

“Like Human Beings”: Responsive Relationships and Institutional Flexibility at a Rural Community College

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Drawing on data from a program serving displaced workers and adult students, this article explores how students at a small rural-serving community college in North Carolina believe rurality influences their retention. We review the research and descriptive literature on rural community college challenges, advantages, and approaches to supporting non-traditional students. We then describe our research design, including characteristics of the study site and the program for displaced workers and adult students. Analyzing student interviews and staff reflections, we find that only half of interviewed students view the community in which their college is located as rural. For those who do consider the area rural, the loss of economic opportunity defines rurality, rather than constitutive attributes such as access to the natural environment or tightly-knit local relationships. Regardless of their perception of the community as rural or non-rural, all of our interviewees reported that responsive faculty and staff and institutional flexibility contributed to their postsecondary persistence. Rural constraints such as family commitments and lack of entertainment options may also ironically support retention for some students. We conclude with a discussion of implications of our study for policy, practice and research.

In the wake of the Great Recession, community colleges serve increasing populations of displaced workers and other adult students (Sepich, 2011; Taylor, Fry, Wang, Dockterman & Velasco, 2009). This is especially the case in rural communities (Katsinas, Mensel, Hagedorn, Friedel & D’Amico, 2012), which have faced farm closures or consolidation, the movement of industry overseas, contracting labor markets, growing unemployment, declining tax bases and weakening infrastructure—all largely the effects of agribusiness contraction, boom and bust cycles of extractive industries, and globalization (Berry, 1986; Collins & Quark, 2006; Davidson, 1996; Longworth, 2007; Schlosser, 2002; Wood, 2010). Although rural community colleges often face considerable challenges

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in providing accessible postsecondary education due to funding constraints and difficulty recruiting qualified faculty (Cejda, 2010; Eddy, 2007; Hicks & Jones, 2011; Katsinas, Tollefson & Reamey, 2008; Miller & Tuttle, 2007; Murray, 2005; Pennington, Williams & Karvonen, 2006), let alone meeting the needs of new adult student populations, it is possible that such institutions may also possess particular advantages that allow them to support non-traditional students more effectively than their non-rural counterparts. For example, displaced workers who return to school may find the experience daunting; but the presence of local kinship networks on campus or the lack of organizational complexity may help such students adjust to their postsecondary educational experiences (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Pennington, Williams & Karvonen, 2006; Smith, 2008).

This study explores how adult students and the staff of a retention program for displaced workers at one small, rural-serving community college—Richmond Community College (RCC)—view the role of rurality in postsecondary persistence. Accordingly, our research

addresses the following research question: In what ways, if at all, do staff and participants of the retention program for adult students and displaced workers at RCC think that rural context influenced their ability to persist?

Adult Students: An Emerging Challenge for Rural Community Colleges

Rural community colleges serve changing student populations, a consequence of increasing numbers of non-traditional students, displaced workers, and those seeking to update work skills (Pennington, Williams & Karvonen, 2006) in the context of overall larger rural than non-rural enrollment growth rates (Katsinas, et al., 2012). To ensure the academic success of such students, rural institutions are offering a variety of new support services and making programmatic adjustments, such as microcredentials (or credential stacking), and integrating developmental education into technical curricula (Garza & Eller, 1998).

Unfortunately, there is little research about the particular issues associated with supporting the retention and completion of adult students at rural community colleges. Some evidence suggests that the lack of on-campus child care coupled with transportation costs and time associated with traveling across long distances to attend school in remote areas militate against adult student retention. Given that poverty rates tend to be high in many rural areas, rising tuition may be a further barrier to retention (Katsinas, Alexander & Opp, 2003).

A recent case study of one rural community college finds that adult students value certain student support services (such as peer mentoring) and academic support services (mentoring by faculty) (Reid, 2010). However, absent comparison with non-rural sites, it is unclear whether the identified support services differ meaningfully from those that might be most highly valued by students at non-rural institutions. Another study finds no statistically significant differences in the practices used by rural and non-rural sites to retain the generally adult full-time students seeking associate degrees. But 10 of 25 retention practices were rated as less important by community college enrollment management administrators from rural institutions than by those from non-rural colleges. These included mandatory academic advising prior to registration each term, scheduled outside class time for interaction with faculty, child care services, learning communities, peer mentoring services, faculty mentoring of students, mid-term progress reports, regularly scheduled social integration activities, access to full-year schedule of course offerings, and support programs for racial/ethnic minorities (Dempsey, 2009). Reasons for these differences are not clear, however.

