading the same textbooks are made to feel less than (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Additionally, standardized K-12 curriculum in the United States has provided an identity development narrative for rural students around the ideas that “big cities are better than small towns” and “students from big schools are better than students from small schools” (Theobald & Wood, 2010, p. 28). Although this subliminal messaging may not seem important, studies have shown that incoming college students from rural areas believe that they are less confident and less academically prepared for the rigors of college than students from other areas (Higher Education Research Institute, 2002; Schaft & Youngblood-Jackson, 2010). Coupling this lack of confidence with the socially ingrained idea that being from a rural area makes rural students less than their urban counterparts, it is apparent that rural students face a difficult transition into the collegiate environment.

For the purposes of this discussion, rural students will be defined as those growing up in an education desert, meaning they live more than 25 miles from a college or university (Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018). Although living in an education desert provides criteria for what makes someone a rural student, all education deserts look different. Because of the potential variance between rural students from across the United States, this paper is focused on rural students from the Midwest. The Midwest can be difficult to define geographically, but for this discussion the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas are considered the Midwest (Anderson, 2014).

In general, rural students may begin college with a lack of confidence in their academic abilities and, in addition, are often
the first in their family to attend college (Howley, 2006). Looking at rural communities in the Midwest specifically, many are also from low-income communities with mostly White residents (Howley, 2006). Out of all the rural areas in the United States, four-fifths of people residing there are White (Drum, 2017). This implies that once rural students arrive on campus, they face an additional challenge in assimilating as only 29% of traditional-aged students from rural areas attend college (Pappano, 2017). When this number is compared to the college enrollment rates of urban and suburban students—47.7% and 42.3% respectively (NCES, 2015)—it becomes clear that rural students may struggle when transitioning to a college environment where they are a geographic minority. These factors indicate that students from the rural Midwest may struggle to transition to the collegiate environment and demonstrate that there is a need for a theory that explains the tumultuous transition period that rural students face.

One factor that influences many rural students’ transition to college is being first-generation, meaning that neither parent has completed a bachelor’s degree (First Generation, n.d.). First-generation students are often considered an at-risk population with regard to student persistence and retention because they complete college at lower rates than their peers (Hand & Miller Payne, 2008). Specifically, only 56% of first-generation students earn a bachelor’s degree or are still enrolled in college within six years (Forrest Cataldi, Bennett, & Xianglei Chen, 2018). Comparatively, the college completion rate for continuing generation students is 74% (Forrest Cataldi, Bennett, & Xianglei Chen, 2018). The low college completion rates for rural students indicate a need for better support at the collegiate level. The rural transition theory aims to educate practitioners on common experiences of rural students so they can best support their students from such backgrounds.

Since each of the experiences described above—being first-generation, low-income, and coming from a predominantly White community—have different developmental implications, Schlossberg’s transition theory (2006), Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction (2002), and Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinsons’s White Racial Consciousness Model (1994) will be used to provide a comprehensive look at the experiences of rural students as they transition from rural areas to college campuses. These theories will serve as a framework for the rural transition theory as they each explain an aspect of the transition faced by rural students, but none alone truly explain the experience of rural students. Put together, however, these theories begin to describe potential deficits that rural students overcome as they transition to life on campus. By organizing aspects of these three theories, the rural transition theory provides a framework for student affairs practitioners to better understand and support rural students.

Although literature on each of these theories has been tied to the transition of diverse student populations (Griffin & Gilbert, 2016; Tzanakis, 2011; Wolff, 2009), the tie to the experiences of rural students is heavily under researched (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). In an effort towards filling this gap, this paper reviews literature related to the rural experience and college student development to propose the rural transition theory. The theory proposed analyzes how rural students transition to life on campus in order to provide student affairs practitioners with the knowledge needed to best support rural students.

