

“Since I Am From Where I Am From”: How Rural and Urban First-Generation College Students Differentially Use Social Capital to Choose a College Major

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By definition, first-generation college (FGC) students share similar levels of parental education, and they often receive support on college campuses as though they represent a homogenous group. However, FGC students come from a wide variety of backgrounds that may necessitate different forms of support. This article takes a step toward exploring this variation by examining how rural and urban FGC freshmen differentially use their social networks to help them choose college majors and career pathways. The case study uses longitudinal interviews with 18 rural FGCs and 15 urban FGCs to tease apart the ways in which rural and urban places create distinct challenges and opportunities that affect the transition to college. The analysis also examines the ways in which race interacts with place to further shape these processes. Most notably, urban students benefited from career exploration opportunities available in their cities and high schools and were preconditioned to see their home communities as sources of social capital, while rural students relied heavily upon fewer hometown mentors but also understood the urgency of forming new ties in college and ultimately bridged more successfully into the collegiate sphere. In addition, with potential implications for student affairs professionals, administrators, faculty, and others seeking to support and mentor FGC students, rural students in particular rejected the FGC label and associated more strongly with their geographic background. Finally, while Black and White students from rural and urban areas often pursued similar college majors, their experiences along these trajectories often diverged in meaningful ways.

While many undergraduates from both rural and urban areas are first-generation college-going (FGC) students, the social, cultural, and economic contexts from which they make academic decisions can still vary widely (Reynnells

& La Caille John, 2016).¹ For instance, many urban high schools facilitate (or “broker”) college-going opportunities for their FGC students through organizational ties to college mentoring programs (Duncheon & Relles, 2019). These networks can facilitate a smooth transition into college and expose FGC students to a wide variety of career pathways. Efforts to create similar social capital pipelines from rural high schools to college campuses have not received the same scholarly attention. As a result, students from rural high schools may create social capital through a different set of processes that could affect their own transition from high school to college.

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¹ Even the definition of what it means to be a rural or an urban student is up for debate. While many researchers use U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) guidelines to identify students based on area population (Reynnells & La Caille John, 2016), institutions may choose any number of means to identify such students or ask them to self-identify—if they focus on this categorization at all.

Targeting subgroups of students for institutional support (e.g., advising, clubs, living-learning programs, mentorship, scholarships, etc.) can help students engage and ultimately succeed in college (Burke, 2019; Bussell, 2020; Castellanos et al., 2016). Yet if universities devise student support measures based on characteristics with which students do not strongly identify, students may not take advantage of those measures (e.g., an FGC student who does not identify strongly as FGC may not respond to an offer of support geared toward FGC students). On the other hand, if a student identifies more as “rural” than with another trait, such as FGC status, the student may be more likely to accept outreach based on geographic background and therefore be more likely to feel supported by the institution.

With these challenges in mind, this study illuminates the differences between rural and urban students’ early collegiate decision-making processes and suggests that support measures may benefit from place-based awareness even within the FGC population. Historically, FGC students have been framed through a deficit model that assumes they are “at risk” to struggle or fail in college due to broadly defined characteristics that cannot be representative of whole student groups (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Warner, 2016). For this reason, we join others in avoiding the use of this phrase (McKenzie, 2019) in favor of a community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). The community cultural wealth framework originates in critical race theory and argues that those historically identified as disadvantaged due to a lack of traditionally valued sources of capital (e.g., social ties, wealth) actually use their home cultures to create unique systems of support. Yosso’s (2005) research focused on racial groups; we deploy the framework here to suggest that urban and rural FGC groups, like minoritized students, likely create and mobilize different forms of social capital and other resources to influence and support their postsecondary goals. In addition, “place” may interact with race, further shaping the experiences of FGC students from differing geographic and racial backgrounds.

While place-based differences could ultimately guide students in various ways, access to and use of social capital from differing contexts may have a traceable influence on the biggest academic decisions that students make about college: selecting a major and career. A robust body of research has explored the importance of college major decisions for students’ future success (Montmarquette et al., 2002; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2011) and the differential results that these choices have for low-income and FGC students (Dika & D’Amico, 2016; Mullen, 2010). To build upon this growing body of literature, we conducted a case study that looked exclusively at place-based differences among a sample of FGC students. This approach allowed us to contrast the experiences of rural and urban students as they chose a major and associated career

path during the transition from high school to college. While research specific to either FGC, urban, *or* rural status is well established, some of our study participants were also a part of minoritized racial or ethnic groups, and this design drew out differences between and within these subgroups and considered the influence of rural or urban backgrounds across the high school to college transition.

Specifically, we addressed the following research questions.

1. In what ways, if any, do geographic differences shape the way first-generation college students create and use social capital to inform their college major decisions?
2. What specific practices and resources do rural and urban first-generation college students use when selecting a college major?
3. In what ways may race interact with place-based differences to further shape the process of selecting a college major?

To explore these questions, we analyzed longitudinal interview data and academic records from 33 FGC students—18 students from rural areas and 15 students from urban areas—during their transition from high school to a flagship research university. This research adds to the evidence of important variations between urban and rural students. Through our findings, colleges can see how place-based factors shape the real-world choice of college major and career trajectory, likely with lifelong ramifications.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Yosso’s (2005) framework of community cultural wealth explored how families who are not “rich” in a culture’s dominant strands of capital (e.g., social, cultural, economic) can still exert power. Yosso used critical race theory to argue that minoritized families should not be viewed as culturally powerless, but as uniquely powerful due to six types of community-sourced wealth: aspirational, linguistic, resistant, navigational, familial, and social capital. Yosso thus laid a foundation for how nondominant populations can recognize, and be recognized for, their own capital. While our study included students from racial/ethnic minority groups, we primarily emphasized their nondominant status as FGC students, especially those from rural or urban backgrounds. Along with the FGC student population in general, these geographic backgrounds are associated with lower rates of college-going in comparison

to students from suburban backgrounds—thus our emphasis on their nondominant status (Li, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016; U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2017). We then explored the potential influence of race as it intersects with place, particularly among urban participants, many of whom identified as Black, but also among the few rural Black participants in our study.