Other challenges to the capacity of rural community colleges to meet the needs of adult students and displaced workers are more fundamental, related to funding

mechanisms, the difficulties associated with recruiting and retaining faculty, and low status in the world of higher education. Finding sufficient resources to continue operating and to address the changing roles community colleges play is a particular obstacle in rural communities (Hicks & Jones, 2011; Katsinas, Tollefson & Reamey, 2008; Miller & Tuttle, 2007). Most community colleges are financed by a combination of state and local funding, and tuition (Education Commission of the States, 2000; Katsinas, 2007). However, the tax bases of rural community colleges are often small and lack the diversity that might help them weather difficult economic conditions (Pennington, Williams & Karvonen, 2006). Moreover, some states distribute funds to their community colleges using formulae based in part of student enrollments (Education Commission of the States, 2000). Because rural schools have smaller mean enrollments than others, this may mean smaller allocations (the average enrollment in fall 2000 at urban community colleges was 6,288, and 5,443 at suburban, compared to a mean enrollment of 2,100 at rural community colleges) (Hardy, & Katsinas, 2007). Such funding does not take into account the unique challenges that rural institutions face associated with offering programs to smaller, more dispersed student populations often confronted by serious barriers to their academic careers (Pennington, Williams & Karvonen, 2006).

A second major challenge is recruiting and retaining qualified faculty, staff and leadership (Cejda, 2010; Eddy, 2007; Hicks & Jones, 2011; Murray, 2005). Salary constraints, the need to assume multiple responsibilities, and lack of time for research activities may make rural community colleges unattractive to many potential faculty (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Hicks & Jones, 2011; Pennington, Williams & Karvonen, 2006). Rural locale can also be a concern to recruits; limited social, cultural and entertainment options; unfamiliarity or discomfort with local community norms and cultural expectations; and geographic isolation from urban centers may also discourage faculty new to a rural area (Eddy, 2007; Leist, 2007).

Funding and staffing issues in turn constrain the curricular offerings of rural community colleges. Small rural institutions are particularly challenged; only 80% of small rural community colleges offer academic programs and are less likely to provide accelerated learning options (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Small rural institutions are also less likely to provide on-campus child care and distance education than are larger and more urban or suburban sites, both important issues to adult students and displaced workers; lack of public transportation and local daycare exacerbates the issue.

Such challenges are made more difficult to address given the lack of status and political power wielded by community colleges relative to that of 4-year institutions and those offering graduate degrees. State policymakers—

who render decisions about the state funding provided to public education institutions—are often unaware of the central role that community colleges play in the educational, economic, and civic lives of rural communities (Pennington, Williams & Karvonen, 2006).

The Overlooked Advantages of Rural Community Colleges

Despite the hardships rural community colleges face, they can be “socially enabling institutions that improve and help form the identity of rural America, both in terms of individual communities and in terms of individuals themselves” (Miller & Tuttle, 2007, p. 126). Catalysts for the quality of life in rural places (Cavan, 1995), one advantage of rural community colleges is that they often serve as community centers or hubs (Leist, 2007), providing meeting space and other support for civic groups (Miller & Tuttle, 2007), and offering various educational, social, cultural, and entertainment programs and services to their local communities (Hardy, & Katsinas, 2007; Miller & Tuttle, 2007). Lacking the range of public and private resources often available in urban or suburban areas, rural communities frequently embrace local schools and colleges as key sites for community connection (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Lyson, 2002). Although community colleges in general are intended to facilitate such links, their significance in rural places may be greater given that they are often “the only game in town” (Katsinas, et al., 2012, p. 6).

Rural community colleges are also centers for a wide array of economic and workforce development efforts (Chesson & Rubin, 2002; Emery, 2008; Garza & Eller, 1998; Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011; Torres & Viterito, 2008). Traditionally, community colleges have contributed to local economic development as a local employer, preparing students for the workforce, offering basic skills education, conducting contract training, providing the first two years of higher education for some students, facilitating internships and cooperative education, providing prescreening services for employment, and offering placement services for graduates (Katsinas, 1994; Miller & Tuttle, 2007). But as rural community college missions change in response to political, economic and social forces, schools are assuming a range of new responsibilities to support economic development (Pennington, Williams & Karvonen, 2006). For instance, some community colleges form partnerships with local and potential businesses to provide rapid-response training or to develop degree programs that align with regional employer needs (Garza & Eller, 1998). Community colleges may also participate in state or regional consortia focused on improving regional markets, or serve as business incubators, providing office space and technical assistance for start-ups (Dabson, 2001; Drury, 2001; Torres & Viterito, 2008). However, large rural institutions have an advantage

that smaller community colleges lack: economies of scale render the provision of workforce training and economic development activities, and other regional services, more feasible (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007).