**Literature Review**
In developing a transition theory for rural college students, existing literature was reviewed to provide a base understanding of the population and theories utilized. First, rural culture and K-12 educational experiences of rural students in the Midwest are summarized. This is followed by a discussion of college student development theories relevant to rural student’s transition to life on campus.

**Rural Culture: United States Midwest**

In 1947, Eugene Griffin of the *Chicago Tribune* (as cited in Anderson, 2014) stated that “The American middle west produces more benefits for humanity today than any region on earth” (p. 3). Although this statement refers to both the urban and rural areas of the Midwest, the article as a whole placed emphasis on the farming contributions of rural Midwestern states, citing that 50% of the nation’s dairy supply, and 80% of the total corn crop were produced in the Midwest at the time (Anderson, 2014). Additionally, more students graduated from high school in the Midwest than in any other region, and the Midwest produced the highest voter turnout in the country. Despite the well-documented history of a flourishing society, the “dominant narrative of the post [World War II] and contemporary rural Midwest…is one of decline rather than leadership, essentialness, and vitality” (Anderson, 2014, p. 4). It is widely debated when the contributions of rural farmers became less valued within society, but a combination of factors such as the industrial revolution and an increasing body of literature painting those from rural areas as “hillbillies” certainly contributed to the view that those from rural areas are less than (Theobald & Wood, 2010, p. 24). The effects of the industrial revolution and negative stereotypes in the rural Midwest continue to be relevant, most recently revealing itself in the 2016 presidential election when Donald Trump’s promises of increasing job opportunities, changes to trade agreements, and tighter United States borders won over rural voters who were tired of competing for few jobs (Balz, 2018).

Young students in rural areas are not immune to the literary and media messages portrayed before, during, and after the 2016 election that glorify the process of leaving a small, rural town for the big city and paint their communities as uneducated. When students work towards a college degree, such messages are reinforced within a system that maintains them resulting in “sever[ed] attachment to place,” or a lower desire to return home after degree completion (Schaft & Youngblood-Jackson, 2010, p. 2). Since these ideas are often communicated to students beginning in elementary school, it is necessary to discuss the K-12 educational experiences of rural students.

**K-12 Educational experiences**

Rural students are conditioned to believe that they are less than their nonrural counterparts through textbook messaging, and even self-reported that they would be behind academically when beginning college (Theobald & Wood, 2010). In addition to feeling underprepared and less than, a 2012 study by Byun, Meece, and Irvin reported ways that pre-collegiate factors impact the postsecondary educational outcomes of rural youth. These factors included coming from an area with a high poverty rate, having parents that did not attend college, having parents that held students to a lower academic standard, and limited access to career counseling and college preparatory programs at the high school level. (Byun et al., 2012). Said study investigated this topic further to determine which of these factors had the biggest impact on college enrollment. It was found
that rural students were less likely to even enroll in college due to their lower socioeconomic background than nonrural students.

Another factor that often impacts students who attend secondary school in a rural area is school district consolidation. School district consolidation occurs when many small schools are combined into one larger, centrally located school in order to standardize education and ameliorate tension between local and state government (Butler-Flora & Flora, 2013). In the process of school district consolidation, small schools are branded as inefficient, as most of the schools closed during consolidation are those in rural areas (Butler-Flora & Flora, 2013). This process has perpetuated the idea that schools, educators, and students in rural areas are less than their nonrural counterparts.

**Schlossberg’s Transition Theory**

Schlossberg’s transition theory defines a transition as any occurrence, no matter how relevant, that changes a person’s “relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). According to those criteria, students moving from rural areas to college campuses are facing a significant transition as their relationships with family and friends, daily routines, assumptions about others, and roles within their community are subject to change. Once it is determined that a transition is taking place, the type, context, and impact of the transition become important to understand. As transitions can take significant amounts of time to conclude, Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) use the phrases “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out” to organize the experiences and feelings one has while enduring a transition. Finally, Schlossberg’s theory details factors on how individuals cope with transition. These factors are termed the 4 S’s of transition and include situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman et al., 2006). According to Schlossberg, the success of a transition depends upon the amount of resources students have in each of these four areas.

