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Seeds of Resilience: Navigating College Transition, Belonging, and Persistence among Rural Latinx Undergraduates from California's San Joaquin Valley

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Daniel Ulises Rios Arroyo

Committee in charge:

Professor Mayra Puente, Chair

Professor Richard Duran

Professor Rebeca Mireles-Rios

September 2024

The dissertation of Daniel Ulises Rios Arroyo is approved.

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Mayra Puente, Committee Chair

August 2024

Seeds of Resilience: Navigating College Transition, Belonging, and Persistence among Rural Latinx Undergraduates from California's San Joaquin Valley

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by

Daniel Ulises Rios Arroyo

Dedication

To the land that serves as one of the largest food distributors in the United States, contributing billions of dollars to the national economy, yet where the people who cultivate and harvest the land often face high rates of poverty and racial discrimination due to their brownness, I dedicate this dissertation to the San Joaquin Valley. Specifically, this dissertation is dedicated con mucho cariño to the migrant and immigrant Latinx farm working families who are frequently overlooked by policy and research yet whose labor continues to be exploited for economic gain. Despite these challenges, we remain resilient. Through my research, I am committed to uplifting our voices and advocating for educational and social equity. Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to the research collaborators: Annie, Mimi, Taylor, Jose, Juan, Blue, Alicia, Catherine, Isabella, Alondra, Maria, Sofia, Jazel, Grace, and Sally. Thank you for entrusting me with your stories. Each of you represents the commitment we have to our rural Latinx communities. Your stories highlight that rural Latinx farm working families not only make significant contributions to the U.S. economy but also play vital roles in enriching and improving our communities in countless ways. ¡Mil gracias!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Hechelen ganas a la escuela para que no trabajen en el fil." These were the words my parents repeated to me and my older brother the night before each new school year. Their hope for us has always been the attainment of a college degree.

To my father: As a young child without your presence, I often resented your absence. I did not understand why you had to be en el norte instead of with your family in Mexico. Now, having graduated from UCLA, one of the best public universities in the country, and having earned a doctorate degree from UCSB, I wish I could go back in time and tell my younger self that your absence was not due to a lack of love, but because you were working tirelessly to build a better future for us in the United States. You sacrificed more than ten years away from your family, and now your two sons have bachelor's degrees and, in your family, hay un doctor.

Para mi madre: No hay palabras para expresar cuánto te amo. Eres la mujer más trabajadora que conozco. Empezaste a trabajar en el campo apenas tres días después de que llegamos a Estados Unidos. Gracias por ser la mejor madre para Luis, Lupita y para mí. Siempre me has motivado para lograr mis objetivos y no hay un día en el que no me digas lo orgullosa que estás de mí. Hemos pasado por muchas cosas juntos, navegando por los diferentes tipos de instituciones en los Estados Unidos. Lamento las ocasiones en las que no pude traducir con precisión durante las visitas médicas y por aprovecharme de la situación al no traducir correctamente a propósito cuando mis maestros me pidieron que te dijera que no había entregado la tarea (lo sé no siempre puede ser el hijo perfecto). Escuchar sobre tus experiencias de infancia y cómo creciste en la pobreza y cómo te sacaron de la escuela en tercer grado para ayudar económicamente a tu familia siempre ha sido mi motivación para algún día pagarte por tus sacrificios. Por último, finalmente tengo una respuesta a la

pregunta que me hacías cada verano: ¿cuándo terminarás? Has estado en la escuela durante tantos años. Bueno……. ¡ya terminé!

To my older brother: You have always been a role model in life. As young kids, we were both scared to leave Mexico and dreaded going to school in the United States. I remember our first day of school when I faked being sick to avoid going to school. Later that day, you came back and said, "It is not as bad; there are a lot of Mexican kids." Thank you for always being the best big brother. You have always motivated me to accomplish my goals. I am so proud of all your achievements. We are living proof that when Mexico sends its people, they are sending hard-working men who will one day earn college degrees. I guess that makes us bad hombres?

To my little sister, I hope that by the time you read and understand this dissertation, rural Latinx students are no longer facing the same challenges as I did and, like the students in this study, had to face. I am so sorry for not being by your side for the past nine years. I've missed so many of your childhood memories while I was at UCLA and at UCSB. You came to this earthly world when I wanted to give up and leave UCLA. There are no words I can use to explain how much you have changed my life, sister. I hope I am being and continue to be the best big brother (I know I am your favorite brother). You are the smartest little girl, but the one thing I love the most about you is that you are the kindest and most loving girl I know. You are my pride and joy. I hope Luis and I can guide you on a path where you become a strong, independent mujer. I promise you that I will always take care of you. ALWAYS! Since you always want to play rock, paper, and scissors, let's play again. Ready? Don't cheat.. rock, paper, scissors, and……(the first letter of the dissertation title corresponds to what I chose).

I would also like to take the time to give a HUGE thank you to my friends from Corcoran, CA: Angelica, Aaron, Michael, Estefany, Jeanette, Vanessa, Karla, and Pilar. Thank you for continuously checking in on me for the past five years. To Aldo Garcia, primo, te nos fuistes muy pronto. Gracias por todo el apoyo que me distes. Your love for the San Joaquin Valley led you to pursue a political career where you advocated for social justice for the people of the San Joaquin Valley. We miss you, Aldo.

Lastly, I want to thank my dissertation committee. Dr. Richard Duran, when I started the doctoral program, I questioned why you decided to take me on as your advisee. It all stemmed from experiencing imposter syndrome at UCLA, which then carried onto UCSB. I remembered one occasion when you ended our conversation with Adelante; it's your time to create change. Thank you for all the support over the past five years and for always ensuring that I knew my work is needed to create transformative change in higher education. Dr. Rebeca Mireles-Rios, thank you for being there for me since day one. Thank you for always believing in me, even when I often doubted my belonging. Dr. Puente, I often felt invisible in the department and the university, but your presence in the department for the past two years gave me the sense of belonging I longed for. I admire your commitment to our rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley. Thank you for your support over the past two years. I struggled to see myself as a scholar, and you consistently affirmed my capabilities, ensuring I recognized that I was already a scholar. Thank you for challenging me to embrace my intellectual strengths and guiding me through complex theories and discussions with patience and insight. Your mentorship deepened my understanding and strengthened my confidence in my academic pursuits. Your belief in my potential has been a profound source of motivation, and I am immensely grateful for your unwavering support and encouragement

throughout my journey. ¡Muchas gracias! I look forward to our many collaborations as we fight for social and educational equity in the San Joaquin Valley.

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ABSTRACT

Seeds of Resilience: Navigating College Transition, Belonging, and Persistence among Rural Latinx Undergraduates from California's San Joaquin Valley

by

Daniel Ulises Rios Arroyo

This dissertation examines the interconnectedness of race and rurality in higher education, focusing on rural Latinx undergraduate students from California's San Joaquin Valley—a region representative of the intersection between rural identity and Latinx migrant farm working Latinx families. While previous research has extensively examined the higher education experiences of Latinx students, particularly through the lenses of race, gender, sex, and socioeconomic status, it has generally overlooked how geographic origins shape these students' educational trajectories. This study aims to bridge this gap by highlighting rurality, alongside race, as central rather than peripheral to understanding the full spectrum of challenges and motivations that rural Latinx students face in higher education.

The existing body of scholarship on rural students often defaults to a focus on white populations, particularly those in regions like Appalachia, the Midwest, and the southern U.S., inadvertently reinforcing a narrow, racially homogenous view of rural America. This oversight not only marginalizes rural Latinx students but also overlooks the unique ways in which their rural backgrounds intersect with their racial identities to influence their academic and social experiences in higher education. By centering the college experiences of rural Latinx students from the San Joaquin Valley, this dissertation enhances our understanding of how race and rurality interconnect to impact students' higher education

experiences and aspirations. This dual focus challenges the prevailing narratives that have historically marginalized rural Latinx communities and highlights the distinct challenges and motivations derived from their specific socio-geographical contexts.

Drawing on data from 15 second-year rural Latinx students through Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas, the study explores three critical aspects of higher education: college transition, sense of belonging, and persistence. The findings illuminate that these students face significant academic and social challenges due to disparities in educational resources and unfamiliar racial dynamics, which contribute to a prevalent sense of (dis)belonging. Despite these challenges, the motivation to fulfill familial aspirations, overcome rural racialized stereotypes, and create a better future for rural communities drives these students to persist in their education. The dissertation highlights the need for universities to develop more inclusive support systems that recognize and address the unique needs of rural Latinx students, fostering a more welcoming environment that supports their academic success and social integration.

Keywords: Rural Latinx students, College transition, Sense of belonging, College persistence, Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Today's economy has shifted the role of higher education in determining an individual's participation in the current global economy (Belfield & Bailey, 2017; Cairó & Cajner, 2018; Penprase, 2018). In recent years, the United States has observed an increase in high school graduating seniors enrolling in higher education institutions (NCES, 2022). The successful completion of a college degree awards college graduates with higher chances of obtaining higher-paying jobs (Belfield & Bailey, 2017), better health outcomes (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018), and lower probabilities of prolonged unemployment which may all result in increasing an individual's lifetime (Cairó & Cainer, 2018; Hendi, 2017). Furthermore, the United States has seen a decrease in rural industries (e.g., agricultural, mining, or forestry) over the decades (Green, 2020), prompting the increasing importance of higher education attainment for rural students' social mobility. However, for most rural students in the United States, college access is inequitable as they significantly lag behind in college enrollment compared to non-rural students (Means, 2018). Additionally, rural adults have lower educational attainment than adults living in urban areas. For example, in 2015, 19% of rural adults had a bachelor's degree, whereas 33% of adults in urban areas held a bachelor's degree (Marré, 2017).

Moreover, higher education research has overlooked rural students as a distinct student population (Byun et al., 2017), with minimal research on their college outcomes and persistence. Furthermore, the current scholarly work on rural students is overwhelmingly centered on white rural students from the Midwest and Southwestern United States regions (Clark et al., 2022; Goldman, 2019; Nelson, 2016; Sims & Ferrare, 2021); this emphasis on scholarly work in these regions excludes rural communities in other parts of the country, like

California, where rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley agricultural region are more diverse with large populations of immigrants from Mexico and Latin America working in agricultural work (Allensworth & Rochin, 1998; Chandrasekaran, 2021; Puente, 2023). The lack of research on Latinx and other rural students of color creates a false narrative that associates rurality with whiteness; however, over the decades, rural areas across the nation have seen an increase in diverse populations increasing in numbers in rural regions across the country (Johnson, 2012; Saint Onge & Smith, 2020). Furthermore, the idea of rurality itself has no concrete definition, as it is defined differently across government, policy, and academic fields (Hart et al., 2005; Thier et al., 2021). In most instances, rurality is defined as not urban and often ignored in federal policies because of the small populations or remoteness (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). This leads to a lack of attention on rural communities from educational policymakers, extending beyond the K-12 context and into the higher education experiences of rural students.

Moreover, there is minimal research on the higher education experiences of rural students attending four-year universities. Most existing literature focuses on those attending two-year colleges (Hlinka et al., 2015; Hlinka, 2017; Scott et al., 2016; Wright, 2012). This disparity in research is due to several factors, including geographical isolation and the scarcity of four-year universities in rural areas (Hillman, 2016; Puente, 2022; Turley, 2009). Consequently, the research often overlooks rural students at four-year institutions. Moreover, the limited studies available predominantly highlight the experiences of rural white students (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017). There is a significant need for research to explore the experiences of rural Latinx students attending four-year universities, particularly those from California's San Joaquin Valley.

Purpose of Study

A substantial body of research has examined the higher education experiences of Latinx college students, offering valuable insights into the myriad challenges these students face and the institutional supports that can address these challenges. Predominantly, this body of research has explored the intersections of race, gender, sex, and socioeconomic status, examining their impacts on Latinx students' academic and social experiences. However, an often-overlooked dimension in these studies is the geographical backgrounds of the students. The existing literature fails to adequately consider how geographic origins influence the educational experiences of Latinx students, treating these backgrounds merely as locational markers rather than identities shaping students' motivations and challenges.

The purpose of this dissertation study is to fill this gap by explicitly incorporating students' geographical backgrounds to understand their higher education experiences. It seeks to nuance the existing literature to examine how the geographical contexts of students, particularly those from rural areas, inform understanding and analyzing their academic challenges and aspirations. This study is driven by the recognition that geographical backgrounds are not peripheral but central to comprehending the full spectrum of Latinx students' educational experiences. Moreover, while considerable research has been done on the educational experiences of rural students, this scholarship has predominantly focused on white rural students, particularly from the Appalachian, Midwest, and southern U.S. regions. This narrow focus perpetuates the misconception that rurality is synonymous with whiteness.

Consequently, the experiences of rural Latinx college students remain underexplored and poorly understood. Hence, the purpose of the study is to bridge the gap between Latinx and rural scholarship. Therefore, it focuses on the college experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students from the San Joaquin Valley, a region that epitomizes the intersection of rurality and Latinx identity. By doing so, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of how race and geographic background intersect to shape the higher education experiences of rural Latinx students. This dual focus not only challenges the existing narratives that marginalize rural Latinx students but also highlights the unique challenges and motivations that arise from their specific socio-geographical context.

Research Questions

To provide a comprehensive analysis of rural Latinx undergraduate students' first-year college experiences, this study examines three distinct areas: college transition, sense of belonging, and college persistence. Each area is addressed in a standalone scholarly article, guided by different research questions but drawing from data collected from the same 15 students who, in effect, were my research collaborators. The first article explores the college transition of rural Latinx undergraduate students. The guiding research question is: How does the transition from a rural community to an urban college environment impact the academic and social experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students? This article aims to examine how the identities of rural Latinx students influence their college experiences as they navigate a university environment that differs from the racial and spatial familiarity of their rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley. The second article examines the sense of belonging among rural Latinx undergraduate students. The research questions are: How do urban-centric college social environments impact the ways rural Latinx undergraduate

students understand their sense of belonging? and How do rural Latinx undergraduate students believe the university can help create social support systems for them? This analysis focuses on the influence of rural backgrounds on students' feelings of belonging in urban higher education settings. The final article completes the triad by exploring the persistence of rural Latinx students despite the challenges identified in the previous articles. The research question is: What factors motivate second-year undergraduate rural Latinx students to persist toward college completion? This article seeks to understand the underlying motivations that drive these students to continue their education and strive for degree completion. Through this comprehensive approach, the 3-paper study aims to inform and enhance institutional support strategies tailored to the needs of rural Latinx students, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and effective higher education policies and practices.

Significance of the Study

This dissertation makes a significant contribution to the field of higher education research by examining the college experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students. This research fills a critical gap in the literature, where rural and Latinx scholarship has traditionally treated these identities as separate rather than interconnected. Rural scholars often focus on students' rural backgrounds to analyze the impact of rurality, while Latinx scholars emphasize racial backgrounds. However, both fields have largely overlooked the interconnectedness between rurality and racial identities. This dissertation addresses this oversight by simultaneously exploring the dual identities of rural Latinx students, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of their unique experiences in higher education.

The existing literature on the higher education experiences of rural students is limited, with most research centering on rural white students. By employing critical theoretical frameworks, this study challenges the assumption that the experiences of rural white students can be generalized to all rural students. Each of the three articles included in this dissertation focuses on distinctive aspects of the higher education experiences of rural Latinx students, collectively offering a holistic perspective on how the intersections of first-generation college status, racial/ethnic identity, rurality, and socioeconomic status influence their college experiences. This study expands the understanding of three distinct fields within higher education: college transition, sense of belonging, and college persistence. It highlights that students in this study do not view their rural backgrounds merely as geographical locations often associated with challenges. Instead, they perceive their rural identities as a source of empowerment, reinforcing their commitment to their rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley. This finding complicates traditional notions of space as merely a geographical marker, suggesting that rural identities can serve as a source of strength and resilience.

This study also points to the importance of using Chicana/Latina feminist methodologies to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. By acknowledging the participants as co-constructors of knowledge, the research findings are grounded in their lived realities, providing compelling insights into the significance of rural Latinx identities in higher education. This dissertation study is significant because it demonstrates that, although rural backgrounds can present challenges as students navigate higher education settings, rural Latinx identities also serve as powerful motivators for students' desire and commitment to act as transformative agents of change in their

communities. The field of higher education research must, therefore, account for students' geographical backgrounds not just as statistical data but as crucial factors that contribute to both challenges and persistence in college.

Positionality

I immigrated from Palo Alto de Abajo, Guanajuato, Mexico, to Corcoran, California, a small town in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley. My upbringing in Palo Alto de Abajo, or as I call it "el rancho," consisted of limited educational resources, which came from living in an unincorporated rural community in Mexico. The families who had the financial means sent their children to school in "el pueblo" (the nearest city). My family was privileged to legally immigrate to the United States after my father spent more than ten years waiting for his U.S. citizenship and later brought my mother and older brother to Corcoran, California. My father sacrificed ten years of being with his family in hopes of better socioeconomic circumstances for his family and aspirations for his two sons to obtain a college education.

As I was preparing to leave "el rancho," I could not imagine what life in the United States could be like; all I knew was what my father told us, "Es para el bienestar de ustedes" (it is for your well-being). As I boarded the airplane, I was excited to finally see New York City. As a fan of superhero movies, I've noticed a common pattern among them: they always seem to take place in major cities like New York City. As a 9-year-old, I used to imagine the entire United States as being exactly like New York City. On May 7th, 2006, as I arrived in Corcoran, CA, I quickly realized how wrong I was. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale lookup tool, Corcoran, CA, is classified as a distant town. This means it is a territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area. Corcoran, CA, proudly represents itself as

the “farming capital of California.” Due to the large demand for agricultural labor, many Latinx immigrant families have settled in Corcoran, which reflects 74% of the town’s racial demographics, whereas the white racial demographic is 12.8%. Moreover, 27.6% of Corcoran residents live in poverty, compared to the national rate of 11.5%. Additionally, from 2018 to 2022, only 3.9% of adults in Corcoran had a bachelor’s degree or higher. This percentage is significantly lower than the national average, which stands at 34.3% for adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Despite the NCES local classification of Corcoran as a distant town, I have always perceived Corcoran as a rural community rather than a town. My first impression of Corcoran was that it was a bigger “rancho.” Corcoran shares similar characteristics to my native rural community in Mexico, such as the large percentages of Latinx families working in agriculture and the high poverty rate. This racial and spatial familiarity was lost when I attended UCLA for my undergraduate education. I quickly realized that my rural Latinx identity was uncommon at the university. Throughout my four years at UCLA, by luck, I only met one Latino male from the San Joaquin Valley. However, I did not meet anyone who was also a rural Latinx undergraduate student with migrant farm working parents. As a rural Latino male attending a large urban university, I never felt that my rural identity was cared for and valued. Moreover, the lack of institutional resources for rural students augmented my sense of (dis)belongingness. I often found myself alone in my dorm, crying and wanting to leave the university and transfer to a college or university within the San Joaquin Valley. I attributed my academic and social “failures” as my own problems that *I* needed to solve. As I became more engaged with research and eventually as a graduate student, I now understand that it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to

ensure the academic and social success of underrepresented students seeking a college degree.