Rural community colleges tend to maintain close relationships with nearby public school systems. For example, to maximize limited local resources, rural community colleges often offer dual enrollment programs for high school students (Katsinas, 2007). Some rural institutions provide online courses for area public schools, summer programs for college-bound high school students, and family literacy services (Emery, 2008; Torres & Viterito, 2008). Rural community colleges accrue advantages because of such relationships, including opportunities to align secondary and postsecondary instructional pathways, early outreach to potential college students, and enhanced community support.

Rural-serving community colleges also play a critical role in helping rural youth and adults access postsecondary opportunities (Katsinas, et al., 2012). Nearly all rural community colleges provide a range of postsecondary offerings such as occupational programs, remedial and tutoring services, academic and career counseling, and employment and placement services, and most offer Adult Basic Education (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). A clear advantage of community colleges’ open-access policy in rural communities is that residents are offered higher education options that they might not otherwise have, the effects of which can be easily observed by the community as graduates obtain jobs, open new businesses, and exercise options to reside locally.

Because small and moderately-sized rural community colleges are less organizationally complex than their large rural and non-rural counterparts, an especial advantage of rural institutions is their ability to implement new initiatives quickly (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Smith, 2008). As insights from the sociology of organizations suggest, complicated bureaucratic systems and rigid hierarchies may be resistant to change (Scott, 2004) and are frequently subject to goal displacement, wherein organizations lose sight of their core mission as formalistic goals and institutional survival become more important (Merton, 1957). In the case of community colleges, organizational complexity may confuse or alienate students, contribute to faculty and staff role overload and duplication of effort, and ultimately jeopardize the institutional goal of providing locally-responsive, open-access postsecondary education (Jaggars, Jacobs & Little, 2012; Parilla, 1993).

Another advantage of rural community colleges may arise from their multiple missions and the presence of local kinship networks. Because rural-serving institutions address a wide range of educational and economic development needs, they often serve several generations of community members at one time, creating “unique family

Table 1.
Selected Richmond and Scotland County Demographics, as Compared to North Carolina and United States

	Richmond County	Scotland County	North Carolina	United States
Race & Ethnicity				
White	60.2%	46.5%	68.5%	72.4%
African American	30.6%	38.6%	21.5%	12.6%
Hispanic/Latino/a	5.9%	2.1%	8.4%	16.3%
Economic				
Per capita income	\$17,692	\$16,297	\$24,745	\$27,334
2006-2010 below poverty level	25.2%	29.5%	15.5%	13.8%
2011 average unemployment rate	13.9%	17.5%	10.5%	8.9%

Note. Data from U.S. Census <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html>; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/unemployment/RDLList2.asp?ST=NC>; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics <http://www.bls.gov/cps/>

environment[s]” (Pennington, Williams & Karvonen, 2006, p. 649) that may support student persistence.

The particular strengths of rural community colleges often remain unremarked, but the experience of the authors in developing, operating and evaluating rural community college programs for displaced workers and adult students led us to consider the possibility that rurality may have influenced participants’ persistence. The first author’s rural research interests aside, program staff routinely described their in-depth knowledge of students’ progress, lives and families, and discussed the ability of faculty and staff to navigate organizational systems quickly to meet student needs. These observations led the team to wonder how rurality might influence retention and completion, and whether any earlier research had explored the possibility. Finding that few studies in the community college literature explicitly explore rural issues, let alone in terms of adult student retention, we sought to examine them at a rural community college in North Carolina. In the following section, we turn to a description of the study site and its program for adult students and displaced workers, and then discuss our study design and methods.

Study Site and Design

Study Site

Richmond Community College (RCC) is located in Hamlet, North Carolina, and serves learners in the predominantly rural Richmond and Scotland Counties. More than 46,000 people live in Richmond County and over 36,000 in Scotland County (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). Hamlet itself has a total population of 6,495. According to the National Center for Education Data (NCES) (2012), RCC is situated in what is classified as a rural-fringe

area—that is, a Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, or rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. Established in the late 1800s, the community sits at the junction of two railroads, one running from New York to Florida, and the other from Wilmington, North Carolina to Alabama. In 1991, Hamlet received national attention when a fire at the Imperial chicken processing plant there killed 25 people and injured more than 50 others trapped behind locked fire doors (Smothers, 1991). Richmond and Scotland counties have experienced the recent closure of several large manufacturing plants, including textile mills, a hand sanitizer maker, a floor covering manufacturer, and a consumer packaging company. As a result, unemployment has increased from 7.6% in 2006 to a high of 14.0% in 2010, falling only slightly to 13.9% by 2011, in Richmond County; in Scotland County, unemployment rose dramatically from 8.9% in 2006 to 17.5% in 2011 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2012).