An example of the resources students use to facilitate a successful transition to college lies within the “self” category of resources that Schlossberg outlines. Within the “self” category are two types of resources; personal characteristics and psychological resources (Goodman et al., 2006). Rural students may lack the personal characteristics and psychological resources needed to successfully transition to college because of the fact that their parents may have held them to a lower academic standard, and they may have had limited access to career counseling and college preparatory programs in high school (Byun et al., 2012). These factors indicate a lack of opportunity to develop the personal characteristics needed for collegiate success, as well as a lack of access to psychological resources. Noting these potential deficits, Schlossberg’s transition theory is used to frame the ways in which rural students may struggle to adjust to the collegiate environment.

**Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Reproduction**

Another aspect of development for rural students transitioning to the campus environment has to do with their introduction to an educational environment that “creates, maintains, and reproduces inequality” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 250). This concept can cause dissonance for students from rural areas as they may begin to understand the systemic reasoning as to why their rural community is considered inefficient (Schaft & Youngblood-Jackson, 2010). In general, dissonance occurs for
students when they experience a situation that involves differences in attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. Such dissonance can cause a feeling of discomfort that leads to a change in the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors in the hopes of reducing the discomfort experienced (Mcleod, 2018). When rural students begin to interact with students, professors, and ideas that are different from their upbringing, it can cause dissonance during the transition to college.

The dissonance students experience can be analyzed through the concepts of field, habitus, and capital discussed in Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction (2002). The term field is used to describe the different aspects of a person’s social life where people from both dominant and nondominant groups compete for power. Related to field is habitus, which is a person’s understanding and articulation of the social norms used within each field. Within each field, people use capital to get ahead (Bourdieu, 2002). Capital can be economic, cultural, and social where each type can be used to increase “status, wealth, and power in a world of competition over scarce resources” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 250).

When exploring the necessity of Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction within the context of rural students, it is important to consider the concept of habitus. Habitus can be viewed as a form of “cultural inheritance” that “reflects class or position…in a variety of fields” (Tzanakis, 2011, p. 77). It has been established that rural Midwest students often enter college from a background where they are painted as less than their nonrural peers and may not be privy to the type of cultural inheritance that sets others up for collegiate success. As the theory of social reproduction serves to explore environmental and social inequality, it is necessary for the framing of the rural transition theory.

**Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson’s White Racial Consciousness Model**

According to Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson, White racial consciousness is “one’s awareness of being White and what that implies in relation to those who do not share White group membership” (1994, pp. 133-134). This model goes on to describe that people’s response to dissonance is what causes the condition for change in racial attitudes. For students from the rural communities outlined above where four-fifths of the population is White (Drum, 2017), spending time on a college campus—even within a primarily White institution—can cause racial dissonance. Examining how rural students in particular respond to said dissonance is an important piece in understanding their transition and is why this model is an integral part of the framework surrounding the rural transition theory.

Once White people from rural areas experience dissonance, they may exhibit a variety of attitudes that are organized into two categories: unachieved White racial consciousness and achieved White racial consciousness (Rowe et al., 1994). Attitudes within each category are not linear and people can move through a variety of attitudes based on the situation with which they are faced. Movement between categories results from dissonance, meaning that rural students have the potential to move within these categories frequently throughout their transition to college. Unachieved White racial consciousness is comprised by avoidant, dependent, and dissonant attitudes, whereas achieved White racial consciousness includes attitudes that are dominative, conflictive, and reactive (Rowe et al., 1994). The final attitude is termed integrative and does not fit inside of the two categories. Integration occurs when people who are White exhibit an
understanding of what it means to be White and make a commitment to social change in response (Rowe et al., 1994).