As I initiated the process of recruiting research collaborators for my dissertation study, I received emails from students expressing their interest in volunteering for the study upon reading the "seeking rural Latinx students" description on the recruitment survey. They eagerly hoped to be selected to participate in the study. As I began the pláticas with the 15 rural Latinx students, there was one common pattern among all: the pláticas with me was the first time they shared their rural Latinx identities with pride on the college campus and the hope for a better future for our rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley. During the pláticas with the students, I realized that the experiences I had as an undergraduate at UCLA were similar to those of the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study. I am invested in higher education research to uplift the underrepresented experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students and to my commitment to my beloved San Joaquin Valley with the hope that my research informs higher education policy and practice so that future rural Latinx undergraduate students can transition to college without difficulties.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation consists of three separate scholarly articles that collectively explore the higher education experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students who completed their first year of college and returned to continue their college education. Moreover, the purpose of this dissertation was to understand how both race and rurality influenced the college experiences of the rural Latinx undergraduate students in the study. As three stand-alone research articles, each article used different but complementary critical theoretical frameworks to examine the racial and spatial barriers faced by the students. These

frameworks included Bridging Multiple Worlds Theory (BMW) (Cooper, 2011), Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging Model, and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework. All three articles included the same 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students from different rural communities in California's San Joaquin Valley. As part of their participation in this qualitative study, all 15 students participated in two two-hour long pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). The first plática engaged students to talk about their rural communities, rural high school schooling experiences, concerns prior to starting their first year at the university, and their college transition to the university. The second plática consisted of conversing with students about the impact of their rural backgrounds on their sense of belonging in an urban college environment. Finally, the second plática concluded with the students reflecting on what motivated them to persist and return for their second year despite facing academic and social challenges during their first year at the university. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 were written as three distinct stand-alone scholarly articles, with Chapter 5 serving as the discussion and conclusion for the dissertation study.

Chapter 2 conducted a qualitative analysis of data derived from both pláticas to investigate how the interplay of racial and rural identities shapes the transition experiences of students moving from the San Joaquin Valley to a university setting beyond its geographic boundaries. The study utilizes the Bridging Multiple Worlds (BMW) theory to explore the influence of rurality on the transition from rural communities to an urban collegiate environment. Concurrently, the racial experiences of rural Latinx students at the university were examined through the lens of Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). The

analysis revealed that rural Latinx undergraduate students undergo a distinctive transition, moving from worlds characterized by rural, economically disadvantaged, and migrant Latinx farm working communities into an academic environment often marked by urban affluence and predominant whiteness. The adaptation to the new urban environment presented the students with unique academic and social challenges, reflecting a broader cultural and contextual shift. Chapter 2 concludes by arguing for a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of race and rurality, advocating for a more inclusive approach in examining the higher education journeys of students from diverse rural backgrounds.

Chapter 3 implemented a qualitative analysis of data from both pláticas to explore the sense of belonging among rural Latinx undergraduate students from California's San Joaquin Valley, currently enrolled at an urban, research-intensive public university on California's Central Coast. The analysis employed Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging model to examine how the rurality of the students influenced their feelings of inclusion or exclusion within an urban collegiate environment. As these students navigated their campus environment, they became increasingly aware of the uniqueness of their rural Latinx identities, a rarity within the university's student demographic composition. The pláticas, conducted with the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students during the fall quarter of their second academic year, revealed a lack of peers with similar backgrounds—rural, Latinx, and migrant farm-working—originating from the San Joaquin Valley. The absence of a shared cultural and geographic community further intensified their sense of (dis)belonging. Moreover, the study identified a significant lack of institutional resources that specifically cater to the needs of students from rural backgrounds, exacerbating their feelings of isolation and exclusion. Chapter 3 contributes to the existing literature on the sense of belonging by

integrating a spatial dimension, highlighting how the geographical origins of students can profoundly impact their experiences in higher education settings. This chapter underscores the importance of considering spatial context when addressing issues of belonging, as previous studies have often overlooked the significance of students' geographical backgrounds and their influence on the sense of belonging.

Chapter 4 of this dissertation completes the analysis of the first-year college experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students. This qualitative study examined the motivational factors that influenced these students to return to the university for their second year and persist in their pursuit of their college degrees. The study was prompted by the identification of the significant academic and social challenges faced by rural Latinx students in their first year, emphasizing the need to understand the motivations underlying their decision to continue. Drawing on data from the second plática conducted with 15 rural Latinx undergraduates and employing Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework, this chapter explored the factors that fostered their persistence. Despite experiencing a challenging transition and a lack of belonging at the university, these students were driven by the aspirational hopes and dreams their parents held for them, a desire to counter racialized rural stereotypes, and a determination to create a better future for their rural communities. This chapter contributes to the existing literature by addressing the scarcity of research on the higher education experiences of rural students, particularly from a qualitative perspective focused on persistence factors among rural Latinx undergraduates. Furthermore, this study underscores the significance of examining the role of space in students' college persistence. The participants expressed a strong emotional attachment to the San Joaquin Valley and a commitment to returning to their rural communities. They envision themselves

as builders of social capital within their communities, aspiring to improve the future for community members and inspire the next generation of rural Latinx college students. This study highlights the importance of place and community in shaping the educational trajectories and aspirations of rural Latinx undergraduate students.

Chapter 5 synthesizes the findings of the three articles and discusses their implications for research, policy, and practice in higher education. The findings from the three articles share one common pattern: race and rurality were significant salient factors that contributed to their challenges and motivations to succeed in completing their college degrees. It is important to emphasize that the rural backgrounds of these students are not merely geographical markers; rather, their rural Latinx identities played a crucial role in shaping their experiences and aspirations within the urban college environment. While these identities presented unique challenges, they also fostered a strong sense of collective aspiration for the students, their families, and their communities. The students' deep connection to the land, cultivated by the labor of their migrant farmworker parents, who provide essential sustenance for the state and nation while living in poverty and lacking college-access resources, serves as a powerful motivator for their persistence in higher education. The rural Latinx undergraduate students envision their college degrees to create a better future for the rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley. Higher education policymakers and practitioners must recognize the presence and unique experiences of rural Latinx students within their institutions. A critical first step is to enhance recruitment efforts in the San Joaquin Valley and, once enrolled, provide these students with the necessary resources to succeed academically. These students are not pursuing higher education solely for personal gain; they aim to leverage their education to challenge and transform the

systemic structures that affect rural Latinx families and communities in the San Joaquin Valley. It is imperative that institutions support these students in their academic and professional journeys to foster broader social change.

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Chapter 2: Navigating New Worlds: The College Transition of Rural Latinx Undergraduate Students from California's San Joaquin Valley

ABSTRACT

This study explored the college transition experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students from California's San Joaquin Valley. Existing studies often depicted rural students as having low college-going aspirations, with many starting at two-year colleges. Employing a Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas (conversations) methodology, each student participated in two, two-hour-long pláticas, resulting in 30 pláticas. The study identified three critical findings: rural Latinx students faced academic challenges due to inadequate preparation from rural high schools; they encountered racism and racial microaggressions while navigating unfamiliar racial dynamics on campus; and they experienced social disconnection from wealth and urban Latinx peers. These findings highlighted the unique challenges faced by rural Latinx students in higher education.

Keywords: College transition, rural Latinx students, Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas, higher education

Introduction

Latinx students are now one of the fastest-growing student populations enrolling in higher education in the United States (Santiago et al., 2016). Despite the increasing college enrollment rates of Latinx students in four-year universities, their retention and persistence rates in completing a four-year degree remain below the national average (Santiago et al., 2024). For example, in 2021, the four-year graduation rate for Latinx students in the United States was 52%, compared to 65% for white students (Excelencia in Education, 2023). To address the lower graduation rates among Latinx students, researchers have been investigating the role of college transition experiences to identify factors influencing their persistence and retention (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Hurtado et al., 2020). Several studies examining the college transition of Latinx students have identified that factors such as campus racial climate, cultural dissonance, and financial instability significantly challenge their college transition experiences (Hernandez, 2019; Lopez, 2005; Pyne & Means, 2013).

Nevertheless, the existing Latinx research has largely overlooked the critical influence of students' geographical backgrounds (i.e., rural, suburban, urban) on their transition to college. Many studies either sample Latinx students from urban regions or fail to specify their geographical backgrounds, which excludes the higher education experiences of Latinx undergraduate students from rural communities. Thus, the examination of the impact of geographical backgrounds is crucial because students from rural areas often face unique challenges that can significantly influence their college transition experiences (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; McNamee, 2019). Understanding rural students' college transition challenges can lead to the addition of more tailored support and resources for rural students. Moreover, research on rural students' higher education experiences can reveal

underlying systemic issues and inform policy changes to better the rural student population in higher education.

Additionally, rural students are disadvantaged when accessing four-year universities, which leads to their lower college enrollment rates in four-year universities than students from urban backgrounds (Byun et al., 2012; Nelson, 2016). Rural education scholarship highlight geography as a dominant factor in the disparity of rural students' college enrollment to four-year universities, which describes rural regions as education deserts where rural communities are far from four-year universities (Hillman, 2016; Turley, 2009). Consequently, rural students have fewer school resources and limited access to academically rigorous courses (Burney & Cross, 2006; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015, 2016), including high-quality STEM courses, teachers, and updated facilities (Crain & Webber, 2021; Hassel & Dean, 2015). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the disconnect of rural Latinx students from college-related access resources; however, they continued to enroll in college (Puente, 2022).

More attention has been given to rural students in the past years; still, the majority of the rural education literature predominantly focuses on college access barriers and their college and career aspirations (Means et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2018; Nelson, 2016; Sowl & Crain, 2021). Still, much of the rural education literature has primarily focused on the experiences of rural white students from the Midwest and the Appalachian regions (Ganss, 2016; McNamee, 2019), often excluding diverse rural students like rural Latinx students. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers acknowledge that rural communities are not monolithic and that rural white students' higher education experiences are not representative of all rural students. No studies have examined the college transition experiences of rural

Latinx students from California's San Joaquin Valley. However, Puente et al. (2023) suggested that rural Latinx students in California's San Joaquin Valley tend to select a college campus that is spatially and racially familiar to their rural communities, believing that this choice will facilitate an easier transition to college.

Accordingly, this article addresses the underrepresentation of rural Latinx undergraduate students' higher education experiences in California, examining the impact of rurality and race on the college transition of first-generation Latinx students. This article examined the college transition experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students who decided to enroll in a research-intensive public four-year university located in California's Central Coast region that vastly differs from their rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley in terms of racial demographics, labor industries and polarizing household income differences. This article was guided by the following research question: How does the transition from a rural community to an urban college environment impact the academic and social experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students?

Literature Review

The transition to college presents a unique set of challenges for students, particularly those from rural backgrounds. This literature review explores the multifaceted barriers and experiences of rural students by reviewing the literature on their transition to college. The intersectionality of rural and Latinx identities in the context of higher education has been understudied; therefore, this review synthesizes existing research on Latinx students' transition to college to provide a comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Rural Students' College Transition Experiences

There is minimal research on rural students ' college transition, with the existing research showing that rural students face additional challenges adjusting to four-year universities in urban regions. Ganss (2016) studied the college transition of 10 rural students attending a four-year university in Oregon and found that these students experienced unexpected emotional and social challenges during their first year at the university. Ganss found that many rural students who had high grade point averages (GPAs) in high school did not expect to struggle academically, but many ended up withdrawing from classes after receiving low grades. Scholars have attributed the academic challenges experienced by rural students during their transition to college to several factors, including a lack of adequate knowledge of college expectations, less rigorous high school courses, causing many rural students to feel academically unprepared for their college courses, and shifting to larger classes (Byun et al., 2012; Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017). Additionally, research has shown that students from rural areas often struggle to adjust to large campus environments, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed and difficulty in forming friendships with their peers (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; McNamee, 2019). Rural communities are known for their close relationships among community members, and when rural students move to college, they may find it challenging to recreate these close friendships and adapt to new urban lifestyles that may not prioritize tight-knit relationships (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; McNamee, 2019; Puente et al., 2023; Schultz, 2004; Tran & DeFeo, 2021). Additionally, Tran and DeFeo (2021) found that rural students from Alaska not only struggle to adapt to urban life but also experience emotional distress due to their inability to visit their rural hometowns and participate in rural community events. Furthermore, Tran and DeFeo (2021)

found that a factor impacting the college transition of rural Alaskan students was missing their families, as their parents were financially unable to visit them on campus or had never been to the campus community.

Moreover, Ganss's (2016) study indicated that rural students' first exposure to diversity (racial, lifestyle, and political affiliations) occurred when they transitioned to college. The rural students embraced the new diversity as it allowed them to develop a rural identity consciousness. Ganss (2016) found that rural students became aware of the political differences between rural and urban regions, noting that their rural hometowns tend to be more conservative than the liberal politics in urban areas.

Latinx Students' College Transition Experiences

In recent years, there have been numerous studies exploring how race and racism impact the experiences of students in higher education, particularly in terms of campus racial climate and racial microaggressions affecting Latinx students and other Students of Color (Bridgeforth, 2022; Sanchez, 2019; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Stokes, 2023; Yosso et al., 2009). Research has shown that Latinx students attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) are often stereotyped as academically unqualified and unable to succeed by both peers and faculty (Keels, 2013; Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2016). Additionally, Latinx students may struggle to find a sense of community due to their ethnic minority status in a PWI and feel unwelcoming campus racial climate (Clayton et al., 2019; Garcia & Hurtado, 2011; Serrano, 2022). Similar studies have found that Latinx students experience challenges in finding a community during their transition to college, with many reporting high rates of marginalization and signs of acculturative stress (McCoy, 2014; Nuñez, 2011; Pan & Reyes, 2021).

Furthermore, Latinx students majoring in STEM fields report higher instances of isolation. For instance, (Cole & Espinoza, 2008) discovered that Latinx students often find themselves among the few Latinx students in their STEM courses, leading many to feel isolated from their white peers. Other scholars examining Latinx students in STEM also found that not being prepared for college expectations in STEM courses, along with their ethnic minority status on campus, affected students' psychological well-being and academic progress (Peralta et al., 2013; Sparks et al., 2021). Many Latinx students come from low-resourced high schools and make the college transition feeling academically underprepared (Ducheon, 2018). For example, Ramirez et al. (2023) found that Chicana/Latina students became hyperaware of the lack of educational resources their high schools offered them as they transitioned to the university by comparing themselves to the other students who showed to be more academically prepared based on having more educational resources prior to entering college. Ramirez et al. (2023) noted that students began questioning their belonging as STEM majors due to a lack of academic preparedness and the underrepresentation of Chicana/Latina women in STEM.

Additionally, many Latinx students enrolling in four-year universities are low-income and first-generation college students who, upon entering the college campus, find themselves navigating the campus alone (Falcon, 2015; Green & Wright, 2017). Moreover, Latinx students have also been reported to hold part-time jobs in college to afford tuition and housing (Falcon, 2015; Perez & Farruggia, 2022). Research has found that college students working while being full-time students can experience lower academic outcomes, less engagement with campus life, and higher stress reports, negatively affecting their college transition (Hernandez, 2019; Nuñez, 2009; Perna & Odle, 2020; Sy, 2006).

Existing studies on rural students' higher education experiences have mainly used samples of white rural students. It is important for literature to acknowledge that rural white students' experiences do not represent the experiences of all rural students. Current research on rural students' college transitions often neglects the racial experiences of Latinx and other rural students of color, failing to address how these students are subjected to racism and racial microaggressions. Moreover, the Latinx college transition literature has excluded the addition of examining students' geographical backgrounds and their impact on rural Latinx student's college experiences. This study makes major contributions to the rural and Latinx college transition literature by examining the experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students who are first-generation and from farm-working, low-income families in California.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Bridging Multiple Worlds Theory (BWM) (Cooper, 2011) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to examine factors such as race and rurality in the college transition of rural Latinx undergraduate students. The BMW framework examines how students' various social environments (peers, school, family) interact and influence the challenges, resources, and success of culturally diverse students' pathways to college (Cooper, 1999, 2011). Cooper (2011) formulated five dimensions used to track students as they navigate through their multiple worlds. The five dimensions are (1) family demographics, (2) students' aspiration and identity pathways, (3) math and language academic pathways through school, (4) resources and challenges in students' worlds, and (5) cultural research partnerships from K-20 (Cooper, 2011). Using the family demographics, academic pathways through school, and the resources and challenges across students' world dimensions, I used BMW to consider the

college transition of rural Latinx undergraduate students because it effectively captures the complexities of their experiences. Rural students often come from rural communities with limited resources, resulting in a significant mismatch when they enter universities in large cities (Hillman, 2016; Manly et al., 2020; Puente et al., 2023). This transition exposes them to new cultural and social worlds that may vastly differ from their rural environments, creating unique challenges.

The study also used Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) to examine how attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) affected the college experiences of rural Latinx students. LatCrit extends Critical Race Theory (CRT) to highlight how race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression shape the educational experiences of Latinx students (Pérez Huber, 2012; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). CRT challenges dominant ideas like meritocracy and colorblindness that present educational institutions as neutral systems promoting success for all students (Pérez Huber, 2012; Solórzano, 1998; Yosso et al., 2009). Moreover, LatCrit was used to capture the nuances of their experiences with race and racism in higher education settings. At PWIs, research has shown that students of color face racial microaggressions, such as racial isolation, and that significantly impacts their college experience (Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). I used LatCrit to provide a critical analysis of how rural Latinx undergraduate students' newly founded racial dynamics affected their academic and social transition into the university. The BMW theory focuses on the student's navigation of different cultural and academic environments, while the LatCrit theory highlights the systemic inequalities and cultural dynamics that influence their college transition experiences.

Methodology

Research design

This study utilized qualitative methodology to comprehensively understand rural Latinx students' college transition experiences. It involved conducting individual Chicana/Latina Feminist pláticas (conversations) (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) with 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students who had completed their first year of studies at Central Coast University (pseudonym), a public four-year university located in an urban region in California's central coast. Qualitative studies are helpful in understanding how individuals make sense of their world and lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore, pláticas, as a qualitative methodology, provides the inclusion of both researcher collaborators and researchers, resulting in richer experiences and perspectives.

Research Collaborators Recruitment and Selection

Potential research collaborators were recruited via e-mail solicitation. E-mails with a background and interest survey were sent to various Latinx student organizations, student support programs aimed at serving low-income and first-generation students, undergraduate student advisors from academic departments on campus, and through the university's registrar's office by sending an e-mail to all undergraduate students at the university. Eligibility was based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) second-year students, (b) child of at least one farm working parent, (c) self-identified as Latinx, (d) first-generation college students, and (e) come from rural or small-town communities in California's San Joaquin Valley. I utilized the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021) locale lookup map tool and local classifications to ensure that students came from communities designated as rural or town.

Out of 740 survey responses, 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students met the inclusion criteria and participated in this study (see Table 1). Three students completed high school in a fringe town (locale code 31), a town inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area (NCES, 2021). Nine students completed high school in a distant town (locale code 32), a town inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area (NCES, 2021). Although 12 students completed high school in a town community as classified by NCES (2021) locale classification, in the pláticas with the students, they all self-identified as rural individuals from the San Joaquin Valley.