As shown in Table 1, a larger percentage of African Americans, but a smaller percentage of Hispanics, reside in RCC’s service area than in North Carolina and the United States as a whole. Per capita income in both counties is lower than in North Carolina and the nation, and the percent of residents living below the federal poverty line much larger. Unemployment rates in both counties are also higher than those across the state or the nation. Thus, RCC serves a population that is more racially but less ethnically diverse than the state or the nation as a whole, and more impoverished.

RCC was established in April of 1964 as the Richmond Technical Institute by the North Carolina Department of Community Colleges. Shortly thereafter, Richmond County voters authorized a bond issue and a tax levy for construction

and support of the Institute. The Institute became Richmond Technical College in 1980. The institution's name was again changed, to Richmond Community College, in 1987 after it applied for community college status from the North Carolina General Assembly.

RCC serves over 2,000 students in curriculum programs (roughly half attending full time) and more than 5,500 students in continuing education programs, with 63 full time and 134 part time faculty (NCES, 2012). The Carnegie Foundation (2012) classifies RCC as a small, rural-serving institution. Like other rural-serving institutions, its enrollment has climbed dramatically as a result of local layoffs and other effects of the recession, from 1,961 students in 2009 to 2,455 by 2011.

Forty percent of RCC students are African American, and 9% identify as American Indian/Alaska Native. Only about 2% are Hispanic. More than two-thirds (68%) of students are female, and nearly half (49%) are aged 25 and older. The institution offers 23 associate degree programs, 9 diploma programs, and 16 certificate programs. In addition, RCC is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award associate degrees and various programs of study are accredited by relevant agencies.

Displaced Workers and Adult Students Program

In January of 2010, RCC was awarded funding via a special competition of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) focused on innovative community college strategies for supporting displaced workers and adult students. RCC's program is comprehensive, integrating an enrollment and placement model with an enhanced package of student services designed to address the special needs of the target learner population. The project also integrates occupational skills into the academic curriculum through application of ACT's WorkKeys methodologies and instruments, a job skills assessment and micro-credentialing system. Test-takers who earn passing scores on three WorkKeys assessments are eligible to receive the National Career Readiness Certificate. Other project components include identification of emerging high-growth job clusters, definition of the specific skill sets required by employers, and integration of credentialing processes certifying competencies in those skills within the curriculum. The program has served 560 students as of the writing of this manuscript.

The program's specific array of retention services reflects research suggesting that comprehensive and integrated academic, financial and social/ecological support facilitates persistence, particularly of low-income students (Bean, 2001; Boylan, 2002; Lotkowski, Robins & Noeth, 2004; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2001; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Staff sought to infuse such supports throughout students' tenure, from recruitment, application

and enrollment to program completion and job placement. They did not, however, consider how the institution's rurality might constrain or enable their retention efforts.

Academic supports. Academic success appears to encourage further academic success (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002; Lotkowski, Robins & Noeth, 2004). But to help displaced workers and adult students achieve early successes despite deficiencies, various academic interventions may be required to accelerate acquisition of knowledge and skills required by programs of study (Fincher, 2010; Perin, 2006). Program staff offered services to identify academic needs, provide appropriate intervention, and accelerate learning outcomes. Displaced workers who had not attended school for many years often required supplemental instruction or tutoring to enhance math, reading, or writing skills—but without the overall threats to retention posed by drawn out developmental education experiences, such as exhausted education funds or loss of student interest (Bailey, 2009). To ease the transition from the world of work to college (Brown, 2002), the program coordinated a range of orientation opportunities, including joint registration and orientation sessions, a required Success and Study Skills course for program participants, and workshops to help students acclimate to online courses. Throughout their tenures at RCC, program staff monitored student progress and provided referrals to tutoring, study groups, academic counseling, and additional supplemental instructional opportunities as needed.

Financial supports. For many displaced workers and other low-income adult students, poverty can be a serious barrier to retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2007). The less financially secure a student, the less likely she or he will be to persist to graduation, given the pressing need to balance survival with the costs of education (Gerardi, 1996; Wessel, Bell, McPherson, Costello, & Jones, 2006). Program staff sought to help students identify and take advantage of all available financial resources. Supports included collaborative RCC-Employment Security Commission outreach to displaced workers with information about Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) funds for retraining, and assistance with completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), financial assistance workshops, financial literacy and debt management training, and referrals to student support services and community social services during times of crisis. Learning that local employers increasingly required WorkKeys certification of workplace competencies from applicants, program staff also encouraged participants to complete WorkKeys assessments to obtain the relevant microcredentials, and used program funds to waive costs for students. Career center referrals, a listserv announcing new job opportunities, and an annual

job fair were additional strategies staff employed to help students address financial challenges to college completion.