**Rural Students and Their Transition to College**

In order to propose the rural transition theory, research on existing student development theories are used within the context of rural communities and the rural K-12 experience. In doing this, student affairs practitioners will gain a greater understanding of how to best support rural students as they transition to college. As Schlossberg’s theory suggests, any student, regardless of rural or nonrural status, faces a period of transition when beginning college. The pieces of this theory that look different for rural students are the degree to which they experience transition, as well as the ways in which the 4 S’s are utilized. The application of Schlossberg’s theory provides insight into the transition of rural students, but because of the complexity of the transition rural students face, the rural transition theory integrates Schlossberg’s theory with Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction and Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinsons’s White Racial Consciousness Model.

Schlossberg provides four criteria—relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles—that help people determine whether or not a transition is taking place (Goodman et al., 2006). Any student moving to a college environment is bound to face transition in at least one of the above criteria, but for rural students who often are first-generation college students with little guidance on what to expect from college (Byun et al., 2012), change is experienced in all four areas. For example, student’s relationships with their families may change as they become the most formally educated person in their family. Additionally, student’s schedules are likely to change from their rigid high school schedule, their assumptions about others will be challenged as they move to an environment that is more diverse than their predominantly White hometown, and the role they play in their community is likely to change now that they are no longer full-time residents.

To assist in coping with the level of change they are experiencing, rural students utilize their assets within the 4 S’s, as discussed above, to best navigate change (Goodman et al., 2006). While all students will utilize such strategies to facilitate a successful transition to collegiate life, the way such strategies are used looks different for rural students. One type of support includes support from a family unit. As many rural college students are first-generation, they will not always be able to rely on their family unit for the same level of support and guidance as their nonrural peers.

In regard to Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction, the fact that both rural and nonrural students enter the same colleges means that they have reached the same field. Within this field, however, dominant and nondominant groups compete for power. In many instances, White, rural students from the Midwest will find spaces in which they are the dominant group, but in other ways rural students may find themselves members of a nondominant group of first-generation, or low-income students. Because rural students can often be first-generation and low-income, they enter the field of college with lower habitus, or understanding of the social norms used on a college campus. Economic, cultural, and social capital are other factors students can use to get ahead within the collegiate environment. As it is likely that rural students come from school districts that have been consolidated with other schools in the area, such schools may have had less
economic capital per pupil than large urban or suburban schools (Butler-Flora & Flora, 2013). This lack of capital can translate into less access to college counseling and career preparation programs, contributing to the self-reported attitude of rural students stating that they will be academically behind in college compared to their nonrural peers (Byun et al., 2012; Theobald & Wood, 2010).

Although rural students may experience being a minoritized group in some ways, it is likely that rural students from the Midwest will find themselves in a racial majority on the primarily White college campus. Despite this, rural students from majority White Midwest towns may experience dissonance within an environment that is slightly more diverse and will move frequently through the types of attitudes outlined in Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinsons’s White Racial Consciousness Model (1994). The major difference between rural and nonrural students here is the attitude with which they start college. Nonrural White students, especially those in urban areas, have had many opportunities to experience and react to dissonance as “Whites have become a minority population in most urban counties since 2000” (Mitchell, 2018). Because nonrural students have had greater exposure to people who are not White, they are more likely to possess an attitude within the category of achieved or integrated White racial consciousness and will experience less racial dissonance when they get to campus. For rural students from areas that are nearly 90 percent White (Mitchell, 2018), they may start college possessing an attitude within the category of unachieved White racial consciousness and experience dissonance as they begin to navigate the same environment as others who do not look like them. Such dissonance can be mentally exhausting, causing students to move in and out of achieved and unachieved White racial consciousness, inhibiting growth in other areas.

Figure 1 below organizes and summarizes the three theories that provide the conceptual framework for the rural transition theory alongside the ways in which components of each theory look different for rural students. Although the three aforementioned theories—Schlossberg’s transition theory, Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction, and Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson’s White Racial Consciousness Model—provide insight into an aspect of the transition that rural students face when living on campus, none alone provide a complete picture of the phenomena observed when rural students make the transition to attending college. In layering these three theories, the rural transition theory emerges to best explain the holistic experiences of rural students in a way that student affairs practitioners can apply to best meet the needs of their rural students.