Context on The San Joaquin Valley and the University

All students came from rural and small-town agricultural communities in California's San Joaquin Valley. Known as one of the nation's largest and most productive agricultural regions, the San Joaquin Valley also faces significant challenges with high unemployment and rural poverty (Flores-Landeros et al., 2022; Escriva-Bou et al., 2023 Martin & Taylor, 1998). For example, in California, rural families in the San Joaquin Valley are mainly involved in agricultural jobs, and many live below the national poverty threshold (Barros Nock, 2009; Goodhue & Martin, 2014). Approximately four million Californians reside in the San Joaquin Valley, which has seen increased diversity due to Latino immigrants working in agriculture, predominantly Mexican-born farmworkers (Public Policy Institute of California, 2022; Rogers & Buttice, 2013).

The university where the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students were recruited is located on California's Central Coast. According to the U.S. Census (2022), 6.7% of the surrounding labor force is employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting. The

median household income in the county where the university is located is around $90,894. In 2023, the university's first-year student demographics included 1,362 Chicano and Latino students. The newly admitted first-year students had an average parent income of $177,194, with 31% being first-generation college students. Additionally, 9% of the new first-year students in 2023 came from Central California and 5% from North Central California, totaling approximately 14% from regions within the San Joaquin Valley. However, based on individual counties, this data does not provide a detailed geographical background of the students (e.g., rural, town, city).

Table 1

Student Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Major	NCES Locale Classification of High School	Distance from university to rural hometown
Maria	Female	Economics and Accounting	Town Distant	265 Miles
Alondra	Female	Psychological and Brain Sciences	Town Distant	249 Miles
Sofia	Female	Economics	Town Distant	199 Miles
Catherine	Female	Environmental Studies	Town Distant	248 Miles
Jazel	Female	Global Studies	Town Distant	265 Miles
Grace	Female	Sociology	Town Distant	466 Miles
Isabella	Female	Chemistry	Town Distant	496 Miles
Taylor	Female	Communication	Town Distant	249 Miles
Jose	Male	Biology	Town Distant	244 Miles
Blue	Female	Communication	Town Fringe	233 Miles
Annie	Female	Economics	Town Fringe	242 Miles
Sally	Female	Communication	Town Fringe	242 Miles
Alicia	Female	Sociology	Rural Distant	271 Miles
Juan	Male	Biology	Rural Distant	241 Miles
Mimi	Female	Biology	Rural Distant	200 Miles

Data Collection

This study employed the methodological approach of Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas. As a methodology, pláticas are culturally responsive and appropriate when the

research inquiry involves Latinx populations, as it is a culturally familiar process "to gather family and cultural knowledge through the communication of thoughts, memories, ambiguities, and new interpretations" (González, 2008, 647). Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) further explain that pláticas are more than a data collection method (i.e., the way interviews are conducted) and situate pláticas as a methodology where it takes "into consideration the epistemological framing of the researcher and their relationship to the research inquiry and research participants" (Fierros & Delgado-Bernal, 2016, p. 107). Therefore, pláticas are grounded in five guiding principles that contribute to the methodology as outlined by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016):

1. Pláticas draw from Chicana/Latina Feminist Theory
2. Pláticas centers the participants as co-collaborators and co-constructors of knowledge in the research process
3. Pláticas use everyday lived experiences as part of the research inquiry
4. Pláticas provide a potential space for healing
5. Pláticas rely on reciprocal relationships, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity

Each of the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students participated in two individual two-hour pláticas during the fall quarter of their second year at the university. The students had the option of having the pláticas via Zoom or in person; all students opted to have the pláticas via Zoom. All students created their pseudonyms to protect their identities. The first plática prompted students to share about their rural communities, high school experiences, concerns before attending the university, and their college transition. The second plática prompted students to reflect on their first-year experiences at the university regarding their

sense of belonging and what motivated them to persist through the first year. This article drew data from both pláticas.

Data Analysis

All pláticas were audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature. I then carefully reviewed each transcript by following along with the audio recording for each plática and checked for accuracy. Transana was used to conduct all data analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process. The first process includes becoming familiar with the data. I began familiarizing myself with the data by writing brief analytical memos after each plática to reflect on emerging patterns across all pláticas. The next step involves coding the data. I generated data-driven initial codes using inductive and deductive approaches (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). The third step included searching for themes based on the developed codes to generate separate categories for potential themes (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). The fourth step involved a second review of the themes to ensure they accurately reflected the students' experiences and voices and effectively addressed the study's research question. The fifth step included redefining and creating theme names that sensitize the findings. The last step included writing the report and identifying quotes from the pláticas representing the findings.

Findings

Data analysis revealed three critical themes regarding the college transition experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students attending an urban college environment: (1) academic disadvantages from rural high schools, (2) navigating unfamiliar racial dynamics, and (3) social disconnectedness from wealth and urban Latinx peers. First, rural students felt the academic transition was difficult due to the significant gap in resources

between their rural high schools and urban universities. Second, they struggled to find a sense of community at the university, experiencing racism and racial microaggressions. Third, social disconnectedness included two subthemes: (1) feeling alienated by income disparities and (2) disconnection from urban Latinx students due to geographical differences. These findings highlight the complex challenges faced by rural Latinx students as they transitioned to an urban college environment.

Academic Disadvantages from Rural High Schools

The rural Latinx undergraduate students were confronted with the realization that coming from rural, under-resourced school districts and enrolling in a research-intensive four-year university in an urban location had placed them at an academic disadvantage. Jazel explained her academic transition to the university as coming from a rural background:

> I feel like I am still discovering things people have discovered in high school. I feel like I did not get that from my high school and being from a small town while other [students] who come from bigger high schools with more resources are putting students into college with internships or like a lot of scholarships and a lot of resources that they are still using today… you definitely feel how much your high school lacked the resources others did and like how calm those other students are with their transition to college. I feel like it was not such a big change for them as it was for us.

Throughout her first year at the university, Jazel observed that students from urban regions were afforded more resources in their high schools. Moreover, she felt that students from urban backgrounds entered higher education settings with a wide variety of resources, such as internship experiences and skills they utilized at the university. As Jazel reflected on

the educational disparity in resources between rural and urban students, she concluded that students from larger urban high schools had a "calm" college transition. In contrast, for Jazel, her college transition was a "big change" due to her rural background.

Similarly, Jose expressed difficulties in his academic transition to the university, where his rural high school did not provide the same resources compared to high schools located in urban regions:

> Rural communities do not have the same services as in a big city. So, in terms of being prepared to come to a big university like this, you know, more challenging classes than in high school and stuff like that, there was definitely a lack of those challenging classes, lack of the resources and opportunities to prepare me for this type of education that I'm receiving here. So, at first, it was definitely a challenge, right? Trying to adapt to the material here.

Jose recognized that the academic challenges he experienced as he transitioned to the university were because he graduated from a rural high school that lacked resources that would have prepared him to succeed at a "big university." Just like Jazel, Jose was aware that rural high schools do not offer the same "services," "resources," and "challenging classes" as high schools located in big cities. In the pláticas, Jose shared how his rural high school offered limited Advanced Placement (AP) courses, causing him to "not been exposed to the type of rigor expected [at the university]. So academically, that has been challenging." For Jose, his high school education did not prepare him to transition academically to a research-intensive university without experiencing academic difficulties.

Grace also became aware of the lack of resources that her rural high school provided her compared to students from larger high schools in urban regions. For Grace, this

realization became apparent during her summer orientation session prior to starting her first year at the university:

> I did not realize how messed up our education system was until I graduated, and I was like, "damn, I literally am out in the real world, and I feel like I know nothing." I remember being at orientation when everybody was like, "Oh yeah, I took 30 AP classes, like summer internships, I have extra credits from community college," I have never felt more stupid in my life. I was very nearly like telling my parents, "I do not want to come here, I am not gonna like it, I am gonna get eaten alive, like this place was gonna be horrible for me." I still feel like that sometimes, like a voice in the back of my head being like, "Oh, this is so hard. You are not smart enough."

Grace realized how "messed up" her rural education schooling was when she attended her summer orientation session and heard about the academic resources of other students who did not come from rural communities. Consequently, Grace began to contemplate if she wanted to continue with her enrollment at the university while attending the university's summer orientation. As she started her first year at the university, Grace still had doubts about her academic preparedness, similar to her feelings during orientation when she questioned her academic abilities.

Like Grace, Catherine noticed the disparity in educational resources between students from rural and urban backgrounds during her orientation before starting her first year at the university:

> At orientation, before coming here, people from bigger cities would tell me their stats, and they would say, "I took 12 AP classes, and I did all this, and I did all that, and like, my SAT score was like a million or whatever." I was like, "Oh my god,

> these are the people I am competing with. These are the people that I'm going to school with." You did not feel like you were going to make it. So, I definitely had concerns that I was not prepared academically just because people had so many opportunities that I did not have and so many resources that I did not have.

Upon hearing that her soon-to-be peers had more resources than her in high school by completing "12 AP classes" and achieving an incomprehensible SAT score, Catherine felt that she was not "going to make it" as she began to feel academically unprepared. Catherine's first exposure to the university consisted of having concerns about the students she would be "competing with" who came from bigger cities that offered greater academic opportunities and resources than she did in her rural community.

Navigating Unfamiliar Racial Dynamics

Additionally, rural Latinx undergraduate students also noticed differences in racial composition and dynamics as they transitioned into higher education. Jazel expressed that her rural community is predominantly Hispanic because "a lot of the Hispanic people that are moving in is usually because their parents are coming in to work in the agricultural fields." In contrast, the rural Latinx undergraduate students noticed that white students make up the highest percentage of the student body at the university. Navigating through the college campus led them to notice the dominant presence of white students, as Alicia shared:

> You walk into your lecture hall, and you see a sea of white people. You are walking through the [student center,] and you see a sea of white people. You are sitting in the library, and all around you, there are white people everywhere. I worked on one group project in my first year that had two other People of Color. I did not feel like there was a whole lot of diversity.

Alicia noticed a lack of diversity on campus, feeling surrounded by predominantly white students in various campus settings such as lecture halls, student centers, and campus libraries. Moreover, Alica recalled only having two other Students of Color in one of her classes furthering her perceived lack of diversity in the university. The lack of diversity from the students' perspective impacted their college transition experiences as they faced challenges navigating the racial dynamics of the college campus. As Maria recalled, “I am definitely used to seeing like a lot more Hispanics around, and coming here, it definitely has been a challenge just involving yourself like in classes.” Maria experienced challenges in adjusting to the lack of racial familiarity she had in her rural community. This became particularly difficult when she tried to participate in her classes, where she was often the only student of color:

> I have not even met any other Latina who is in economics. . . and I do notice, when I'm the only brown person in the [class], how people look at me and ignore me and talk to the people around them that look similar to them. So, I definitely feel the pressure of being the only brown person in the room, right? Or like having the darkest skin in the room which is like a very weird feeling to me. It is like they want me to notice that. Like if I did not notice before, like they will make sure I notice.

Maria has become aware of an invisible target that followed her brownness when she entered her economics classes, where she “would look around the lecture hall and did not see Hispanic girls.” Instead, the student demographics of her economics classes tended to be predominantly white men, and “few white women sprinkle here and there and then a lot of like Asian people.” In her economic classes, Maria felt isolated from her non-Latinx peers as they tended to “ignore” her based on her skin color and interact with students who looked

racially and ethnically similar to them. Moreover, Maria felt that her non-Latinx peers intentionally made her feel isolated so that they could make "sure" that she "notice[s]" her brownness in a room dominated by whiteness.

Mimi also shared similar experiences as she transitioned to the university as a STEM student. Mimi shared that "my race is a challenge because there are not a lot of Latinos in STEM," which led Mimi to also experience racial isolation from her white peers in her STEM courses:

> There is no sense of communication with me whatsoever. No one tries reaching out to me. I try reaching out to a few people by asking them a question. So, it is hard because I am Latina because you can tell I am Latina based on my last name, Sanchez. Everyone knows that Sanchez and Gonzalez are Latinx last names. So, they knew right off the bat, based on my last name, that I was Latina. So, I feel like they would hear it, and they would be like, "Oh, she definitely does not know what she is doing," so I felt that they do not even bother trying to reach out. So, it is just hard.

Mimi's racial background as a Latina in STEM has subjected her to feeling excluded by non-Latinx peers. While in her STEM courses, Mimi expressed that her mostly white peers did not attempt to communicate or reach out to her, leading Mimi to initiate communication with them. However, when Mimi introduced herself to her classmates, her Latinx last name prompted her peers to disregard her attempt at communicating with them. Mimi felt that her racial background, alluded to by her Spanish last name, exposed her to racialized stereotypes where her peers perceived her as someone who "does not know what she is doing," alienating her by not responding to her communication attempts with them.

Coming from rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley and being Latinx has made the students feel isolated and not accepted by their non-rural and non-Latinx peers. For example, Annie shared her experience with her white peers not accepting her to be part of their social groups based on her racial and geographical background:

> I remember telling someone that I am from the [San Joaquin Valley], and she gave me like a face and this girl was from LA, you know, she comes from a very privileged background. In the beginning, it was a little bit weird, like they were not accepting me like "this girl, cannot be smarter than me", you know, like "she's Hispanic." You know, but I feel like I have proven myself to them, so maybe they would accept me, but you know, it's not even about will they. It is just more like, would I even want to be accepted by them?

Annie remembered a time when she mentioned to one of her white peers, who came from a more privileged urban background, that she was from the San Joaquin Valley. Annie then noticed that her peer gave her a disapproving look upon hearing that Annie comes from the San Joaquin Valley. Moreover, Annie felt that her peers were not accepting her because they could not fathom the idea that a Hispanic woman from an agricultural region could be "smarter" than them. Annie then felt that she had to prove herself academically to her non-Hispanic peers from urban backgrounds before they would accept her into their social groups.

Social Disconnectedness from Wealth and Urbanicity

The rural Latinx undergraduate students expressed social disconnectedness from their (a) non-low-income peers, where they could not connect with students who came from

wealthier backgrounds, and (b) though students made friendships with non-rural Latinx students, they still felt a disconnection based on rural and urban differences.

Social Disconnectedness from Wealth

The family income polarization of students at the university had a negative impact on the rural Latinx students who came from low-income families as they transitioned into the university. The students expressed that they experienced difficulties trying to maintain and fit in with their friends who were not from low-income backgrounds. For example, Catherine described her experience as:

> I would search up the average income of a student that goes to [the university] and their family or whatever, and I would be like, "How am I supposed to keep up and do what they are doing and fit in when I am on of budget and a lot of people are not." The transition was super difficult because people just have so much money and leisure time here. I did not know how I would ever be able to bond with people when I have two jobs or do not go out on the weekends. So, I think it has been pretty hard just because I feel like I do not have time for anything, and people say like go to clubs, go to this, go to that, and it is like, what if I have to work? Like I do not have time. It is just hard. It is definitely really hard.

As a low-income student "on a budget," she experienced instances where she felt she would be unable to "keep up" and "fit in" with her friends who did not come from low-income backgrounds. She also noticed that many undergraduate students at the university "have so much money and leisure time" compared to her, a full-time student with two jobs to afford tuition and housing. The disparity in income between her and her wealthier peers

prevented her from participating in weekend social events, while other students from affluent backgrounds attended "clubs" and engaged in other leisure activities.

Sally also experienced being left out of social activities when her wealthier friends arranged plans to travel out of the university:

> A lot of my friends would like to go to LA or San Diego for the weekend, but I would like to have to stay back because I have other things I need to pay for or that restrict me from doing that. I also need to focus on my grades because my grades also supply me with money through scholarships.

Likewise, Sally explained that she did not participate in expensive outings with her wealthier friends who could afford to travel out of the university on weekends. Sally shared how she closely manages her budget to pay for bills and rent, which, in many cases, leaves her with no extra funds to spend on social activities. Furthermore, Sally also prioritizes her time to focus on her coursework and grades, as she needs to maintain good grades to continue receiving scholarships, which she uses to pay tuition.

Grace also reflected on her experiences of being excluded from social activities since joining a sorority by her wealthy sorority friends:

> In terms of the sorority, it has actually been a little hard and rough because a lot of them come from wealthy families. . . they would be like, “Oh my god, let's go get like $8 coffee from Starbucks” like I cannot do that every day so then next time everyone is like “oh well let's not invite her because she does not want to go anyways” sort of thing and then I am like “guys it is not like that. I totally want to hang out with you, but, you know, I do not really have the same accessibility as you do.”

Grace joined a sorority during her first year at the university to ease her social transition and noticed the familial income gap between herself and the other members of the sorority. She recalled having to turn down going to Starbucks every day to buy coffee with her sorority friends. This resulted in them wrongly misunderstanding her decision as not wanting to "hang out" with them and began not to invite her to their coffee social gatherings. Grace eventually had to tell them that she does not join them daily to buy an expensive coffee from Starbucks because she does not have the "same [financial] accessibility] as they do. Instead of helping Grace adjust to university life, the sorority made her feel disconnected from her wealthy friends.

Sofia also described her experience with not being able to form social connections with students who come from wealthy backgrounds:

> I think it's definitely hard at some points, you know, having certain conversations and kind of bringing up my challenges. If I am like just talking about something that I am going through, they definitely do not know where I am coming from. A lot of my roommates and a lot of my friends come from high middle-class and higher-income families. So, obviously, they do not relate; I could say it is hard to connect at some points in some aspects. If I am filling out my FAFSA form, they have never filled out a FASFA form, you know? So, I think that is one example of a way that we cannot really connect.

Sofia shared how many of her roommates and friends are not from low-income backgrounds, which makes it difficult for her when she shares her challenges, and they do not "relate" to her college experiences as a low-income rural student. Moreover, Sofia also

sees a disconnection with her wealthy friends when she is the only one having to submit a FAFSA form when they "have never filled out a FAFSA form."

Social Disconnectedness from Urban Latinx Peers

Though the students formed friendships with Latinx students from urban regions, they still felt a disconnection with them, given the differences between rural communities and urban cities. Alondra describes her experiences with urban Latinx students as follows:

> I feel we are different in a way. Yeah, we are both Latinas, but I was raised differently than they did. I feel that rural values are different than theirs. I feel if I had someone that was exactly like a similar background as me, I feel like I would be able to relate to them more and connect with them more on a deeper level just because we are in the same boat. . . they do not come from a small town. They were from San Fernando Valley. They were big city girls, unlike me and my parents [who are] immigrant farm workers. So, it is like to this day, I still have not met someone who is like me, who has undocumented parents who work in agriculture, who are in the same boat as me, and who comes from a small town.

Alondra described meeting other Latina students at the university, whom she can relate to based on their racial background but not beyond. She shared how all the Latina friends she has met come from big cities and have yet to meet another Latina student from a small town at her large urban university. Aside from sharing the same racial background, Alondra felt that she was raised with different rural values that Latina students from large cities cannot relate to; therefore, she cannot connect with them on a "deeper level." Moreover, she felt that she could not connect with Latina students from urban backgrounds whose parents are not undocumented immigrants working in agriculture.