Social supports. Low-income and adult students may struggle to find their place on campus, with challenges to their ability to make social and institutional connections, such as competing commitments to family and work, lack of a cohort of students with similar backgrounds and experiences, and economic constraints (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Roueche & Roueche, 1993). Unfortunately, students who fail to connect with their campus are more likely to drop out (Astin, 1984; Braxton & McClendon, 2002; Tinto, 1993). To help students overcome any potential barriers to campus integration, the program coordinated efforts to build social support networks among participants, such as peer study and interest groups and cohort social activities. Staff also hosted workshops orienting students to college departments and services and made collaborative presentations to students with faculty and staff from other offices. Referrals to student services and community social services, and counseling and intervention provided by program staff during times of especial difficulty, additionally helped students address their social and emotional needs.

Study Design

Because our purpose was to explore whether and how staff and program participants thought the rurality of RCC played a role in retention (and to suggest a potential area for further investigation), we employed a multimethod case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). We began by conducting a literature review of research on rural community college approaches to supporting adult students. Finding little, we expanded our search to include research on rural community colleges in general. We identified relevant materials by searching the education research databases (ERIC and Education Research Complete) and the internet, and by requesting article recommendations from the Rural Community College Alliance.

Once we were familiar with the research on rural community colleges, we collected data at the study site. Data sources included semi-structured telephone interviews with 11 program participants during April and May 2012; program documents; U.S. Census and state demographic and economic indicators; and written staff reflections.

Program staff selected for interview participation a purposive sample of 20 students representing a diversity of majors and progress through their studies. The evaluator then attempted to contact each student by telephone to explain the study and invite their participation. One student declined to be interviewed, eight did not return telephone calls, and 11 agreed to participate. Interviews were conducted by telephone, lasted approximately 30 minutes and were recorded by the interviewer in the form

of detailed interview notes taken during and immediately after the completion of the interview. In addition to items soliciting information about program services, our interview protocol posed questions such as:

- Do you think of this area as rural? Please help me understand why or why not.
- In what ways do you think that the rural nature of RCC has made staying in school easier for you?
- In what ways do you think that the rural nature of RCC has made staying in school harder for you?

All qualitative data resulting from interviews and staff reflections were analyzed by means of thematic analysis whereby the team identified themes via induction (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2001; Saldana, 2009). We relied on pattern-matching as our key analytic technique (Campbell, 1975; Trochim, 1989), comparing our empirically derived patterns with our proposition that rurality might have played some role in program participant retention, and using the constant comparison method (Patton, 2001) to reassess each new code or grouping for similarities to and differences from other codes, until we were no longer able to identify additional categories. Specifically, we segmented interview and staff reflection data into thematic codes through iterative inductive analysis, documenting any replicating categories and constantly comparing substantive codes. Once significant data were categorized, finer coding was applied using patterns emerging within each coded set. Finally, we identified core codes, consolidated redundant codes, and again reviewed themes to clarify how they supported or problematized our proposition.

To validate the accuracy of interview quotes selected for use in this article, we conducted member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) during January and February 2013 with our interviewees. We attempted to contact each interviewee by telephone to request their feedback and ultimately were able to reach 7 of the 11 interviewees. The telephone numbers of three participants were disconnected, and a fourth interviewee did not return our calls. All of the interviewees we reached agreed to review their quotes. We sent each interviewee a version of this article by email or by post, with relevant quotes highlighted, and requested that they indicate by telephone or email whether or not each quote correctly reflected what they recalled saying during the interview. We also asked that each interviewee discuss with us how to correct quotes in the event that they found inaccuracies. All seven communicated that their quotes were accurate.

We recognize the limitations of our study and the resultant validity threats. Our sample is admittedly small; in total we only interviewed roughly two percent of program participants, and did not interview non-participants. In addition, our study did not compare student

and staff views of advantages at rural and non-rural institutions. Given these limitations, our findings should only be interpreted as both preliminary and exploratory.

A Note on Classification

There are two major classification systems for community college settings. The American Association of Community Colleges employs a categorization scheme based on the U.S. Department of Education's measure of urbanicity (Katsinas, Mensel, Hagedorn, Friedel, & D'Amico, 2012). Codes include rural, small town, large town, fringe of mid-sized city, mid-sized city, fringe of large city, and large city. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Basic Classification, on the other hand, includes two dimensions that provide a more nuanced analysis of rural institutions: locale of service area (e.g., rural-serving, suburban-serving, urban-serving) and institutional size (small, medium, large) (Carnegie Foundation, 2011). Suburban and urban community colleges are subcategorized differently, by the presence of single or multiple campuses.