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<th>Theory</th>
<th>Proposed Difference 1</th>
<th>Proposed Difference 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Schlossberg’s Transition Theory</td>
<td>Degree to which the 4 S’s are utilized</td>
<td>How the 4 S’s are utilized</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rural students experience changes to all four criteria used to define transition</td>
<td>First-generation status means that students will be less likely to depend on their family unit for guidance, and must use other assets to cope with transition</td>
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When professionals in the fields of higher education and student affairs familiarize themselves with the rural transition theory, they will learn the ways that the transition to college may look different for rural students. In addition, understanding that many Midwest rural students are first-generation, low-income, and from mostly White communities will allow professionals to best design programs and establish cultures that will facilitate growth for rural students. As stated, rural students may also enter college with low confidence in their ability to achieve academically. Student affairs professionals working in any department can help build the confidence of rural students by validating their experiences and supporting them through college completion.

Another functional area where this research can be useful is residence life. Student affairs professionals working in residence life environments face the challenge of creating an environment where students from all backgrounds can learn and live. An understanding of rural student development can help professionals predict conflicts that might arise and provide context as to why students from rural areas may possess the beliefs or attitudes that they do. Additionally, a basic understanding of the societal and educational factors that contribute to the upbringing of rural students is important and encourages student affairs professionals in all areas to check their biases in regard to rural students and communities.

From a research standpoint, it is clear that further investigation on the experiences of rural students is necessary (Byun et al., 2012). In order to validate the rural transition theory, a longitudinal study of rural students should be conducted beginning with ethnographic interviews of students in secondary school, with interviews repeated throughout their collegiate experiences. Such a study could help to validate the rural transition theory and provide general information on the experiences of rural students who are pursuing a college education that could be used to inform a broader and more inclusive theory on rurality in college.

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<th>Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Reproduction</th>
<th>Habitus</th>
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<td>Rural students possess less habitus than their nonrural peers as they will likely have a lower understanding of the social norms used on the college campus</td>
<td>Lack of economic capital within rural K-12 school districts results in less college preparation in high school, leading to less social capital at the collegiate level</td>
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<tr>
<th>Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson’s White Racial Consciousness Model</th>
<th>Attitudes with which students start college</th>
<th>Degree to which dissonance is experienced</th>
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<tr>
<td>Due to low exposure to racial differences, rural students are more likely than their nonrural peers to enter college with an attitude of unachieved White racial consciousness</td>
<td>Rural students experience increased dissonance when moving from rural towns that are almost 90% White, to more diverse college campuses</td>
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Figure 1. Rural Transition Theoretical Variance
Further research should also be conducted on the experiences of rural students of color transitioning to college. Since the rural transition theory focuses on the experiences of rural students in the Midwest with majority white residents (Howley, 2006), its direct application is limited to that population. Additional research on rural students of color transitioning to college campuses would bring beneficial knowledge to practitioners, especially in rural areas in the Western United States with high populations of Hispanic students (Pohl, 2017).

Conclusion

As students from rural areas continue to pursue four-year degrees as a way to find the progressive and prosperous America written in their childhood textbooks, it is necessary for student affairs practitioners to familiarize themselves with the experiences of rural students and understand how those differ from nonrural students. By examining Schlossberg’s transition theory, Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction, and Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson’s White Racial Consciousness Model coupled with the cultural context of rural communities, the rural transition theory has been developed. Moving forward, the transition rural students face when starting college is an area that requires further research. The adjustments suggested to each of the foundational theories in the creation of the rural transition theory demonstrate that rural students experience increased dissonance in the collegiate environment, and that supportive, informed professionals can support students as they overcome barriers, grow, and complete their degree.

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