Juan also shared the same sentiment as Alondra of not forming strong connections with his Latino friends who come from large cities:

> I do have Latino friends, and, you know, I am very appreciative of having them with me on campus, but they all come from Los Angeles or the Bay Area, and I am the only one from the Central Valley. They also come here with like different city values and norms that we do not have in my small town…they also do not relate or understand what it means to come from a rural town, and for them, they are here to party and have a good time, and I am here trying to graduate to support my family. That is how I cannot fully connect with them.

Juan finds it difficult to fully connect with his Latino friends at the university due to differences in rural and urban values and norms, similar to Alondra's experience. Among his Latino friends, he is the only one from a small town in the San Joaquin Valley, while the rest come from large cities. Juan described his urban Latino friends as being at the university to "party and have a good time," and he states that partying and drinking are not part of the rural values and norms that he was raised by his parents. Throughout his college transition, Juan has remained focused on his goal to one day financially support his farm working parents.

Blue also shared the same experiences of not being able to connect with her urban background Latinx friends at the university primarily because she is the only one in her friend group from the San Joaquin Valley:

> I feel like I cannot connect with anyone here. I do not relate to anyone, even though we are all first-gen and we are all Latinx; it does not matter because if you are not from the same place, no one is gonna relate to you. No one is gonna relate to fields

> upon fields and cows and manure everywhere…I feel very excluded when Latinx and first-generation students connect with their hometowns. It is usually people from the Bay from LA. So, no one is from the [San Joaquin Valley]. So, it is hard to make friends based on where I am from.

Like the other students, Blue has formed friendships with Latinx students who come from larger cities, but within her friend group, she is the only one from a rural migrant farm working background in the San Joaquin Valley. Blue expressed that despite sharing the same racial and first-generation college student backgrounds, she feels that her Latinx friends from urban areas cannot relate to her rural farm working background, which consists of "fields upon fields."

Discussion

This study on rural Latinx undergraduate students' college transition to an urban college environment expands the existing literature by addressing a critical gap in higher education research. Previous studies have tended to either focus on the transition of Latinx students and the impact of their race/ethnic identity or on rural students and the impact of rurality, but not on how both race and rurality may impact students' college transition. This article explores the interconnectedness of race and rurality and their effects on students' college transition as they adapt to university life in an urban environment with a predominantly white population. The Latinx undergraduates from rural areas underwent a significant transition between their academic worlds from high school to college. Before arriving at the university, the students were high achievers and did not anticipate encountering academic challenges. In the pláticas, the students shared that their two main concerns before entering the university were financial and social, not academic.

The findings on academic unpreparedness aligned with Ganss's (2016) and Heinisch's (2017) findings on how rural students felt academically unprepared once they began taking postsecondary coursework. This study builds upon the common finding by demonstrating that rural Latinx undergraduate students initially felt academically prepared upon entering the university. However, their perception changed as they compared the pre-college academic resources between students from rural and urban backgrounds. It was then that the rural students realized that urban background students "had so many opportunities," as Catherine stated, compared to students from rural backgrounds. This finding is linked to the BMW theory, which suggests that students' educational paths are influenced by cultural resources and challenges across their multiple social worlds (Cooper, 2011). For rural Latinx undergraduate students, their rural educational experiences before college did not adequately prepare them for academic success when transitioning to a new academic social world in college.

Additionally, rural Latinx undergraduate students encountered racial challenges as they bridged into a new social world characterized by vastly different racial demographics. The students described the shift into a new social world where they often encountered themselves as "the only brown person in the room," as Maria stated, that they experienced isolation and racial microaggressions from their non-Latinx peers. This finding is similar to previous research that shows that rural students experience a cultural shock upon entering college when exposed to new diversity (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; McNamee, 2019). However, it is important to note that these studies were based on a predominantly white rural student sample. Previous literature showed that white students from rural areas were open to the diversity on the college campus and had positive experiences with the inclusion

of new cultural and ethnic diversity (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; McNamee, 2019). In contrast, through a Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), this study showed that rural Latinx undergraduate students experienced racism in the form of racial microaggressions from their non-Latinx peers. Findings from this study reflect the broader body of research on Latinx students' experiences with racism and racial microaggressions in higher education from non-Latinx peers, which causes Latinx students to feel isolated and marginalized (Clayton et al., 2018; Garcia & Hurtado, 2011; Ramirez et al., 2023; Serrano, 2022). However, these studies have been conducted using Latinx student samples from urban backgrounds or do not specify students' geographic backgrounds.

This article adds to the existing literature on Latinx students' college transition by expanding it to include the spatial geographic contribution of the college transition experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students. The rural Latinx undergraduate students formed friendships with urban Latinx students; however, the connection to urban Latinx students was weak due to differences in rural and urban values, norms, and lifestyles. In the pláticas, most rural Latinx undergraduate students mentioned that coming to the university was their first time leaving their rural hometowns and had no connections to urban environments. Cooper (2011) argues that students' educational pathways are influenced as they traverse different social environments, which can present students with obstacles or resources. The rural Latinx undergraduate students moved from a rural social environment where most rural populations in the San Joaquin Valley shared similar characteristics (low-income, migrant farm working families from Latin America) to a new urban environment where their rural Latinx identities were uncommon. The rural Latinx undergraduate students "have not met someone" with the same background as them, as stated by Alondra. The rural

Latinx undergraduate students appreciated having urban Latinx friends but felt they could not connect with them beyond sharing the same racial background.

Moreover, rural students have been described as coming from low-income families and tend to be first-generation college students (Byun et al., 2012; Puente, 2023; Wells et al., 2019). The current literature attends to rural students' social disconnectedness primarily due to the transition from small rural communities to large urban environments and lifestyles (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; Tran and DeFeo, 2021). Through LatCrit and BMW as frameworks, this study found that the social challenges faced by rural Latinx undergraduate students go beyond adjusting to a larger campus environment and are also linked to their migrant farm working backgrounds. The rural Latinx undergraduate students from this study experienced an unwelcoming college environment that impacted their socialization with students from wealthier backgrounds. The rural Latinx undergraduate students could not "keep up" and "fit in," as Catherine stated, they often felt excluded from social activities as they could not financially afford to keep up with the lifestyle of students from wealthy backgrounds.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research on rural students has increased over the years; however, much of it still concentrates on the college access and choice processes of rural students (Means, 2018; Nelson, 2016; Puente, 2022; Puente et al., 2023; Sowl & Crain, 202). While existing research on access and choice is crucial for understanding the barriers rural students face in pursuing higher education, new studies need to focus on rural students' transition into college. This shift in focus will provide a more comprehensive view of the unique

challenges and support systems necessary for rural students to navigate higher education environments successfully.

Moreover, rural communities are not monolithic and have been experiencing an increase in diversity over recent years (Litchter, 2012). Despite this demographic shift, research has predominantly focused on rural white students, with very limited attention given to rural Latinx and rural students of color (Boettcher et al., 2022; Means, 2018; Puente, 2022; Puente et al., 2023). Research examining the higher education experiences of rural students that omits analysis of rural students of color neglects the likelihood for these students to experience college campus environments differently than their rural white counterparts.

Conversely, as Latinx student enrollment in higher education has surged, there has been a significant increase in research examining their college experiences (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Duncheon, 2018; Hurtado et al., 2020; Ramirez et al., 2023). Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are enrolling the rapidly growing Latinx student population, prompting current research to investigate whether these institutions are fulfilling their mission of enrolling Latinx students and providing the necessary resources for their success (Franco & Hernandez, 2018; Garcia, 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2020). However, much of the literature on Latinx students attending HSIs focuses on those from urban regions, thereby excluding the experiences of rural Latinx students. Given that Latinx students are not a monolithic group, research must examine their higher education experiences by including the intersection of race and place-based factors that impact their college experiences and transitions. The rural Latinx students in this study were critical to highlight that Latinx undergraduate students from urban regions are different from rural Latinx undergraduate students. Therefore,

researchers should not group Latinx students as a singular group. Recognizing the distinct experiences within the Latinx college student population by examining their geographical backgrounds will provide a more nuanced and accurate analysis of their challenges while pursuing higher education and their college experiences and outcomes.

Recommendations for Higher Education Practice

The recommendations for higher education practice are rooted in the experiences of the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study. The BMW framework suggests that cultural research partnerships from K-20 are crucial to providing early college access resources for students, thereby increasing their college and career aspirations (Cooper, 2011). Therefore, colleges and universities should invest in increasing efforts to reach students from rural regions. The rural Latinx undergraduate students transitioned to the university without knowing much about academic and social expectations. Universities must take the initiative to reach out to rural secondary schools and create strong partnerships to recruit and enroll rural students in their universities. This will alleviate the rural students' social challenges as the rural Latinx students have not met other students from rural backgrounds. The partnerships between rural school districts and universities should be to introduce rural students and their families to four-year universities. It should also involve organizing workshops on how to apply to college, filling out FAFSA forms, and providing campus visits, giving students a firsthand experience of campus life.

Additionally, universities must also commit to creating resources that support rural students' college persistence and retention. As second years at the university, the rural Latinx students in the study have not adapted socially to the university. The rural Latinx undergraduate students came from migrant farm working families who cannot provide

financial support to their children. According to the rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study, being full-time college students and working part-time has caused them to feel isolated from the college community. To lessen the financial burden of rural Latinx undergraduate students, the university should provide more financial aid assistance to cover tuition and housing fully.

Moreover, with one full year at the university, the rural Latinx undergraduate students have not connected with other students from rural migrant farm working backgrounds. The university should invest in creating a campus program designed to serve rural Latinx undergraduate students' academic and social needs. Having a campus program of rural Latinx undergraduate students would allow the students to start developing connections with other rural Latinx peers and have greater identification with the university.

Conclusion

This article makes a significant contribution to the existing higher education literature by nuancing the scholarship on Latinx and rural students. The study revealed that rural Latinx undergraduate students are enrolling in selective, research-intensive universities but face unique challenges due to the mismatch between their rural backgrounds and identities. The findings highlight that these students often struggle academically during the college transition because their rural high schools did not adequately prepare them for the rigor of a four-year university. Additionally, they experience racism and racial microaggressions from their non-Latinx peers.

The social transition was also difficult for these students, as their low-income backgrounds presented challenges that prevented them from connecting with students from wealthy backgrounds. Furthermore, the rural Latinx students failed to establish strong

connections with their urban counterparts. Therefore, universities should develop targeted programs for rural Latinx undergraduate students addressing academic preparedness and social integration to facilitate their transition to urban college environments. This attention is crucial, as rural Latinx students, despite being a racial and geographical minority, will continue to seek enrollment in urban universities, and these institutions must meet them with the necessary resources to ensure their academic and social success.

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Chapter 2 is currently being prepared for submission for publication of the material. Daniel Ulises Rios Arroyo was the primary investigator and the sole author of this paper.

Chapter 3: "Am I Supposed to be Here?": The Sense of (Dis)Belongingness of Rural Latinx Undergraduate Students at a Research-Intensive Four-Year University

ABSTRACT

This study explored the sense of belongingness of 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students at a research-intensive, four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in California. Using a Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas methodology, 30 conversations were conducted. The study, guided by Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging framework, identified three themes: the concealment of rural Latinx identity, the impact of a lack of rural Latinx peers on belonging, and a need for tailored support services. These findings highlight the challenges of rural Latinx students and the impact of rurality on higher education experiences. This study highlights the significance of acknowledging the distinctive experiences of Latinx students not just by racial backgrounds but also by taking geographic backgrounds within the context of a Hispanic-serving institution in an urban setting.

Keywords: Sense of belonging, rural Latinx students, higher education, Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas

Introduction

The Latinx population is among the fastest-growing and largest ethnic minority groups in the United States (Krogstad et al., 2019). Additionally, there has been an increase in Latinx students enrolling in four-year universities across the nation (Garcia, 2016; Santiago et al., 2024); still, Latinx students continue to complete their bachelor's degree at a significantly lower rate than students of other racial/ethnic groups (de Brey et al., 2019). Latinx students' low retention rates and prolonged college graduation have been explained by the multiple barriers they face as many are first-generation college students (Capannola & Johnson, 2022) who often come from low-income backgrounds (Santiago et al., 2024), having to balance familial obligations while being full-time college students (Covarrubia et al., 2019; Espinoza 2010), and perceived as having less social capital than their non-Latinx peers (Ayala & Contreras, 2019). However, there is a growing body of research highlighting the role of institutional factors, including how well colleges foster a sense of belonging for these students. This shift in focus is evident in recent scholarship, which explores the connection between students' sense of belonging and their college experiences and outcomes (Duran et al., 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Museus & Saelua, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012, 2023). The notion of belonging on college campuses has been described as students' perceived connectedness to the campus community, having social support systems, and perceptions of being accepted and valued (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012).

Research on students' sense of belonging has focused on how belonging may differ among marginalized student groups, such as by race/ethnic identities (Hussain & Jones, 2021; Lewis et al., 2021; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021) and college generation status (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020; Museus & Chang, 2021). According to Strayhorn (2012), students'

intersecting social identities influence how they perceive their belonging on college campuses. Moreover, Hurtado and Carter (1997) claimed that by examining the sense of belongingness of students, researchers can assess the ways students' social interactions can enhance students' connectedness to the campus community. Although research has investigated the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students and first-generation college students' sense of belonging (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021), no attention has been given to rural Latinx undergraduate students' sense of belongingness at four-year universities.

Accordingly, this study investigated how urban collegiate environments influence rural Latinx undergraduate students' sense of belonging, where their rural backgrounds may be uncommon within the university. The questions that guided this article were:

1. How do urban-centric college social environments impact the ways rural Latinx undergraduate students understand their sense of belonging?
2. How do rural Latinx undergraduate students believe the university can help create social support systems for them?

Literature Review

Latinx Students' Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

The rise of Latinx students in higher education has received increasing attention from researchers examining Latinx students' sense of belonging in four-year postsecondary institutions. Many Latinx students who enroll in four-year institutions are low-income, first-generation college students who navigate higher education alone (Falcon, 2015; Green & Wright, 2017). Scholars have noted that Latinx college students may face a period of culture shock when transitioning to a predominantly white institution upon entering their college

campus (Sánchez-Connally, 2018). Moreover, there is substantial literature on Latinx students attending PWIs and experiencing racial microaggression, leaving Latinx students feeling isolated on college campuses (Choi et al., 2022; Mena, 2022; Ramirez et al., 2023). For example, Clayton et al. (2019) found that the Latinx participants struggled to find a sense of community given their ethnic minority status in a predominantly white institution while transitioning to their PWI. Other similar studies also found when Latinx students struggled to find a community of support in college, many reported feeling marginalized and having acculturative stress (McCoy, 2014; Nuñez, 2011; Pan & Reyes, 2021).

Furthermore, after Donald Trump took the presidential office in 2016, there was an increase in racism and anti-immigrant rhetoric targeting the Latinx student population (Stokes, 2023). For example, Serrano (2022) found that Latinx students attending a PWI reported being victims of overt and subtle forms of racism on campus. The study participants in Serrano's (2022) study shared that they initially perceived to have chosen a campus with a positive racial climate by attending a PWI designated as an HSI. Still, the lack of racially diverse professors led them to experience racial microaggressions from white faculty members. Other studies have also found similar findings of Latinx students experiencing hostile environments with white faculty, prompting them to undergo the imposter syndrome, leading many Latinx students to doubt their academic abilities (Johnson, 2012; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021).

Rural College Students Social Transition

The literature on rural students' college transition to four-year universities is very limited. The scarcity of literature on the college transition of rural students can be explained by their lower college enrollment rates than students from urban backgrounds (Wells et al.,

2023), which research explained as rural students facing college access barriers primarily due to living in rural regions defined as “education deserts” where rural students have no proximity to four-year universities (Hillman, 2016; Turley, 2009). Students from rural areas who attend four-year universities often have to travel longer distances to attend their college campuses than their urban counterparts. This can affect the way rural students adjust to an urban-centric campus environment. For example, Dustan and Jaeger (2016) examined how the linguistic characteristics of white rural Appalachian college students impacted their social integration within a non-rural environment. Dustan and Jaeger (2016) found that the white rural Appalachian students' rural backgrounds and distinct rural English dialects subjected them to negative academic stereotypes from peers and faculty. The students in their study became aware of the stigmatization of rural Appalachians as uneducated and perceived to be unintelligent. Moreover, the rural Appalachian students in their study used their distinct Appalachian dialects to detect other students with similar linguistic characteristics, with whom they then developed connections. Conversely, some students in their study consciously decided to distance themselves from students with Southern Appalachian dialects so that they would not be associated with the stereotypes targeting students from the Appalachian region.

Leaving their rural communities to enroll in college has been described as a difficult transition for rural students. Tieken (2016) refers to rural students’ college transition as navigating cultural distance where rural students depart from their rural communities and enter a college environment that does not align with students’ rural values and lifestyles. For instance, Cain and Willis (2022) examined how rural students navigated their rural and other multifaceted identities within an urban college environment. For the rural students in their

study, their rural identity was not salient in their college experiences as much as their race, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, Cain and Willis (2022) found that the three rural students opted not to identify as rural individuals. Cain and Willis (2022) suggested that rural students in their study did not view their rurality as a significant aspect of their college experience, using defensive othering to distance themselves from their rural backgrounds. The three rural students in their study were aware of negative rural stereotypes, therefore suggesting their attempt to stray away from being associated with common rural stereotypes.

Moreover, rural students often come from low-income communities (Means et al., 2016) and have parents with no college education (McNamee, 2019), which causes them difficulties navigating the college environment (McNamee, 2019). Furthermore, rural communities have been defined as tight-knit communities (McNamee & Ganss, 2023). When rural students leave, they struggle to develop close relationships with their college peers, causing them to feel isolated and disengaged from the campus community (McNamee, 2019). For instance, Ganss (2016) and Heinisch (2017) discovered that students from rural areas experience initial isolation when transitioning to a large urban college environment from small rural communities. Research has that the college transition is made easier by having a supportive community of students who share similar backgrounds. For example, Nelson (2019) found that rural students who have direct contact with other rural peers in college have an easier college transition and gain greater forms of social capital, such as access to social and academic support resources.

Institutional Support

Researchers studying factors that address Students of Color retention and persistence have recommended that universities focus on developing ways to help students feel more

connected to the campus community (Serrano, 2022; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). College and university administrators have made considerable efforts to address the needs of first-generation Students of Color college students and have invested in interventions through first-year programming (Gonzalez Quiroz & Garza, 2018). One method universities use to lower attrition rates of first-generation college students is implementing summer transition programs at their universities (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Many summer bridge programs include partnerships with faculty, staff, student organizations, and campus support centers to provide students with knowledge of college life and support resources and to create a space for students to thrive at the university (Strayhorn, 2011). Another method to uphold institutional accountability for student retention and persistence is the implementation of cultural centers that aim at providing racial minority students with academic and social support services that increase their sense of belonging at their PWI (Castillo-Montoya & Verduzco Reyes, 2020). Williams (2020) stated that racial microaggressions directed toward racial minority students in academic and social spaces directly impact Students of Color connectedness to their university.