For our purposes here, we employ the Carnegie Foundation's Basic Classification system. Despite our recognition that enrollment size represents an important aspect of rural institutional diversity, we often refer in this article more broadly to the rurality of community colleges to combine various constitutive rural characteristics (e.g., small population size, low population density, distance from metropolitan areas, etc.). Our perspective on rurality, however, is also informed by an understanding that, as useful as official classifications can be for making broad generalizations about locales and people, conceptions of place are socially constructed and therefore significantly subjective and relative (Flora & Flora, 2004; Scott, 1998). We strive to include both the formal Basic Classification categorizations and the subjective insights of our study participants as we explore how they saw rurality influencing, or not influencing, their ability to persist.

Findings

We interviewed 11 program participants during April and May of 2012. Among the 11, four were women, two were graduates, and all were pursuing or had earned an associate's degree. Among current students, two were in the human services program, two in the associate's of arts program, and one each in computer information management, health care management, industrial maintenance, and criminal justice. One graduate had earned an associate's degree in business administration, and the other in industrial systems technology. Two program staff members were also asked to write reflections about how they saw rurality supporting or constraining the retention of program participants.

Rurality as Opportunity Loss

To begin to explore student perspectives on how rurality influenced their postsecondary experiences, we first asked interviewees whether they thought of the community in which RCC is situated as rural, and for what reasons. Six of the 11 respondents reported that they considered the area to be rural. Asked what about the community made it rural, all but one student indicated that the loss of manufacturing and associated jobs was the defining characteristic. As one respondent put it, "Yes, I would say this is a rural location. Probably at one time it was not quite as rural—when there were more companies in the area." Prompted to explain in what way the community is rural, another said, "There's not many job opportunities here. It's very industrial, and we used to have a lot of manufacturing. But we're losing industry and plants have been closing." Asked whether the area is rural, yet another interviewee replied, "I think so. We used to be a manufacturing area. Now that they've left here we're at the top of the list for counties that caters to retail and sales. Up above us not too far is farm work. In Richmond County, it seems to be more rural. There's not a lot of business opportunities around here." Rurality, in this view, is largely the experience of opportunity loss. For these students, a place is rural if it has experienced economic decline, with loss of businesses and contracting labor markets.

Only three interviewees who considered the area rural mentioned other attributes. One noted that "there are no big cities here," and another reported that "it's very spread out, but there are clusters where it's very populated." The third explained, "I would say it is rural because Rockingham is not really that big. It's in a good location...Not many suburbs around here." For these respondents, then, the rurality of the community is associated with a relative lack of cities. One of these students further suggested that the area was rural because the college was "not set in the middle of a housing community." In her thinking, rurality means not only lack of urbanization, but also of particular racialized manifestations of poverty.

Right-Sized, Not Rural

On the other hand, five respondents did not think of the community as rural. One clarified that this was because he hailed from a very small town, smaller than the area surrounding the college; by contrast, then, the community did not strike him as especially rural or particularly "citified." As he put it:

This area doesn't seem too rural to me but it's because I'm from a town smaller than this. My friends from Rockingham, however, do find it to be a small town, though. I think compared to the other local cities and towns around here, it's one

of the biggest. Seems like the small businesses do well here. It's not that it's too cityfied, though. When you turn into the campus you don't feel like you're in a big area; it's quiet and peaceful and kind of off to itself.

Another interviewee reported that the community had been rural, but was no longer:

It used to be what you would call rural, but it's grown up now. I used to think it was rural because it was a small community. Along here it's not really rural anymore, but it used to be because there wasn't much between Rockingham and Hamlet where the school is. Now you bump into businesses—WalMart, gas station, lot of businesses.

For such students, the area is not rural by comparison to other places or times. And for one respondent, the college's location along a state highway precluded its rurality: "I don't think of it as being as rural as you might think because it's on a highway. It's not out in the country where you have to look for it. If you get on 74 from Charlotte you'll pass the school so I don't think it would be considered rural."

The other two interviewees who did not perceive the community to be rural indicated that the small campus and class sizes were more significant in their experience. "It doesn't really seem rural...By being a small school and not having large classrooms, teachers are able to sit down with you one-on-one," explained one. The other explained, "I think that it's not the area, but it's just the teachers and not having too many people in the classes." According to these respondents, then, a small campus serving a small student population encourages the accessibility of faculty and staff.