To remedy Students of Color low sense of belonging at PWI, there have been institutional efforts to fund multicultural centers aimed at providing a space for community for racial minority students (Castillo-Montoya & Verduzco Reyes, 2020). Cultural centers have been described as counterspaces for Students of Color as alternative spaces on a college campus to promote well-being, collective resistance for individuals experiencing marinization, and spaces for acquiring social capital (Aguilar-Hernandez et al., 2021; Kornbluh Bell et al., 2022). For example, Yosso and Lopez (2010) presented stories of Latinx undergraduate students' reflections and their participation in cultural centers on

PWIs. Yosso and Lopez (2010) found that Latinx students often feel empowered to create counterspaces to seek out safe spaces and communities where they obtain cultural and social validation after experiencing negative racial encounters at their PWI.

Theoretical Framework

Strayhorn's (2012) model of sense of belonging framed the study implementation and data analysis. Rooted in Maslow's concept of the hierarchy of needs, Strayhorn's (2012) model refers to a sense of belonging as an essential need in higher education, where belonging is defined by students' perceptions of affiliation and identification with the college campus community. In the model, students' sense of belonging is influenced by their perceived level of being cared for, valued, and connectedness to interpersonal relationships and campus engagement while considering support systems on campus to satisfy their needs. Higher education research has rapidly paid more attention to students' sense of belonging as it strongly impacts students' persistence and retention (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Students who feel a lack of sense of belonging may have lower motivations to persist, negatively impacting their academic outcomes (Lewis et al., 2016), interpersonal relationships with their peers and faculty (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008), and campus engagement (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021).

Studies that have examined the sense of belonging have been focusing on how racial/ethnic minoritized students experience belonging at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), illuminating that these students often experience fewer forms of belongingness (Fan et al., 2021; Hussain & Jones 2021; Strayhorn, 2018). However, Strayhorn's (2012) model emphasizes the importance of understanding how students' multiple social identities intersect and influence their sense of belonging. There has been very little research

pertaining to the higher education experiences of rural students; nonetheless, to how rural Latinx students experience belonging while attending a large university where their rural and racial identities intersect in campus environments where whiteness and urbanicity dominate academic spaces.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative approach to understand how students' rural backgrounds impact their sense of belongingness. Individual pláticas were conducted with 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students in their second year at Central Coast University (Pseudonym), a predominantly white institution PWI designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). The pláticas with the individual students occurred in the Fall quarter of their second year. The qualitative approach allowed for the exploration of the rural Latinx undergraduate students' multiple realities while examining a complex issue within a real-life context. Moreover, the inclusion of pláticas as the study's methodological approach

Research Collaborators and Recruitment

Recruitment for the study was carried out by sending recruitment emails to different student-led Latinx organizations on campus and various academic departments at the university. The university's registrar's office also sent the recruitment email to all enrolled undergraduates to ensure that all potential research collaborators received it. To have been included in the study, research collaborators had to be (1) second-year students, (2) self-identified as Latinx, (3) have at least one farm-working parent, (4) first-generation college students, and (5) come from rural or small-town communities within California's San

Joaquin Valley. I utilized the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2021) locale lookup map tool to ensure students' hometowns were classified as rural or small towns.

A total of 740 survey responses from the recruitment emails were received. After analyzing the survey responses, only 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students met all of the recruitment criteria and were included in the study (See Table 1). Three students graduated from high school in a fringe town (locale code 31), which is defined as a town within an urban cluster located 10 miles or less from an urbanized area (NCES, 2021). Nine students graduated from high school in a distant town (locale code 32), characterized as a town within an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles but no more than 35 miles from an urbanized area (NCES, 2021). While all twelve students completed high school in areas classified as towns by NCES (2021), in the pláticas, they all identified themselves as rural residents of the San Joaquin Valley. The imbalance of gender within the participants can be explained by research that shows that Latinas are more likely to enroll in higher education than Latino men (Hernandez, 2019)

The San Joaquin Valley and the University

All students came from rural and small-town agricultural communities in California's San Joaquin Valley. The San Joaquin Valley is one of the nation's largest and most productive agricultural regions; however, it is subject to high unemployment and rural poverty (Thorn et al., 2014). Approximately four million Californians live in the San Joaquin Valley (Public Policy Institute of California, 2022). Moreover, the San Joaquin Valley has also become more diverse due to Latino immigrants working in the agricultural fields, with Mexican-born farmworkers being the majority; in fact, the Latinx population in

the San Joaquin Valley is significantly high, comprising approximately 54.8% of the residents (Public Policy Institute of California, 2022; Rogers & Buttice, 2013).

The university from which the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students were recruited is situated in Santa Barbara County on California's Central Coast. According to the U.S. Census, 6.7% of the labor force comes from agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting. The 2023 first-year student demographics showed that 1,362 Chicano and Latino students began their first year at the university. Moreover, the newly admitted first-year students had an average of $177 194 parent income, and 31% of the first-year enrolled students were first-generation college students (Institutional Data, 2024). Additionally, the geographic profile of the 2023 new first-year students showed that 9% of the first-year students came from Central California and 5% from North Central California. In total, approximately 14% of the first-year students in 2023 came from a region within the San Joaquin Valley (Institutional Data, 2024). However, the data is derived from the number of first-year students from individual counties, which misses the opportunity to showcase a greater in-depth geographical background of students (i.e., rural, town, city).

Data Collection

I conducted two two-hour Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas (conversations) (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) with the 15 second-year rural Latinx undergraduate students to explore their higher education experiences coming from rural communities. The pláticas were conducted in the Fall quarter of their second year at the university. The pláticas were deliberately conducted with second-year students in the fall quarter of their second year at the university since, by then, they would have had one full year of college experiences at the university.

Pláticas have been described as a "way to gather family and cultural knowledge through the communication of thoughts, memories, ambiguities, and new interpretations" (González, 2001, 647). Pláticas challenge Eurocentric traditional methods of qualitative research. Pláticas also differ from interviews because pláticas allow reciprocal exchanges, where participants are acknowledged as co-collaborators and co-creators in the research process and knowledge production. (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). This then situates pláticas as a method and as a methodology which "takes into consideration the epistemological framing of the researcher and their relationship to the research inquiry and research participants (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p., 107). Using pláticas as a methodology involves critically employing its five principles, as Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) outline: 1) pláticas draw from Chicana/Latina Feminist Theory, 2) pláticas centers the participants as co-collaborators and co-constructors of knowledge in the research process, 3) pláticas use the everyday lived experiences as part of the research inquiry, 4) pláticas provide potential space for healing, and 5) pláticas rely on reciprocal relationships, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity.

I employed pláticas as a methodology because this study conducted research with a population of rural Latinx undergraduate students from low-income farm-working backgrounds who have been underrepresented in traditional research methods. More importantly, my positionality as a rural Latino allowed me to carry out the five principles needed as part of the research inquiry. I am a first-generation college student with farm-working and immigrant parents from Corcoran, CA, a small rural town in the San Joaquin Valley.

Together, the research collaborators and I discussed their higher education experiences at the university and how their rural Latinx identities have played a role in their experiences. The pláticas were guided by my own research interests, influenced by my past experiences as a rural Latino student in my undergraduate studies at UCLA, the literature on rural higher education, and, more importantly, by the lived experiences of each research collaborator. All students were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms and the option to have the pláticas via Zoom or in person. All 15 decided to have the pláticas via Zoom.

Data Analysis

All pláticas were audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature. I then reviewed each transcript by listening to the corresponding audio recordings to ensure accuracy. For the data analysis, I employed Transana software and followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process. The first step involved becoming familiar with the data, which I followed by writing brief analytical memos after each plática to reflect on emerging patterns. Next, I coded the data using both inductive and deductive approaches (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). The third step involved searching for themes based on these codes, resulting in the creation of separate categories for potential themes (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). In the fourth step, I conducted a second review of the themes to ensure they accurately represented the students' experiences and addressed the research question effectively. The fifth step involved redefining and naming the themes to better capture the findings. Finally, I wrote the report, identifying quotes from the pláticas that illustrated the findings.

Findings

This article explored how the rural identities of Latinx undergraduate students affected their sense of belonging in an urban university setting. The data analysis revealed three critical themes. The first theme, concealing rural Latinx identity, highlights how students consciously hid their rural backgrounds to avoid being associated with rural stereotypes. The second theme, the uncommonness of rural Latinx identities, indicates that these students have not formed social networks with other rural Latinx peers due to the lack of other rural peers on the college campus. The third theme, envisioning institutional resources to support rural Latinx students, shows that the students have not received adequate support from the university and are envisioning what such support could look like.

Concealing Rural Latinx Identities

The students realized that their rural Latinx identities were not common on the college campus, leading students to consciously conceal their rural backgrounds from non-rural peers. The students have avoided being perceived as academically inferior to students from non-rural communities. For example, Jose shared how he consciously decides not to share his rural identity with his peers:

> **Jose:** Talking to classmates in my STEM courses, I guess, that's where there's a lack of me wanting to say that I'm from a small town. Just because I guess if I say, "Oh, I did bad on this test," or "I'm struggling like with the material and stuff," I think saying that I'm from a small town might give them a bad stereotype that I am not as prepared as them or they will probably think I'm probably dumb. That's how they view me.
>
> **Author:** How does that make you feel?

Jose: In a way, like discouraged and I guess it makes me feel like a kind of isolated. Just because you, I guess, [are] afraid of what other people may think about your background. They can just choose not to interact with, you know, I feel isolated like between my classmates. You just don't feel like interacting with them. Even though you should but, because they might have this bad stigma about you coming from a small town, they can choose not to socialize with you.

Jose shared that he has not met anyone from a small rural town in the San Joaquin Valley in his courses. Despite coming from a small town, he refrained from mentioning it to his peers. He is worried that revealing his rural Latinx identity may lead his peers to believe that he is academically underprepared to succeed in STEM courses, especially if he admitted to struggling with course material or did "bad" on a test. Jose feared that his peers might associate rurality with a negative stereotype that students from rural backgrounds are not adequately prepared to succeed in STEM courses. Consequently, he felt isolated from his peers and worried that they might socially exclude him if they learned about his rural background.

In addition to not wanting to share their rural Latinx identities with their peers, the students also consciously hid their rural backgrounds when they interacted with their professors. For example, Mimi stated:

I would not want [my professors] to know that I'm a rural student because I feel once they know that I'm a rural student, I feel that they would minimize their way of thinking about me. They'll be like, "Oh, she's a bit more special because she comes from a very bad background." I feel they'll try to treat me in a certain way compared

to other students, and then they would treat me as if I'm dumber just because I'm from a lower place than other people are, and I don't want them to think that.

Mimi decided to conceal her rural Latinx identity from her professors because she did not want them to "minimize" their academic expectations of her based on assumptions that rural students come from "very bad background[s]," negatively impacting their academic perceptions of rural students. Mimi shared that if she revealed that she comes from a rural background, her professors would treat her as a "dumber" student because she comes from a "lower place."

Additionally, students not only concealed their rural Latinx identities to avoid being perceived as academically inferior to non-rural students but also to prevent being judged for coming from rural communities often described as low-income and lacking educational resources. Alicia shared how she does not reveal the true location of her rural town to divert attention away from her rural background:

> I just kind of named a bigger city, and so the thing I usually say is, "I'm from near Yosemite." I think a really big part of that, I think, subconsciously is because I'm trying to divert from where I'm actually from because everyone's like, "Oh Yosemite, that's so cool," and the focus then becomes on like nature and national parks, and instead of broken down badly maintained country roads. I definitely think that there is a fear about expressing that, especially to certain groups of people on this campus. . . I do think that people definitely judge you if they know that you're from a place where no one ever comes to college, quote on quote, and so I definitely shy away. I don't ever tell anybody the name of my hometown. . . usually, it works, and people

don't ask too many other questions, but when they do, there is that sense of ridicule or that sense of judgment about where I'm from.

Alicia made a subconscious decision not to provide the real location of her rural hometown to her peers and instead diverted their attention to Yosemite, a national park in the state of California, where her peers would be more inclined to show enthusiasm for her proximity to living near a national park. Alicia concealed her rural background from her peers because she has a "fear" about sharing her rural Latinx identity with certain groups of students who may "judge" her for coming from a rural town and region where "no one ever comes to college." Alicia has kept her rural background hidden from her peers. However, sometimes, when asked further questions, she ends up disclosing the location of her rural town. After revealing this information, she often felt judged and ridiculed by her non-rural peers.

Like Alicia, Taylor deterred attention from her rural Latinx identity by hiding the real location of her rural hometown whenever she is asked where she is from:

Taylor: So when I get asked that question, where are you from? What city? "Oh, I'm from the [San Joaquin Valley]." I don't know what else to say without lying.

Author: Do you think they think anything of you because you're from a small town?

Taylor: I feel like they just think, "Oh, she doesn't have as much money as my family does." I just feel like it's something like that because a small town is usually correlated with low income, working class. So, I'd say they just automatically put me in those boxes.

Author: How does it make you feel in that moment?

Taylor: A little embarrassed because, like, yes, it's true, but like, why do you care to that point? Why does it matter? We're all at the same place. We're all trying to strive for better success. I don't know why my [rural] background and my past have to follow me through negatively.

When asked about her hometown, Taylor shares that she is from the San Joaquin Valley but keeps her small town location private. She does not share her small-town location with peers to avoid comparisons of familial socioeconomic status, where her peers would use stereotypical references of small towns from the San Joaquin Valley as "low-income" and "working class" families. Taylor felt that her peers would "automatically" categorize her as poor, which caused her to be "embarrassed" when talking about her small town with peers.

Lack of Peer Affiliation and Isolation

For the rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study, not having a community of support was amplified throughout the pláticas. The students shared their challenges adapting to the social environment at the university due to the lack of affiliation with other rural Latinx undergraduate students from the San Joaquin Valley. Juan elaborated on his lack of belonging at the university:

Juan: I remember at orientation, you know, they tell you, "Oh, don't worry if you do not find your group of friends right away, like give it time, and by the third week, you will have met other students who share similar like backgrounds and interests as you," and I am now in my second year and have yet to find people, you know, like from the valley, or like with farm working backgrounds.

Author: How does that make you feel?

Juan: Alone. When I think about it, this whole university is bigger than my town like all these students probably would not fit in my town, yet I haven't found someone who has the same background as me. It makes you feel isolated and like you don't belong here because you can't relate to anyone, or you can't share your struggles because they wouldn't get it because they don't know what it means to be from the Valley.

Author: Yeah, I feel you. At UCLA, I only met one other person from the Valley. He was from Delano, which is bigger than Corcoran, and his parents were not farmworkers, but that made me feel like I was not alone; just having someone from the Valley made a huge difference to me. We became best friends and decided to become roommates just because of that.

Juan: Yeah, even one person can make a difference, right? Even if they are not from a small town, they at least know the Valley or have heard about your town.

In our plática, Juan and I exchanged experiences as two Latino men from rural migrant farm working backgrounds attending higher education institutions where we struggled to find a community with other rural Latinx students and its impact on our sense of (dis)belongingness. Juan was told during his summer orientation that he would make friends with students who have similar backgrounds and interests to him within the first few weeks of his first year. However, Juan shared that even after a year, he has not found friends who are either from rural backgrounds or from the Central Valley. The lack of friends who share his rural Latinx background made Juan feel isolated from the campus community and contributed to his sense of (dis)belongingness.

For Alondra, one of the most challenging aspects of navigating through the university has been not being able to "[find] people like me with similar backgrounds who understood me. I feel like I am the only person like me on this campus. I haven't met anyone with a similar background, like from a rural town." The lack of rural Latinx peers at the university has caused Alondra to reflect on whether she made the right decision to enroll at the university:

> I do not see people like me. I was starting to second guess myself, like, am I in the right school? Am I supposed to be here? I do not see people with the same background as me at all, and I haven't met someone to this day who has the same background as me, you know, small town agricultural parents like none of that. So, it really had me doubting myself because I was like, am I smart enough to be here? Am I gonna be able to pull through with this? I was really second-guessing myself.

The absence of other rural Latinx peers caused Alondra to "doubt" her enrollment at the university. As a second year at the university, like Juan, Alondra also noticed a lack of other rural Latinx students at the university. Furthermore, the absence of rural Latinx peers has also led Alondra to question whether she can succeed academically at the university without having and belonging to a community of rural Latinx peers.

Annie also shared similar sentiments of not belonging at the university based on the rarity of her rural Latinx identity at the university:

> Coming from like a rural background, I would say that, in a way, I know that I'm aware that our backgrounds are not common. You know, as a student, I'm already aware of that, but if anything for me, you know, in the beginning, I took it as like maybe I don't belong here, maybe I just got accepted because I'm a minority.

Just like Alondra, the absence of rural Latinx peers has caused Annie to doubt her belongingness at the university. As a second year at the university, Annie became aware that her rural Latinx identity was “not common” within the college campus. Moreover, Annie's uncommon rural Latinx identity led her to believe that she was accepted to the university solely because of her status as a “minority” student, dismissing her academic merit and other exceptional qualities and abilities that led to her admission to a research-intensive four-year university.

The lack of affiliation with other rural Latinx peers has been a major contribution to a sense of (dis)belongingness for the students in this study. In the pláticas, students described having a strong support of social networks in their rural communities, whereas at the university, they have been unable to form social connections with their peers, as Blue shared:

> Coming from a small town definitely impacted my sense of belonging because, back home, everything feels so tight-knit. Whereas here, everything is, I think of it as points on a map, and we're all spread out, and you have to really reach each other to build a connection.

In the pláticas with Blue, she shared how, in her small town, she formed tight-knit relationships with friends and community members. However, when she came to the university, she struggled to connect with other students:

> Establishing friendships is harder for most students who come from small towns, or at least it's harder to find those people who do because when you talk to someone new, they're either coming from the Bay Area or they're coming from Southern

> California. You are not meeting anyone from the middle. So, it's also harder to build relationships coming from a small town.

Blue explained that students from rural communities often face challenges in making friends with other students because most students she has met do not come from rural backgrounds. In a plática with Blue, she defined a sense of belonging as having "a home away from home;" however, at the university, Blue has yet to find a home away from home as she has not found a community of rural Latinx students that can understand her problems and share similar experiences at the university.

Envisioning Institutional Support Services and Spaces

The students shared that they have not received resources from the institution aimed towards students from rural backgrounds. Despite not currently having resources allocated to rural students, in the pláticas, students envisioned what institutional support would look like, as Alicia expressed:

> No one thinks about the rural Latinx population…and I do not know off the top of my head what that would look like if the university really cares about diversity and equity and inclusion is creating some type of program or funding something that services rural Latinx students would be the first thing they should do because that's where most of the students don't ever reach college are from.

Alicia called on the university by saying that if they "really care" about diversity, equity, and inclusion, the university would be funding programs specifically aimed toward rural students. In the pláticas, students proposed for the university to invest in developing a college transition program designed for rural Latinx students. For example, Catherine proposed for the university to create a summer program for rural Latinx students:

> For rural students, I think that a summer program would be really cool. I don't know if that would have to come from the Hispanic-Serving Institution funds, but it would be a good investment because I feel like there's a decently large or decently small but still big group of people who are from the [San Joaquin Valley] who come here and would benefit a lot from it.

Catherine proposed that the university should create a summer bridge program that would benefit rural Latinx students and help them with their college transition. Catherine suggested that the university should use the funds it gets by being a Hispanic-Serving Institution to develop the summer bridge program for rural Latinx students. Blue also noted that a summer bridge program would be beneficial for rural Latinx students and provided insight into how the university can develop one:

> For those that got accepted to the university, I would look at the demographic, and I would look at their location, and I would send emails to all of the [San Joaquin] Valley students, and I would offer the same thing that [the university's summer transition program] offered me a chance to immerse into [the university] and to figure out all of its resources prior to actually attending the school. I would basically do like copy and paste of my summer enrichment program, and I would just really serve it for [San Joaquin] Valley students. I would get them familiar with faculty and staff and set them up with mentors who also came from the [San Joaquin] Valley. You could have mentors that serve your majors or your identities, but I would probably also provide them like serving the location that they came from in hopes that they could really resonate with that person, like, "Oh, you're from Bakersfield?

> Okay, cool. Like, alright, or you're from Corcoran? Or you're from Kerman?" and just hope that they would stick with them throughout the four years.

Blue participated in the university's summer bridge program but shared how she felt that it lacked resources tailored toward rural Latinx students. Blue suggested that the university should recruit rural students from the San Joaquin Valley to join a college transition program specifically designed for students from that region. Blue's idea of a college transition program includes having rural Latinx students become familiar with faculty and resources and pairing students with mentors who are also from the San Joaquin Valley. Blue has envisioned a college transition program offering sustained mentorship to rural Latinx students. Her goal is for rural Latinx students to receive mentorship throughout their four years of college from someone who shares similar rural backgrounds and comes from the San Joaquin Valley.

The rural Latinx students also discussed having their own physical space on campus to meet other students who also come from rural communities and from the San Joaquin Valley, as discussed by Isabella:

> I would probably have a space, a rural community space, because then I could meet people who are also from the same area, and I could relate to their experiences, which I'm used to, and talk to them.

In the pláticas, Isabella shared that it is difficult for her to find other rural Latinx students because there is no physical space on campus for them to meet and form social connections with each other. Alondra also shared the same idea as Isabella that having a physical space on campus for rural Latinx students would be beneficial for rural students:

> [The University] should have an area for people like me because not only will it be more comfortable, but it like if any of you guys are struggling, you guys will have each other early on, you know, like get the help and meet together and not feel out single would be a great start to be in with as well as having an organization for people like me having a spot in the [student center] for people like me are things like that I feel like would be very good for people like me.

Alondra has identified a need for providing a dedicated physical space on campus for rural Latinx students. For Alondra, this space would enable them to interact with each other right from the beginning of their academic journey at the university, creating a sense of community.

In addition to having a physical space on campus, the students wanted a living-learning community for rural Latinx students as Maria shared:

> A community housing, I feel like they kind of have floors for everything except maybe rural, right? I feel that would be a really good addition. Having like a floor just of rural students who can like find like a sense of community on their floor because they're probably not gonna find it in their classes.

In the pláticas with Maria, she expressed not being able to connect with other rural Latinx students on campus, as she has not encountered any rural Latinx students in her courses. Maria explained that a dorm hall designated for rural students would provide a "sense of community" for rural Latinx students.

Discussion

The 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study were second-year students attending a research-intensive public university on California's Central Coast. Attending a

university that vastly differed from their rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley subjected the students to experiencing a sense of (dis)belongingness. This article expands the rural literature by centralizing the impact of rurality and its impact on rural Latinx undergraduate students' sense of belongingness. Moreover, this article also contributes significantly to the existing literature on the sense of belonging of Latinx college students as it primarily focuses on the impact of race, sex, gender, and socioeconomic status while overlooking the influence of rurality. Therefore, this study implemented Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging model to examine how rurality impacts students' sense of belonging in an urban college environment.

As the students navigated the college campus, they became aware that their rural Latinx backgrounds were not common in the campus community. According to Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging model, identification with the campus community is a significant influence on students' sense of belonging. However, the rural Latinx students in this study did not perceive their rural identities as being part of the campus community. The uncommonness of rural Latinx identities led these students to feel isolated. As a result, they consciously concealed their rural backgrounds to avoid "bad stereotypes," as Jose stated, and fit into the urban college environment. This finding on rural Latinx students being aware of negative rural stereotypes aligns with Dustan and Jaeger's (2016) and Cain and Willis's (2022) findings on how rural students, upon entering higher education, are subjected to rural stereotypes that depict rural students as uneducated and unintelligent. However, in Cain and Willi's (2022) study, the students' rural identities were not salient in their college experiences as they were in this study that found that students' rural

backgrounds made them conceal their rural Latinx identities and feel isolated in the urban college environment.

Moreover, many of the rural students in Dustan and Willis's (2016) study used linguistic cues to identify other students who may be from rural regions to form connections, and only a few decided to disassociate themselves from their rural backgrounds. However, the rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study consciously decided to conceal their rural backgrounds from peers and professors without having any physical or linguistic assistance to meet other rural Latinx students on the college campus. Furthermore, the literature describes rural students coming from low-income families (Mattingly & Schaefer, 2021). For the rural Latinx undergraduate students, their poor rural migrant farm working backgrounds also prompted them to conceal their rural Latinx identities. The rural Latinx students in this study avoided sharing their rural identities because, as Taylor stated, "they would automatically put me in those boxes" that describe rural students as low-income and working-class individuals.

Strayhorn's (2012) model of belonging emphasizes the significance of positive interpersonal relationships for students' sense of belonging. The higher education literature also points to the importance of developing social networks with other students and its positive impact on students' belonging and persistence (Museus et al., 2017; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021). However, after attending the university for one year, the rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study have not developed interpersonal connections with other rural Latinx students. After one full year at the university, the rural Latinx students have not developed interpersonal relationships with other rural Latinx peers. The rural Latinx students became aware of the uncommonness of their rural identities, which made

students believe that “maybe I do not belong here,” as stated by Annie, and started to feel isolated from the campus community. Previous studies on the higher education experiences of rural students have found that, during the college transition period, rural students struggle to develop social networks, leading to feelings of isolation from the campus community (Ganss, 2016). However, the rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study felt isolated because they failed to make social networks with other rural Latinx undergraduate students. Moreover, previous literature on rural students' higher education experiences did not connect students’ social isolation with their perceived sense of (dis)belongingness. This study bridges that gap by examining how rural students' backgrounds contributed to their awareness of the rarity of their rural Latinx identities and how the lack of institutional resources further exacerbated their sense of (dis)belonging.

As second-year students, they have not received institutional resources and support services geared toward students from rural backgrounds. Strayhorn’s (2012) sense of belonging model points to the importance of having support systems on campus as a way for students to develop an affiliation with the college community and increase students’ campus engagement. The third finding of this article highlights that despite not having resources for rural students, the rural Latinx undergraduate students envisioned institutional support that could mobilize their sense of belonging. For instance, rural Latinx undergraduate students are experiencing a sense of (dis)belonging, and Isabella suggests the university should have a "rural community space" to ease the social transition challenges. The rural Latinx undergraduate students are looking for a physical space on campus where they can connect with other students who share similar cultural backgrounds and experiences. This aligns with the higher education literature on counterspaces, which are spaces that promote

students' well-being and the acquisition of social capital. (Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Yosso and Lopez (2010) found that when Latinx students lack access to designated campus counterspaces, they often feel motivated to create their own spaces on campus, providing cultural validation and increasing social capital. However, the sense of (dis)belongingness of rural Latinx undergraduate students has led them to conceal their rural Latinx identities, making it harder for them to connect with peers who share similar backgrounds.

Recommendations for Future Research

From the findings, rural Latinx undergraduate students experience social challenges based on the uncommonness of their rural backgrounds in urban college environments. Researchers must consider the critical role that students' geographical backgrounds play in the sense of belonging of rural college students who come, as Alica stated, "from a place where no one ever comes to college." The existing literature on the sense of belongingness of college Students of Color has mainly focused on race, sex, gender, and socioeconomic status (Duran et al., 2020; Hussain & Jones, 2021; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021) and must make efforts to include the impact of rural backgrounds on students' sense of belonging. For the rural Latinx students in this study, their rural identities were the most salient in impacting their sense of (dis)belongingness while attending a university in an urban region.

Additionally, as more Latinx students enroll in higher education institutions, researchers have ramped up studies on the role of colleges and universities that are Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) to determine their "servings" (Garcia, 2019; Garcia & Cuellar, 2023). While these studies have provided important insights into the institutional support, academic outcomes, and social integration of Latinx students at HSIs, they often overlook the voices and experiences of rural Latinx students. Latinx students are not a

monolithic group, and their college experiences can vary significantly by their geographical backgrounds. Higher education research needs to focus on the distinct experiences of rural Latinx students, as stated by Annie, "[rural] backgrounds are not common," emphasizing that despite sharing the same racial background, their educational journeys are shaped by their unique rural identities.

Lastly, the pláticas for this article were conducted towards the end of the rural Latinx undergraduate students' fall quarter of their second year. Future research should conduct longitudinal studies from the college transition to college completion. Understanding the higher education experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students from beginning to end will provide significant insights into how colleges and universities can provide institutional resources for rural students to increase their sense of belonging to the university and ensure college completion.

Recommendations for Higher Education Practice

The university must assume a pivotal role in outreach and recruitment efforts targeting rural Latinx students, as the participants in this study have recognized the rarity of their rural Latinx identities within the academic community. Therefore, the institution must increase its recruitment efforts in rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley. By actively engaging with these communities, the university can not only attract more rural Latinx students but also ensure they feel valued and supported through their transition and college completion. This proactive approach is essential for creating an inclusive environment where rural Latinx students can feel represented in the campus community.

The lack of spatial familiarity (Puente et al., 2023) has led rural Latinx students to feel isolated and excluded from the college community. One of the key recommendations

from the rural Latinx undergraduate students was the establishment of a summer bridge program specifically designed for rural students. Summer bridge programs have been proven effective in helping first-generation college students, Students of Color, and low-income students adjust to college life, providing academic support, and fostering a sense of community (Howard & Sharpe, 2018; Johnson, 2016; Walpole et al., 2008). These programs typically offer an array of resources, such as tutoring, mentoring, and social activities that help ease the transition to college. Implementing a summer bridge program tailored for rural students would allow them to connect with peers who share similar backgrounds, forming social networks that can support them throughout their four years of college. This aligns with Strayhorn's (2012) models, which emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships in fostering students' sense of belonging. Such connections are crucial for rural students who might otherwise feel alienated in an urban-centric campus environment.

Additionally, despite attending a university designated as an HSI, the rural Latinx students still did not receive any resources specifically designed for Latinx students from rural backgrounds. In the pláticas with the students, it was revealed that although the university has a student center funded through the HSI grant, the rural Latinx students wished for their own physical space on campus. One student recommended that the university use the HSI grant to create programs specifically for rural students, which could also fund an organization to support rural students on campus. This recommendation is grounded in the literature on counterspaces, which highlights their importance in providing supportive environments where Students of Color can affirm their identities, share experiences, and build community (Aguilar-Hernandez, Benavides Lopez, & Gutierrez, 2021; Kornbluh Bell, Vierra, & Herrnstadt, 2022). By creating such spaces, the university

could better address the unique needs of rural Latinx students, fostering a greater sense of belonging and support within the campus community.

Conclusion

The study investigated the influence of rurality on the sense of belonging among rural Latinx students in an urban college environment. The findings revealed that the rural backgrounds of students significantly contributed to their feelings of (dis)belonging. The lack of university-provided resources specifically designed for rural students exacerbated these feelings, as students perceived that their rural Latinx identities were neither valued nor supported. Consequently, many students felt compelled to conceal their rural Latinx backgrounds and experienced a lack of affiliation with the broader campus community due to the low number of peers sharing similar identities. It is crucial for universities to develop and implement resources tailored to the needs of rural students, as this group has historically been underrepresented in both academic research and higher education practices. Addressing these gaps is essential not only for fostering a more inclusive environment but also for enhancing the overall educational experience and success of rural students.

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Chapter 3 is currently being prepared for submission for publication of the material. Daniel Ulises Rios Arroyo was the primary investigator and the sole author of this paper.

Chapter 4: A Valley of Aspirations: Examining the Factors Influencing the College Persistence of Rural Latinx Undergraduates from California's San Joaquin Valley

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the factors motivating the college persistence of 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students from California's San Joaquin Valley. Prior literature has depicted rural students and their families as having lower college-going aspirations. Utilizing a Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas (conversations) methodology, the study conducted 30 in-depth pláticas. The study, guided by Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, identified three themes: (1) career aspirations beyond agricultural work, (2) resisting racialized rural stereotypes, and (3) increasing social capital in rural Latinx communities. These findings highlight how these factors helped rural Latinx undergraduate students returning after their first year to persist in completing their college degrees by overcoming the negative influences of racism, socioeconomic discrimination, and lack of institutional programs to support persistence of rural Latinx students.

Keywords: College persistence, rural Latinx students, higher education, Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas

Introduction

A college education has become synonymous with greater economic opportunities (Chan, 2016). Additionally, it can make individuals less susceptible to unemployment (Cairó & Cainer, 2018; Hendi, 2017) and better health outcomes (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). Many first-generation Latinx students who come from low-income backgrounds strive to obtain a college degree not only to achieve economic stability but also to support their families and uplift their communities (Huber et al., 2023; Marrun, 2020). Although Latinx students have high enrollment rates in four-year universities, they have one of the lowest college graduation rates (Contreras & Contreras, 2015). Researchers have increased efforts over the years to examine factors that create barriers for Latinx students to graduate from college within four years (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011; Hernandez, 2019). Research indicates that factors such as campus racial climate, financial insecurities, and academic readiness are the dominant challenges impacting Latinx students, often leading to lower retention and persistence rates (Perez & Farruggia, 2022; Sánchez-Connally, 2018). However, research has ignored the potential significance of the impact of students' geographical backgrounds (i.e., rural, suburban, urban) as another factor that can impact students' higher education experiences.

Rural students have lower college enrollment rates than students from urban backgrounds (Cain & Class, 2023). Moreover, research on the higher education experiences and persistence of rural students is minimal, given that there is a small minority in higher education settings (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017). Furthermore, examining the college persistence of rural students is essential as their high school graduation rates have been increasing over the years, now surpassing those of non-rural students (Hartman et al., 2023).

College persistence has been defined as the continuous enrollment and progression of students toward completing their degree despite facing various obstacles (Porter, 1989; Krivoshey, 2014; Stewart et al., 2015). Literature on college persistence has identified the role of familial support, peer support, and cultural capital as critical factors in helping Latinx and Students of Color to continue with their college education (Azpeitia & Bacio, 2022; Covarrubias, 2021; Ovink & Veazey, 2011; Tovar, 2015).

Despite facing significant barriers to college access, rural students continue to enroll in higher education (Boettcher et al., 2022; Puente, 2022), highlighting the need for further research on their unique challenges and successes. Therefore, this article fills a significant gap in higher education literature by focusing specifically on the college persistence of rural Latinx students—an area that has been largely overlooked in previous research. Prior research on college persistence has predominantly utilized quantitative methods, often emphasizing the barriers that hinder students from completing their degrees. This article utilized a qualitative approach to analyze the factors that motivated rural Latinx students to persist in college, providing a nuanced understanding of their experiences. This article was guided by one research question: What factors motivate second-year undergraduate rural Latinx students to persist toward college completion?

Literature Review

The literature review will explore two distinct areas: factors influencing Latinx college persistence and the higher education experiences of rural students. While there is an extensive body of research on Latinx college persistence, focusing on what motivates these students to continue their education, studies on rural students' college experiences are relatively scarce, with even fewer addressing their persistence.

Factors Motivating Latinx Students College Persistence

There has been an increasing number of studies that examine the role of the family as a positive cultural value that emphasizes support and motivation for Latinx students' college persistence (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016; Sáenz et al., 2020). For example, Ojeda et al. (2011) studied the role of familism and parental support and encouragement on Mexican American men's college persistence. The scholars found that familism had a strong correlation with parental encouragement in terms of college support for students, and it also had a significant relation to college persistence. Moreover, Pérez and Taylor (2005) found that Latino students' academic outcomes and college persistence aspirations were highly influenced by capitalizing on the familial cultural wealth (knowledge, support, skills) their parents transmitted, suggesting that positive familial ties positively impact Latinx students' college persistence. Other studies found that familism cultural values do not create barriers to Latinx students' college transition but instead contribute to their educational success and college transition and keep Latinx students motivated to complete their college education as a way to repay their parents struggles and sacrifices (Cahill et al., 2021). Additionally, research has found that Latinx students are not only motivated to give back to their families but also to their communities (Perez Huber et al., 2018). In fact, Pérez Huber et al. (2018) challenged normative ways of thinking about college success often associated with educational and occupational achievements. Instead, they argued that Students of Color perceive college success as the act of giving back and uplifting their communities, countering dominant narratives that equate college success solely with individual financial gains.

Subsequently, research has also examined the role of peers on Latinx students' college persistence and aspirations to achieve their educational goals. Some researchers have found that the influence of peers on Latinx students' college outcomes and persistence is more significant than student-faculty interactions (Lamont Strayhorn, 2008; Perez II, 2017). For instance, Perez II (2017) utilized Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework to examine how 21 Latino males' academic persistence was influenced and sustained at one private four-year university and one public four-year state university in the northeast region of the country. Perez II (2017) identified Latinx students' overreliance on peer networks to seek forms of social capital rather than channeling resources established by the university or seeking assistance from faculty. Moreover, Pérez II and Sáenz (2017) found that Latinx students not only depended on their peers for social capital, but their peers provided them with instances of academic validation that fueled their persistence to accomplish their educational goals such as plans for graduate school and encouraged them to participate in undergraduate research programs. Moreover, studies have examined the impact of peer networks on Latinx students' academic outcomes and found that positive peer support increases students' academic outcomes (Baker, 2013; Cole & Espinoza, 2008; Sanchez-Connally, 2018). Sanchez-Connally (2018) found that Latinx peer networks contribute to Latinx students' self-efficacy from having emotional and academic support from peers.

Factors Motivating Rural Latinx Students College Persistence

Research indicates that rural students who leave their communities to pursue higher education often do not return, contributing to rural outmigration and the "brain drain" phenomenon. This trend is largely due to the scarcity of professional opportunities in rural areas, making urban centers more attractive for long-term career prospects (Carr & Kefalas,

2009; Estes et al., 2016). Studies have shown that rural students frequently view leaving for college as a pathway to greater opportunities and success, influenced by the cultural narrative that success equates to leaving their rural roots (Hektner 1994; Smeraldo Schell &Silva, 2020). However, despite this trend, numerous studies have highlighted that obtaining a college degree can also inspire rural students to return and contribute to their home communities, leveraging their education to enhance local development and well-being (Puente et al., 2023). This research suggests that many rural students pursue higher education with the intention of returning to their rural communities to support their rural hometowns, reflecting a strong sense of community commitment and a desire to counteract the adverse effects of outmigration.