Responsive Relationships

Whether or not they considered the area rural, all 11 respondents reported that the responsiveness of faculty and staff, and the relationships facilitated by a small community, made staying in school easier for them and had a positive impact on their retention. As one program staff member explained in her written reflections, "The students know each other as well as a vast number of the college personnel (e.g. many attend same church, know parents/grandparents or brothers/sisters, public school attendance, attend athletic events, etc.)" Multiplex relationships—in which people know one another in a variety of roles and contexts—are characteristic of rural communities and often embed residents in multiple, interconnected webs of obligation and support (Beggs, Haines, & Hurlbert, 1996; Flora & Flora, 2004). As a result, rural community members are more likely to respond to each other in ways that do not threaten their multiple commitments but rather support and maintain them.

Instead of the standardized and alienating bureaucratic procedures they imagined likely at larger, more urban institutions, some students thought that local relationships and networks helped ensure that faculty and staff at RCC were accessible and helpful. As one student said, "Everyone knows everyone here. They treat each other like human beings...People know you, so they try harder to help you, talk to you. You are not just a number. This is my third community college and this is the best one on a personal level." According to another respondent, "You have a better experience with the teachers. They're not just here to get a paycheck. They can't do that in a university where they have so many people that you can't get to them." One student contrasted his own rural community college experience favorably with his son's experience at an urban 4-year institution: "I have a son attending [university] in Greensboro and I listen to him talk about that compared to what we get in the community college. My son talks like they don't help you too much but that's not the case at the community college—the instructors try to help." Another student said, "At no time have I walked into my advisor's office or another office and not had a question answered."

Responsiveness may be particularly important to retention during times of student crisis. One program staff member described RCC's response to a student whose house burned down on New Year's Day:

Several months [ago], the student came to [the program] office with tears swelling [sic] in his eyes and asked if we could talk... I was able to ascertain his immediate needs and request permission from [RCC administrators] to send an email to the staff and faculty to request items that were desperately needed... Within 15 minutes of the meeting with the student, I had met with one vice-president and had spoken with another...and received their endorsement to move forward with the request. At which time, an email was sent and the gracious response benefitted the student and his family immensely...The student never missed one complete day of class...In a close knit community, tragic events like this seem to hit home, so to speak, and led to an outpouring of support. The phrase "It could be me" or "It happened to me or a family member" is more easily understood when the community is closely knit, and the tragedy is not disseminated and diluted over large populations.

The accessibility of faculty and staff also meant that students were able to build relationships with mentors. Describing his interactions with staff of the displaced workers program, an interviewee explained, "They were very encouraging to me and kept me wanting to stay in school. When I wanted to give up, I had someone to talk

to. They were very helpful to me at that time. If it wouldn't have been for them being here at that point in time, I think I might have given up."

Not only did rurality seem to influence student-teacher relationships, it also facilitated a sense of cohort among students. As one student put it, "I got to know teachers better, and [student name] and me got to be pretty close...A lot of people were in the same boat [losing jobs due to manufacturing loss] and went to school too, so there was a real tight knit family feeling, not like if I went to school in Charlotte or Greensboro."

Institutional Flexibility

Students and staff alike noted another advantage of their community college, regardless of their perception of its rurality: institutional systems and procedures could be quickly modified to accommodate student needs. For instance, a program staff member discussed the ease with which he was able to negotiate with a technical program colleague to allow a displaced worker to enroll in an oversubscribed course, as follows.

With time limits established by TAA/WIA, the student was aware that she would not have an opportunity to complete all of the prerequisite courses and complete the program within the allotted time... The director informed me that the class was full and that the next scheduled course was several months away. I explained the student's situation, and the director allowed the student to enroll... The student completed the course while at the same time making the President's list.

Students themselves noted the ability of program staff to navigate institutional systems and accommodate student needs quickly. According to one such student, program staff located information to help him graduate on time:

I talked with [a program staff member] recently and thought I'd be able to complete school this semester, but found out that my advisor didn't instruct me about a prerequisite class that I needed. [The program staff member] looked into this for me. She did the footwork and found out that I could still get a diploma.

Empowered by Limits

Interestingly, asked in what ways the rurality of RCC made staying in school easier and improved retention, one student noted the lack of local social and entertainment options. As she explained, "There's not much to do here. There's nowhere to go. There's no social anything, unless you belong to a big church thing... So it's [going to school] like the only

thing to do." For this student, the dearth of local distractions enabled her to focus her energies on completing her studies. According to a staff member, retention may also be aided by students' local commitments and financial constraints: In rural community college settings, displaced/dis-located worker-students seldom feel compelled or are financially able to relocate primarily due to family ties or other personal obligations; consequently, these students attend the local two year college and seek employment in the local area. In her view, the rootedness of rural adult students supports retention because they have few other options and are nonetheless enmeshed in local and family networks of obligation.