Additionally, research has found that familial influences significantly impact rural Latinx students' motivations to complete their college degrees. For example, Stone et al. (2023) conducted a multiple-case study involving five Latina college students from rural communities who attended a large urban four-year university. The study examined how their rural values influenced their higher education experiences. The authors discovered that the motivations of rural Latina students to persist in completing their college education were deeply rooted in their strong familial and community ties. Specifically, Stone et al. (2023) highlighted the significant role of family matriarchs as primary motivators, inspiring rural Latina students to pursue higher education with the goal of becoming independent and self-reliant Latina women. Moreover, the study found that rural Latina students were driven by a commitment to obtain their college degrees in order to financially support their families. These findings underscore the importance of cultural and familial influences in shaping the persistence and educational aspirations of rural Latinx students, extending the current

understanding of college persistence among marginalized student populations. Moreover, Cabrera et al. (2012) found that rural Latinx students in Texas were driven to pursue higher education due to the encouraging messages they received from their parents.

Theoretical Framework

This study examined the factors that motivated rural Latinx undergraduate students to persist beyond their first year and toward college completion using Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) framework. This framework challenges cultural deficit thinking models that position the academic failure of Students of Color on their cultural backgrounds and families (Samuelson & Litzler, 2016). To counter such ideologies, Yosso (2005) uses the community cultural wealth (CCW) framework to highlight the rich forms of cultural assets that Students of Color utilize to navigate educational institutions. Yosso (2005) used a critical race theory (CRT) in education framework to develop community cultural wealth. CRT argues that racism in schools prohibits the educational advancements of Students of Color due to the persistent educational institutions, policies, and practices that discriminate and marginalize students based on race (Solórzano, 1998; Delgado Bernal, 2002). These frameworks position the lived experiences of students of color as central to the analysis of their racialized educational experiences, opportunities, and pathways.

Yosso (2005) argued that there is more to cultural capital than the narrow definitions scholarship provides and developed six interconnected forms of capital that Students of Color bring with them from their homes and families when entering and navigating the school system. The types of capital are familial, aspirational, linguistic, navigational, social, and resistant. This article examines how rural Latinx undergraduate students utilize three types of capital: (1) aspirational, (2) resistant, and (3) social to persist through their higher

education at a public, four-year, research-intensive university. The three forms of capitals used in this study are defined as:

1. Aspirational capital refers to the ability of students and their families to have and maintain high aspirational goals despite facing adversities.
2. Resistant capital refers to challenging social and educational inequalities and students' motivations to prove others wrong.
3. Social capital refers to the social networks and community resources that provide students with connections and support to navigate social institutions.

Utilizing Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework to examine the motivations of rural Latinx undergraduate students in progressing toward college completion provides insight into the capital sources they draw from as first-generation college students navigating higher education. This framework was specifically chosen due to the minimal scholarship on rural students' higher education experiences and the pervasive rural stereotypes that often position these students as lacking college-going aspirations. By employing the CCW framework as an asset-based perspective, the study aims to move away from deficit views on rural students. Furthermore, Yosso's (2005) CCW framework was used to guide both the implementation and analysis of the data, ensuring that the research highlights the strengths and resources rural Latinx students bring with them as they navigate higher education settings.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study examined the motivations influencing the college persistence of 15 rural Latinx college students from California's San Joaquin Valley attending a four-year research-intensive university in California's Central Coast. Qualitative studies are useful for understanding how participants make sense of their world and lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative approach adds to the scarcity of scholarly work on rural Latinx undergraduate students and their motivations to complete a college degree, providing us with insight into their lives and persistence.

Research Collaborators

Research collaborators were recruited through emails which included a background information section and an interest survey, were sent to multiple Latinx student organizations, student support programs dedicated to assisting low-income and first-generation students, and undergraduate student advisors from various academic departments. Additionally, the university's registrar facilitated this process by distributing the email to all enrolled undergraduate students. The inclusion criteria for eligibility were: (a) second-year student status, (b) having at least one farm working parent, (c) self-identification as Latinx, (d) first-generation college student status, and (e) residency in a rural or small town within California's San Joaquin Valley. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021) locale lookup map tool, along with local classifications, was utilized to verify the rural or town status of the participants' communities.

Fifteen rural Latinx undergraduate students, comprising thirteen women and two men, met the inclusion criteria and participated in this study. Three graduated from high

schools in fringe towns (locale code 31), which are towns within an urban cluster located 10 miles or less from an urbanized area (NCES, 2021). Nine students graduated from high schools in distant towns (locale code 32), defined as towns within an urban cluster situated more than 10 miles but less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area (NCES, 2021). Despite twelve students having graduated from high schools in town communities per the NCES (2021) locale classification, they all self-identified as rural individuals from the San Joaquin Valley. The San Joaquin Valley is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the United States but faces significant challenges, such as high unemployment and rural poverty rates (Flores-Landeros et al., 2022; Taylor & Martin, 2000). Additionally, the region has become a destination for Mexican and Latin American immigrants due to the substantial demand for agricultural labor (Hill & Hayes, 2003; Kissam et al., 2019).

Data Collection

This study utilized Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas as a culturally responsive and suitable methodology for research involving Latinx populations. Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) emphasize that pláticas transcend being merely a data collection method. Moreover, pláticas as a methodological approach disrupts traditional educational research where it requires the researcher to detach themselves from the research work (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). In contrast, pláticas as a methodology considers the epistemological positioning of the researcher and their relationship to both the research inquiry and the participants (Fierros & Delgado-Bernal, 2016). My positionality as a rural Latino researcher with farm working parents influenced the decision to use the pláticas methodology. As a rural Latino researcher, my background allows me to view the experiences of rural Latinx students from immigrant farm working backgrounds through an insider's lens. Ultimately, it

enables me to better understand the college persistence motivations of the rural Latinx undergraduate students from this study.

As a methodology, pláticas are grounded in five guiding principles as outlined by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016):

1. Pláticas are rooted in Chicana/Latina Feminist Theory.
2. Pláticas position participants as co-collaborators and co-constructors of knowledge in the research process.
3. Pláticas incorporate everyday lived experiences into the research inquiry.
4. Pláticas create a potential space for healing.
5. Pláticas depend on reciprocal relationships, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity.

The rural Latinx undergraduate students participated in two individual two-hour pláticas during the fall quarter of their second year at the university. The students had the choice of conducting the pláticas via Zoom or in person, with all opting for Zoom. To protect their identities, all students created their own pseudonyms. The first plática encouraged students to discuss their rural communities, high school experiences, pre-college concerns, and college transition. The second plática prompted reflections on their first-year experiences at the university, focusing on their sense of belonging and the factors that motivated them to persist through their first year. This article drew data from both pláticas.

Data Analysis

All pláticas were audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature. To ensure accuracy, I reviewed each transcript while following along with the corresponding audio recordings. Data analysis was conducted using Transana and followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process. The first step involved familiarizing

myself with the data. I initiated this process by writing brief analytical memos after each plática to capture emerging patterns. The second step was coding the data, for which I used both inductive and deductive approaches to generate initial data-driven codes (Saldaña, 2016). In the third step, I searched for themes based on the developed codes, creating separate categories for potential themes (Saldaña, 2016). The fourth step involved a second review of the themes to ensure they accurately reflected the students' experiences and voices, effectively addressing the study's research question. The fifth step was redefining and naming the themes to capture the essence of the findings. The final step involved writing the report and selecting quotes from the pláticas that represented the study's findings.

Findings

Using Yosso's community cultural wealth framework, three key themes emerged from the data analysis. First, rural Latinx undergraduate students were driven to complete their college education by their parents' aspirations, aiming for careers outside of agricultural work. Second, the students demonstrated resistant capital by challenging deficit-based narratives about rural communities. The third theme emphasized students' dedication to returning to their rural communities, enhancing social capital through increased connections, and uplifting the San Joaquin Valley's collective well-being.

Career Aspirations Beyond Agricultural Work

For rural Latinx undergraduate students, their families played a significant role in their motivation to persist through their college education. The students grew up in the United States hearing about their parents' immigration stories; now, as adults attending a four-year university, they use their parents' immigration and farm working experiences as motivation to continue to persist in completing their college education. In a plática, Alicia

shared how her farm working immigrant parents' experiences in the United States have motivated her to persist in completing her college education:

> I think a part of it was the combination of my parents not having finished college but also the fact that they are undocumented. It was kind of like a double whammy for them. They could not find work anywhere, and it was definitely very stressed in my household [of the] importance of education because they know that if you do not get an education, right, if you do not get your bachelor's and now if you do not get a master's as well, like the odds of you going into manual labor [are] a lot higher, and they do not want that for either me or my sister. That was something they definitely stressed and I was able to pick up on.

Alicia's parents have always stressed the importance of obtaining a college education. They had to leave Mexico and immigrate to the United States, leaving their family and not completing college in Mexico. Alicia's parents not only encouraged her to complete her bachelor's degree but also to consider obtaining an advanced degree. Her parents are aware, from their own experiences, that having a college education in the United States is of utmost importance when finding jobs outside of farm work or other "manual labor" jobs.

The feeling of responsibility to complete a college education was amplified throughout the pláticas. As Juan stated:

> In a way, I carry this responsibility to go to college and try my best to graduate just because my parents left Mexico without knowing the English language or without wealth, so I just want to make sure that they are proud of me because I owe this opportunity to them and I think that at the end, my college degree will be like a

> symbol or a symbolic thing that represents their sacrifices and hard work that they do every day by working in the fields and they tell me that a college education is a way out of the fields. So, they have always motivated me to get a college education.

Juan described feeling a "responsibility" to complete his college degree. He is motivated to continue his college education in order to one day represent his college degree as a "symbolic" representation of the sacrifices his parents made to immigrate to the United States and the ongoing hard work they do as farm workers. Juan's parents strongly support his pursuit of a college education as they see it as a "way out" of agricultural field work.

Alondra also shared that her parents' farm working immigrant backgrounds motivated her to persist in completing her college education:

> My parents work in agriculture. They told me that they worked twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week, to make money. . . and [my dad] always told me that he always dreamed of going to college. He did not have money to finish school. So, he has always told me that he wants me to do what he has never been able to finish. My parents just sacrificed so much to give me a better education. I feel that is a motivation for me. I could not imagine traveling on foot to the United States and leaving your own family behind, leaving everything you know, and going into something you do not even know and do not even know what to expect. That is what motivated me. They gave up everything they had. I do not want my parent's sacrifices to not mean anything.

Alondra recalled her parents' experiences as farm workers and the need to work seven days a week to "make money." Alondra's motive to persist in her college education is influenced by her father's dream of getting a college education that was taken away from

him by his socioeconomic reality in Mexico and having to immigrate to the United States. Alondra drew a motivation to persist in college from the sacrifices her parents made when they left Mexico for the United States in search of a better life. She used their experiences to persist in her goal to complete her college education and acknowledged that if she does not get a college education, her parents' sacrifices will "not mean anything."

The rural Latinx undergraduate students also noted that they are motivated to persist in their college education to financially support their immigrant farm working parents. Catherine shared how her parents have indirectly motivated her: "I think indirectly, they motivated me because I would see how tired they were and how hard it would be to have a job working in the fields." Moreover, growing up, she was always aware of her family's low-income socioeconomic status. In a plática with Catherine, she shared that growing up, she would hear her parents discuss falling behind on bills and rent. Catherine later disclosed that her motivation to persist in continuing her college education had been influenced by being away from home and not hearing about her parents' financial problems:

> When I'm over here, I don't hear about my parents falling behind on a payment or my dad's hours getting cut or just stuff like that. That's so normal to hear, but when you're not around it anymore, it's like, damn, that was putting so much stress and sadness on me. Unfortunately, I think one of the biggest motivations for coming back is the struggle and not having to witness it and then also thinking down the line that if I come back, I will be able to help my parents not have to suffer and struggle anymore.

Catherine shared that her motivation for returning to the university after going back home for the summer in her rural community was to temporarily escape her family's cycle

of poverty. When Catherine returns to university, she no longer hears about her parents' financial struggles that caused her "stress and sadness" while at home. Moreover, Catherine shared, "my college degree would impact my family by possibly helping my parents retire or just not have to work as hard. . . That would put us all at ease and make us feel more secure." Catherine described how her family will feel the financial impact upon completing her college degree, and one way she plans to use her college degree is to retire her parents from working in agricultural fields. Growing up in a rural community with immigrant farm working parents, Catherine experienced poverty and financial instability. However, as a college student, Catherine now sees her college degree as a pathway out of the vicious cycle of poverty for herself and her family.

Resisting Racialized Rural Stereotypes

The rural Latinx undergraduate students' motivations to persist in completing their college degrees were also bounded by their reality of living in a rural context because, for them, getting a college degree enables them to resist deficit myths about rural Latinx communities and their families. For example, Taylor explained:

> **Taylor:** I think it impacts [my family] positively, obviously. I feel like they will just be like alguien lo hizo, you know, if it wasn't us, it's her, and I feel like just be incredibly proud of me and know that I'm breaking down the stereotypical Mexican. Whatever it may be like, "Oh, they just work in the fields or whatever," you know, whatever they may think, but no, I'm gonna break out of that stereotype and move on into a life that's better for me and for my family to improve our way of living.
>
> **Author:** You mentioned breaking out of that stereotype. How will you challenge the stereotypes about rural students once you get your college degree?

Taylor: Definitely go against the stigma of like, oh, "small town," you know, "low-income Mexican," definitely go against that stigma of it all, and with this new generation of us kids going to college and making it through, I feel like it will just add a sense of like

we are all building our way up.

Taylor expressed an awareness of a deficit myth that plagues rural Latinx families from California's San Joaquin Valley, which describes them as "they just work in the fields." For Taylor, enrolling in college and eventually completing her degree motivated her to "break out of that stereotype" that continues to harm rural Latinx students as they pursue a college education. Moreover, Taylor recognized that she is not the only rural Latinx student who is "breaking out of that stereotype," as she claimed that there is a "new generation" of rural Latinx students from farm working backgrounds who are challenging deficit rural myths by enrolling in college and "building" their "way up" by persisting in completing their college education.

Blue was also aware of the portrayal of rural Latinx students as lacking college aspirations. Blue stated:

I don't agree with [the rural myth]. Like, look at me, look at us. So that's how I know I can never agree with that myth. We might not have the resources at the right time, but there are kids who definitely want more. . . but I would say those that are in rural [areas] and care about higher education they exist, and that myth should not apply to anyone, honestly.

Blue claimed that the rural myth depicting rural students as having low college aspirations cannot represent all rural students. Though rural Latinx students do not have the

resources geared toward college access, specifically access to four-year universities, Blue stated that rural Latinx students "want more" and that rural Latinx students who do "care about higher education" do "exist," consequently challenging any rural myth about rural students not having aspirations to attend and complete a college education.

In the pláticas with Jose, he shared about being persistent in completing his college education to challenge stereotypes that depict rural students as not being able to graduate from college:

> There are not a lot of students here from rural communities, and why not be part of that small fraction that you can finish your college degree? Why not break that stereotype that, you know, that a majority of rural students can't finish a college degree; nevertheless, a STEM degree? I think that being part of that small minority, in a way, does motivate me.

In the pláticas with Jose, he shared that at the university he has not met other students who are also from rural agricultural communities. Jose explained that not meeting other rural Latinx students has motivated him to be persistent in completing his college education. Jose recognized that there is a stereotype that depicts rural students as not being able to complete a college education, and he is motivated to "break that stereotype."

The rural Latinx undergraduate students also expressed that their migrant farm working families and communities have always encouraged students to pursue a college education. For example, Alondra shared:

> I feel like, in a way, you know how a lot of people leave their other countries to go chase the American dream; I feel we [rural Latinx students] do the same with school. Our sole purpose is to get a better education, like pursue [a college] education. That's

> what our parents want to see. That's what we've been taught. I feel that a lot of people in my town can agree with that. That's what we're meant to do, like pursue [a college] education, be bigger than our parents, and for people to say, "Oh, people from like nonurban places like they don't care about education," Yeah, we do. Do you think we want to go to the fields and work? No, we want bigger things too. We're small. We want more.

Alondra associated people wanting to immigrate to the United States to "chase the American dream" with rural Latinx students pursuing a college education at a university far away from their rural communities. Alondra expressed that rural Latinx students have been "taught" to pursue a college education as it is their "sole purpose" to pursue a college degree. Moreover, Alondra stated that her family is not the only one that recognizes the importance of going to college; other members of her rural community can also testify that they agreed on the importance of rural Latinx students going to college and getting a college degree. Alondra is also aware of a rural myth that falsely accuses rural Latinx families and students of not caring about their education; however, Alondra refuted the myth placed on rural Latinx students of wanting to work in the "fields" and states that rural Latinx students, though they come from rural communities, "want bigger things" and "want more" for themselves and their families.

Increasing Social Capital in Rural Communities

In the pláticas, the rural Latinx undergraduate students shared their educational trajectories from rural schooling to the university, highlighting the absence of social networks to guide them through the college-going processes. For example, Mimi is

motivated to persist in completing her college degree to return to her rural community and work as a college counselor:

> I want to become a counselor, and I want to help guide these students the way I wasn't able to, the way I wasn't guided. I just want to be able to support them as much as I can. Now that I know the whole role, I know all the steps. I might have skipped a few, but I can still learn them and teach it to them. That's my goal.

Mimi aimed to become a college counselor in her rural school district to "prevent" educational practices that she received from her own college counselors that did not provide her with college access resources, specifically resources for applying to four-year universities. In a plática, Mimi shared that "there is no one from the rural town that has completed their college degree from [this university]; I would be the first person to complete university like four-year university…I would be the first Latina to do that from [my rural community]." Mimi is dedicated to becoming a college counselor who will guide her rural students toward higher education, specifically four-year universities. Mimi, as a first-generation rural Latina college student, has now learned "all the steps" of navigating higher education, which she intends to share with her future students from her rural community.

Like Mimi, Blue also shared about the lack of educational resources in her rural community. This contributed to her motivation to persist in completing her college degree so she could return to her rural community to provide college access resources for rural Latinx students:

> Realistically and practically, what I want to do to give back to my hometown is to go into the education route because it's so messed up, and I would love to be able to work in, like, the County Office of Education in Fresno and use my [communication]

> degree to go into the county and fix it from like the [bottom] up. So, like I said, as a senior [in high school], I don't think I was thinking that big. I just wanted to get out, and I just wanted to make money, and I just wanted to have a fun life, but now I'm thinking about the community. Now, I'm thinking about how I can make myself fulfilled. . .so now I'm thinking about my hometown, whereas in high school when I was applying to college, I left it in the dust.

Blue intended to seek a college education to "get out" of her rural community to "make money," and when she was applying to colleges, she "left" the idea of returning to her rural community in the "dust." Now in her second year at the university, Blue retracted on her "make money" motif for seeking a college degree and has now begun to start thinking about how she can return to her rural community and make herself "fulfilled" and plans to work for the County office in Education at Fresno to provide higher education resources and connections to rural Latinx students.

In addition to wanting to improve the lack of social networks that assist students on a pathway toward a college degree, they also thought about the futures of their rural communities, where they envisioned themselves as agents of change. For instance, Catherine's background as a child of two immigrant farm workers made her aware of the poor working conditions that farm workers endure that oftentimes go unregulated. Catherine motivation to persist to complete her college degree is driven by her desire to become an agent of change in her rural town:

> I feel like it wouldn't be right for me to not [give back]…I think since I came to college, it's become a lot more personal it's because I am taught more things. I learned a lot more, and at first, coming from like a rural small town where my

parents didn't make a lot of money, I was trying to find what is what job I go with this major that might be the most money, and now it's more about like how can I make a difference? I don't really know what I would want to do, but I think working at some nonprofit like would help to educate people to know their options and know what they can do and just help people who are exploited . . . I don't know if that would just be like an activist or something, but yeah, like, I don't know what I would want to do, but I know it was something with people like farm workers.

Growing up in a low-income household, Catherine was mostly interested in attending college and obtaining a degree that would make her the "most money." As Catherine entered the university with an environmental science degree, she became more knowledgeable of issues around environmental justice and had a "personal" connection to the issues that migrant Latinx farm workers experience in the San Joaquin Valley. She now sees her college degree as a tool to "make a difference" in her rural community and not to make the "most money." Catherine aspired to return to the San Joaquin Valley and provide migrant farm workers who may be "exploited" and provide them with resources to educate farm workers about their rights as agricultural workers in California's San Joaquin Valley.

Like Catherine, Jose also envisioned himself as a transformative agent of change in his rural community and planned to return home after obtaining his college degrees:

Jose: I guess, in a way, I do want to go into medicine to give back to my community in that way through medicine. It would be my way of helping my town.

Author: Why through medicine?

Jose: I would say, you know, my town is very small, and they recently opened clinics and stuff like that which were never always there, and I guess from just being

there, there are not many Hispanic medical providers there, even though it is like a very majority Hispanic Spanish-speaking population.

Jose came from a rural town that is “a very small, unincorporated town, not very like, industrialized, super very big on agriculture” in the San Joaquin Valley. In recent years, his rural community has been establishing more medical facilities; however, Jose still sees a lack of Spanish medical providers in a region where the predominant population is of Hispanic-speaking background. Jose aspires to improve the social capital of his community by pursuing a medical degree after graduating from the university. He plans to return to his rural community and contribute by serving as a Spanish-speaking medical provider, thus leveraging his linguistic and cultural assets to meet the community's healthcare needs.

Discussion

To the author's knowledge, this study is one of the first to examine rural Latinx undergraduate students’ motivations to continue in college after their first year. Integrating community cultural wealth as the theoretical framework allowed for the examination of the motivation to persist of rural Latinx undergraduates and challenged monolithic ways of thinking about rural students and their families. Prior research has described rural parents as having low educational aspirations for their children based on their poor socioeconomic realities and the perceived irrelevance of a college degree to local rural industries, which often prioritize practical skills over higher education (Byun et al., 2012; Tieken, 2016). However, the rural Latinx undergraduate students were driven to continue their education at the university, inspired by their migrant farmworker parents' aspirational messages emphasizing the importance of a college degree for pursuing careers beyond agricultural labor.

As children of migrant agricultural workers, the rural Latinx undergraduate students' parents had always transmitted messages about the importance of getting a college degree. As Alica stated, "it was definitely very stressed in my household [of the] importance of education," the rural Latinx parents hold aspirations for their children to seek a way out of agricultural work, and for them, a college degree is "way out of the fields" as Juan shared. Using an asset-based framework such as Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, rural Latinx students from the San Joaquin Valley are living in a valley of aspirations where there is a strong desire to pursue a college education. The research collaborators and their parents do not see their rural realities (low-income, immigrant, and farm working family backgrounds) as inhibitors to not pursuing a college education; instead, they use their rural identities and migrant farm working backgrounds as a source of aspirational capital as motivations for their college persistence. This finding aligns with existing literature on Latinx parents and families, which often highlights a strong desire for their children to achieve better socioeconomic opportunities (Cabrera et al., 2012). This article expands on the existing literature by specifically situating the aspirations of rural Latinx students' parents within the context of their lived experiences in rural farm working communities. It emphasizes how these aspirations are not only about socioeconomic advancement but are also deeply tied to the realities of living in rural areas, where opportunities for higher education and professional careers are less accessible.

Furthermore, the students used their resistant capital to challenge racialized rural stereotypes placed on rural students as having lower college-going aspirations than urban background students. The students were motivated to, as Taylor stated, "[break] down stereotypical Mexican" that depicts rural Mexican families as "they just work in the fields."

The rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study were motivated to complete their college education to prove that the rural racialized stereotypes depicting them as not aspiring to leave their rural communities and working in farm fields hold no truth. Moreover, the rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study were aware that their rural Latinx identities were underrepresented in the university and were resistant to maintaining their aspirations to complete their college degrees. This finding aligns with Yosso's concept of resistant capital, emphasizing that Students of Color are aware of their underrepresentation in higher education and are willing to challenge the status quo on college campuses (Yosso, 2005; Kniess et al., 2015).

For rural students, pursuing higher education is difficult as they must decide to leave their families or stay in rural towns. Hektner (1994) and Smeraldo Schell and Silva (2020) described this phenomenon as rural students being confronted with the ideology that social mobility means leaving their rural towns and families behind. Moreover, the existing literature that posits rural students who pursue higher education outside their communities are unlikely to return. Scholars have attributed rural students' unwillingness to return to their rural communities to several factors, including the limited availability of professional opportunities, insufficient economic development, and a lack of infrastructure in rural areas that support the kinds of careers students are qualified for post-graduation (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Estes et al., 2016). However, the rural Latinx students in this study chose to leave their rural towns and families to pursue "a better education," with the goal of returning to their communities equipped with the resources and knowledge needed to foster improvement. They aimed to expand social networks in their rural hometowns and give back by advocating for social justice issues arising from the unique challenges of rural life. Pérez

Huber et al. (2018) critically expressed a need for researchers who work with Students of Color to disassociate how these students perceive success; they argued that success for Students of Color goes beyond completing a higher education degree but reflecting on their conceptualization of success as how they can be successful in giving back to the communities.

Author et al. (2023) further expanded on the conceptualization of success for rural Latinx as "not for individual economic benefits but rather to return to their rural communities and combat the structural and spatial injustices that their rural Latinx community members face" (p. 13). The research collaborators migrated out of their rural communities out of necessity to obtain a higher education degree because they have a personal connection to the issues their rural community members face; however, their migration is not permanent, and upon their return, they strive to become a positive change in their rural communities. Yosso's concept of social capital has traditionally been used to explore how sources of knowledge, such as family and peers, aid students in navigating higher education (Almeida et al., 2021; Moschetti et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005). However, this study extends the application of social capital by examining how rural Latinx undergraduate students from the San Joaquin Valley plan to expand the networks and connections of their younger rural Latinx peers by returning to their rural communities. For the rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study, social capital included the future-oriented vision of creating generational change through active involvement in their rural communities, leveraging their college education to foster connections and opportunities within the San Joaquin Valley.

Conclusion and Implications

This article extends Yosso's conceptualizations by emphasizing how the aspirational, resistant, and social capitals of these students are intricately tied to the racial and spatial context of the San Joaquin Valley. Their motivations and actions are not merely personal or familial but are profoundly influenced by their unique identities and backgrounds as poor, rural, and migrant farm working children, highlighting the critical role of the racial and spatial context in shaping the educational trajectories and community commitments of rural Latinx students in pursuit of their college degrees. The findings highlight the importance of familial connections for rural Latinx undergraduate students, who are motivated to complete their college education through parental encouragement. Universities should facilitate opportunities for these students' families to engage with the institution, ensuring parents are informed about their children's experiences despite the geographical distance. Additionally, given that many students aim to give back to their rural communities, universities should offer resources and support to help them achieve these goals. Researchers should adopt an asset-based approach when studying rural students to avoid perpetuating racialized rural stereotypes and instead emphasize their strengths and contributions.

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Chapter 4 is currently being prepared for submission for publication of the material. Daniel Ulises Rios Arroyo was the primary investigator and the sole author of this paper.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar
(Traveler, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks)
---Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called my Back*

Gloria Anzaldúa's quote, "Traveler, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks," encapsulates the essence of self-determination and resilience. Anzaldúa wrote this to highlight the continuous and dynamic process of creating one's path, particularly for those navigating multiple identities and cultural intersections. This quote profoundly relates to this dissertation, which explored how rural Latinx undergraduate students build their own bridges in higher education environments where their identities are often uncommon. This dissertation examined the interconnectedness of race and rurality by investigating the first-year college experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students from California's San Joaquin Valley attending a research-intensive public university on California's Central Coast. The study involved 15 second-year rural Latinx undergraduate students from various rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley, who participated in two Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). To provide a comprehensive analysis, the study focused on three distinct areas of higher education: college transition, belonging, and college persistence. These three focuses were presented as standalone scholarly articles, collectively illustrating the pipeline of experiences from the first-year challenges to the motivation for returning for the second year to complete their college education.

Overall, the findings of this dissertation provide new insights into higher education research by highlighting that the college transition of rural Latinx students is negatively impacted by the unwelcoming nature of urban collegiate environments toward rural Latinx identities. As students navigated the college campus, they began to experience a sense of

(dis)belonging, exacerbated by the lack of institutional resources, which heightened their disconnection from the university. Yet, the rural Latinx undergraduate students return to the university for their second year with the motivation to persist and complete their college degrees. Their motivations to continue and graduate from college were rooted in the strong familial, cultural, and geographical attachment to their rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley.

Summary of Findings

This dissertation examined the first-year college experience of 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students from California's San Joaquin Valley attending a research-intensive public four-year university on California's Central Coast. The following research questions guided the dissertation:

1. How does the transition from a rural community to an urban college environment impact the academic and social experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students?
2. How do urban-centric college social environments impact the ways rural Latinx undergraduate students understand their sense of belonging?
    a) How do rural Latinx undergraduate students believe the university can help create social support systems for them?
3. What factors motivate second-year undergraduate rural Latinx students to persist toward college completion?

By addressing these questions, the study provides a holistic analysis of the students' first-year experiences, focusing on three distinct areas of higher education: college transition, sense of belonging, and college persistence.

Chapter 2 was an empirical qualitative study that examined the college transition of rural Latinx undergraduate students from California's San Joaquin Valley as they moved to an urban college environment vastly different from the racial and spatial familiarity of their rural communities. This chapter addressed the first research question: How does the transition from a rural community to an urban college environment impact the academic and social experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students? The theoretical frameworks employed in this article included Bridging Multiple Worlds Theory (BMW) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). Using Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), three critical themes emerged from the study. The first finding revealed that rural Latinx students encountered significant obstacles in academic preparedness. Due to disparities in educational resources in rural school districts, these students felt less academically prepared compared to their peers from urban backgrounds. Additionally, the rural Latinx undergraduate students expressed difficulties in navigating unfamiliar racial dynamics. Coming from rural communities where Latinx families constituted the majority, these students found themselves as minorities at the university. The students experienced racial microaggressions from non-Latinx peers, which added a layer of complexity to their social integration into the university. Furthermore, the study found that rural Latinx students were socially disconnected from peers with wealthier backgrounds and experienced an unwelcoming social environment that excluded students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Lastly, despite the university's designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), rural Latinx undergraduate students felt a disconnect from their urban Latinx peers. Although they shared the same racial background, differences in rural and urban values and lifestyles created barriers to deeper connections. These findings underscore the multifaceted

challenges rural Latinx students face during their transition to urban college environments and highlight the need for more tailored support systems for rural Latinx undergraduate students.

Chapter 3 was also an empirical qualitative study that examined the sense of belonging of the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students. This chapter addressed the second research question: How do urban-centric college social environments impact the ways rural Latinx undergraduate students understand their sense of belonging? Additionally, it explored how rural Latinx undergraduate students believe the university can help create social support systems for them. The conceptual framework employed in this study was Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging model. Utilizing Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas, three critical themes emerged from the data analysis. The first finding revealed that due to the rarity of their rural Latinx backgrounds, students often concealed their identities from peers and professors. This concealment was a strategy to avoid being targeted by racialized rural stereotypes that depict rural students as academically and socioeconomically inferior to their urban counterparts. Secondly, as second-year students, the rural Latinx participants had not encountered any other rural Latinx peers from migrant farm working backgrounds in the San Joaquin Valley. This lack of community further contributed to their isolation. Moreover, the lack of institutional resources specifically tailored to their needs weakened their affiliation and connection to the university, leading to a persistent sense of (dis)belonging. These findings highlight the critical need for more inclusive social support systems and resources that acknowledge and address the unique experiences and challenges faced by rural Latinx students in urban college environments.

Chapter 4 concluded the examination of the first-year college experience of the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students. This qualitative study addressed the third research question: What factors motivate second-year undergraduate rural Latinx students to persist toward college completion? The goal of the study was to understand what led these students to return to the university for their second year and persist in completing their college degrees despite facing significant challenges in their first year, such as developing a sense of (dis)belonging and lacking peer and institutional support. The theoretical framework utilized in the study was Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, and three main themes emerged from the data analysis. The first theme identified that the students were motivated to complete their college education by upholding the aspirational dreams of their migrant farm working parents, who hoped their children would pursue careers outside of agricultural work. This familial aspiration served as a powerful motivator, driving the students to persevere through the obstacles they encountered. Secondly, the students were deeply invested in resisting racialized rural stereotypes that depicted rural Latinx families as "just working in the fields." Lastly, the rural Latinx undergraduate students were committed to fostering social capital in their rural communities. They aimed to create pathways for their younger rural Latinx peers to become the next generation of college-going students and envisioned contributing to a better future for their communities. These findings highlight the resilience and determination of rural Latinx students, emphasizing the importance of community cultural wealth in supporting their educational journeys.

Implications for Research

As Latinx students increasingly enroll in higher education institutions, research has increasingly focused on their experiences to inform policies and practices aimed at

improving their college transitions and completions. The number of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) has surged, with numerous two-year colleges and four-year universities designated as such. The mission of HSIs extends beyond merely increasing Latinx enrollment; it involves providing resources and services that foster student retention and persistence. Despite this progress, existing literature often overlooks the role of geographical background in shaping the higher education experiences of Latinx students, focusing predominantly on factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Given that Latinx students are a diverse group, it is crucial to investigate their higher education experiences through the lens of both racial and geographical factors. The rural Latinx students highlighted in this study demonstrate that there are significant differences between urban and rural Latinx students, underscoring the need to avoid treating all Latinx students as a monolithic group. By examining geographical backgrounds alongside other intersectional factors, researchers can provide a more nuanced and accurate analysis of the challenges these students face and their overall college experiences.

Conversely, while rural education research has grown, it has often failed to address the intersection of race and rurality. Rural communities have become increasingly diverse in recent years (Lichter, 2012), yet research has largely concentrated on rural white students, with limited attention given to rural Latinx and other students of color (Boettcher et al., 2022; Means, 2018; Puente, 2022; Puente et al., 2023). This oversight neglects the fact that rural students of color experience higher education environments differently from their rural white peers. Addressing this gap is vital to understanding the unique challenges faced by rural Latinx students and to developing effective support systems that foster their success. Research that focuses on rural Latinx students, from their transition into higher education to

their path toward completion, is crucial for creating equitable and inclusive educational environments that address their diverse needs and experiences.

Implication for Practice

This section presents considerations for secondary and postsecondary practitioners to consider when serving rural Latinx students to ensure a successful college transition and college completion. The recommendations are based on the empirical findings of the three articles in this study.

Increase Advanced Placement Courses: To better prepare rural students for the academic expectations of universities, rural school districts should increase the availability of Advanced Placement (AP) courses. This enhancement in curricular offerings will equip rural students with the necessary skills and knowledge, allowing them to transition more confidently to higher education. The need for such initiatives is linked to the findings from this study, which revealed that rural Latinx students felt academically underprepared compared to their urban peers, who had access to more resources and a greater number of AP courses during their high school years. Increasing access to these advanced educational opportunities is crucial for leveling the playing field and ensuring that rural students are not only prepared for the academic rigor of university life but can also have a successful college transition.

Create Rural College Partnerships: Universities should increase their efforts to recruit students from rural areas by creating partnerships with rural secondary schools. Rural Latinx students often transition to higher education with a limited understanding of academic and social expectations. To address this gap, universities should proactively reach out to rural school districts and build strong collaborative relationships aimed at recruiting and enrolling

rural students. Establishing these connections will help mitigate the social challenges faced by rural students, who may not have previously encountered peers from similar backgrounds. Partnerships between rural schools and universities should focus on several key initiatives. Universities should organize targeted outreach programs to introduce rural students and their families to the opportunities and resources available at four-year institutions. This includes hosting workshops on college application processes, such as filling out FAFSA forms, and arranging campus visits to offer students a tangible sense of university life. By providing early exposure to the academic environment and support systems of higher education, these partnerships can help bridge the gap between rural high schools and universities, facilitating a smoother transition for rural Latinx students. Investing in these strategic partnerships will not only enhance the recruitment and retention of rural students but also contribute to a more inclusive and diverse higher education student demographics.

Develop Institutional Resources Tailored for Rural Latinx Students: Despite attending a university designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), rural Latinx students reported a lack of resources specifically addressing their unique needs. To support the successful transition of rural Latinx undergraduate students into college and increase their likelihood of graduating, the first step would be to establish a summer bridge program tailored specifically for rural students. Summer bridge programs have demonstrated effectiveness in aiding first-generation college students, Students of Color, and low-income students by offering crucial academic support and cultivating a strong sense of community (Howard & Sharpe, 2018; Johnson, 2016; Walpole et al., 2008). These initiatives typically provide a variety of resources, including tutoring, mentoring, and social activities, which

facilitate a smoother transition into college life. Implementing such a program tailored for rural students would enable them to connect with peers with similar backgrounds, forming supportive social networks that last throughout their college years. This approach aligns with Strayhorn's (2012) models, which highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships in fostering a sense of belonging. These connections are crucial for rural students who might otherwise feel alienated in an urban-centric campus environment. Moreover, having a designated rural community space on the college campus can also encourage rural Latinx students to develop an affiliation with the university.

Conclusion

This dissertation examined the first-year college experiences of 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students from California's San Joaquin Valley attending a research-intensive public four-year university on California's Central Coast. The findings revealed that rural Latinx students faced significant academic and social challenges as they transitioned to the urban collegiate college environment. The rural Latinx undergraduate students come from rural communities where there is a lack of social and educational support for migrant farm working Latinx families. However, these students see the opportunity of obtaining a college degree as a way to enact transformative educational and social change in their rural communities by returning with the knowledge and resources gained from their college education. Just as their farm working parents cultivate the land to provide the state and country with substantial economic returns yet receive little support in return and continue to be exploited for their labor, the students in this study are the resilient seeds that will bring about growth and change in their communities, rooted in the strength and determination passed down through generations of migrant/immigrant farm working Latinx families. These

findings highlight the resilience and determination of rural Latinx students. By addressing these unique challenges, institutions can better support rural Latinx students from college transition to completion, ultimately contributing to more equitable and inclusive educational outcomes.

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