The ironically enabling strength of limits is clear in both comments. Although some students view rurality as defined by opportunity loss, rural scarcity may in fact mobilize other students to persist in their postsecondary studies.

Conclusions and Implications

We find interesting how relative are students' views about the rurality of their college community. Roughly half of those we spoke with considered the area as rural given its contracting labor market and small population. But for others the community is not particularly rural, whether by comparison to other areas or eras or by virtue of its location along a state highway; and to some of these respondents, the more important characteristic of the school is its small size. This supports our earlier observation that rurality is subjective and socially constructed, such that residents may view their communities very differently than they are officially classified.

Among those interviewees who do view the community as rural, we are particularly struck by their definition of rurality as loss—of manufacturing; stable, moderate-wage jobs; and population. For such students, what is rural now was once not rural because of thriving local industry and employment; given the effects of globalization on the economic health of many rural communities, this is particularly ironic and poignant. Moreover, their sense of rurality is as a negative category, a space characterized more by what is lacking than what is present, including population, housing developments, labor opportunities, and even entertainment options. Students did not mention other possible constitutive attributes of rural life, such as access and relationship to the natural environment, ability to engage in self-sustenance activities such as hunting and gardening, local community power dynamics, or tightly-knit resident relationships (although interviewees noted this feature in response to later questions, they did not include it in their definition of rurality).

We think that this sense of loss represents an educative opportunity. As Kelly (2009) suggests, acknowledging and understanding the loss associated with rural displacement

enables “a critical stance toward loss” and ultimately, opportunities “to reexamine old certainties, to provoke new knowledge, and to forge new relations” (p. 3). Were we to encounter our participants’ understandings of rurality in a classroom, we might pause to help students think about how, by what means, and in whose interests their rural community has changed over time—and then we might facilitate a discussion about possibilities for recovery and restoration given new contexts.

Regardless of their sense of the community’s rurality, all of the students with whom we talked report that the accessibility and responsiveness of faculty and staff made it easier for them to remain in school. The supportive relationships, and organizational legibility and informality, afforded by RCC are clear advantages in the minds of both students and program staff. These characteristics are not exclusive to rural community colleges, of course. But because rural community colleges are on average smaller and less institutionally complex than their non-rural counterparts (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007), we suspect they may be important components of rural community college experiences. Given the reported significance of responsive faculty and organizational navigability to all our respondents, and the relative importance of rurality to only 6 of our 11 interviewees, we conclude that while rurality may appear as a benefit to some students, others find the experience of a small campus more immediate and more clearly related to their persistence.

We suggest that our research, albeit preliminary, has several implications for policy, practice and research. It appears to us that the small population size, multiplex relationships, and human organizational scale of the RCC community facilitate faculty and staff responsiveness to students. The embeddedness of rural students in local relationships may help them connect even more fully to the campus and needed support services. In our view, this represents an especial strength that rural institutions might deliberately foster through raising faculty and staff awareness about the impact of local relationships on retention, ensuring that institutional procedures remain responsive and clear to students, and marketing the value of rurality, supportive faculty, and organizational legibility to potential students and employees.

Although only two study participants observed that rural constraints may in fact facilitate postsecondary persistence, we think this suggests a problematization of deficit views of rural life. It calls into question the proposition that lack of cosmopolitan options necessarily limits life chances. Some rural residents, youth in particular, seek realization of their aspirations elsewhere, but others imagine futures meaningfully constituted by boundaries geographic, familial or traditional (Burnell, 2003; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Kirkpatrick Johnson, Elder & Stern, 2005). Decisions to honor local and family commitments, decisions that may

appear economically irrational, conflict with individualist and consumerist American ideologies—but are nonetheless an important part of our national narrative about moral behavior (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1996; Sherman, 2009).

Finally, we believe that the significance of both rural community colleges to adult students and displaced workers is under-researched—particularly in the context of damage to rural lifeways and livelihoods wrought by industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. As rural communities struggle with outmigration, a nearby community college offers residents higher education opportunities that can help sustain their local commitments and make decisions to remain easier (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Hektner, 1995; Schafft, Petrin & Farmer, 2011; Wright, 2012); as local revenues decline, such opportunities are increasingly threatened. Additional comparative research, with larger samples, would also be useful to investigate how rural-serving institutions fit into the larger community college space. Pushing aside our (admittedly thin) veil of professional impartiality, we would suggest that it is important to understand how rural institutions are responding, or might better respond, to large-scale social and economic change. Despite the relatively low social status of rural communities and community colleges, both continue to constitute an important part of our American landscape, heritage and potential.

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