We applied the community cultural wealth framework to consider whether rural or urban subsets of FGC students may exercise unique sources of community-sourced wealth that influence or assist with their academic and career decision making. From this perspective, such students may be especially resourceful and determined to succeed, rather than remaining simply, and reductively, disadvantaged. For example, these students may use aspirational capital—the hope of achieving a new goal for themselves and their families, such as being the first to graduate college—as fuel for their educational journeys. Similarly, students and families can employ resistant capital to further motivate collegiate success for those who are historically marginalized. For example, for students of color, building resistant capital means challenging the status quo through “oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). We also explored the extent to which rural and urban FGC students may rely on familial capital as they enter college and explore career interests. Familial capital reflects the broad “kinship ties” which can unite and support an entire community, and the knowledge specific to a community which can help its members navigate new contexts (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

Finally, as Yosso (2005) also noted, marginalized students who gain access to college often do so with strong social support networks (González et al., 2003; Hill et al., 2015). These sources of support act as a form of social capital—resources available to a given actor through the composition and structure of their social networks (Bourdieu, 1986). While the most privileged students may typically have access to immense social capital (such as through parents’ professional connections and those of well-connected peers), Yosso (2005) argued that marginalized students benefit from unique but equally important social networks. We emphasized in our research the role of social capital in particular because of its perceived value in the college context and especially for FGC students (Almeida et al., 2019).

In general, the literature on social capital has found that tightly connected (i.e., dense) personal networks tend to facilitate strong social support, while sparsely connected networks allow for greater access to advantageous information (for a review, see Portes, 1998). Burt (1992) described the latter networks using the concept of structural holes, a situation in which an individual’s network consists

of ties to disconnected others (see also Granovetter, 1973). The concept of structural holes complements the community cultural wealth framework by illuminating how some students are able to simultaneously engage with their home and school worlds in ways that empower rather than constrain them. Thus, for example, for a rural student, being centered between disconnected social groups (rural hometown and college campus) affords a potentially powerful “brokerage position” in which the student can bring people together, relay information, or maintain boundaries as the situation requires (Obstfeld et al., 2014).

Although a brokerage position is generally thought of as advantageous, rural and urban FGC students may find themselves stranded between the unrelated social groups of their home and newfound collegiate environment (E. M. Lee & Kramer, 2013). This “aspirational burden” may be felt by FGC students who “carry not only their own individual hopes but often the aspirations of their families and communities” (Jehangir, 2010, p. 536). Students who experience these expectations negatively may feel that community pressure or a lack of understanding could create barriers that bar them from full access to social networks that offer the support and resources needed to be successful in education (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In this sense, “To be on the margins of both one’s home and school world is to be in a no man’s land” (Jehangir, 2010, p. 537).

The vastly different social contexts from which rural and urban students emerge may result in unique approaches to brokerage access. For example, Tieken (2014) argued that rural schools are especially well positioned to encourage bridging ties across racial boundaries, which could ultimately benefit both students and their communities. In Tieken’s study of two rural school communities in the South, she found that one school encouraged bridging ties between White and Black students, a process that ultimately helped students to begin to move the community forward from its racialized past and set an example for older citizens. Howley (2006), McCulloh (2020), and Byun and colleagues (2012) also found that rural schools and communities can be especially tightknit and thus serve as a wealth of alternative capital for college-going students. In particular, Byun et al. (2012) noted that rural students benefit from “strong kinship bonds and the close social ties among families and religious institutions in rural communities” (p. 431). Students who expand their sense of family to include local mentors or community members are in effect employing an expanded form of Yosso’s (2005) familial capital, which may be especially important for FGC students who need to build college-related social capital (McCulloh, 2020). Fruith and Chan (2018) called these community members “naturally occurring mentors” and argued that they can be key to FGC students’ college aspirations and success as they “can serve as compensatory resources to FG [college] students, making

academic and retention outcomes for involved FG [college] students look more like those of continuing generation students” (p. 7).

Thus, we considered in this study the different ways in which rural and/or urban FGC students exercise unique forms of capital by accessing structural holes between collegiate and home communities, rather than by experiencing damage and dissonance from these brokerage positions. We theorized this process could have a cascading influence on students’ ability to choose well-suited majors, succeed in college, and eventually access upward social mobility. In particular, we expected that rural students, emerging from schools and communities that may have fewer collegiate connections and different attitudes about going to college, may approach the college major decision differently than their urban peers, even if these students are all more generally viewed simply as “FGC” by their institution. We explored whether rural or urban students may use unique forms of capital (e.g., aspirational, familial, resistant, and even social) to navigate their transitions into college and choice of major.

Urban and Rural Student Populations

Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model has been applied most extensively to the experiences of minoritized populations. From a similar perspective, FGC, rural, and urban students face unique challenges in colleges, despite also having valuable sources of capital in their communities. In recent years, research on diversity within traditionally disadvantaged populations has greatly enriched our understanding of the complex factors which influence students from rural, FGC, low-income, and minoritized backgrounds, among others (e.g., Cox, 2016; Grant, 2019; Li, 2019; Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Tieken, 2014). One factor we chose to explore in our study which may contribute to the place-based postsecondary education gap was the additional strain on rural students to bridge into unfamiliar college-going networks, as not only their immediate families but also their wider communities may not possess the types of capital that are valued on college campuses (e.g., Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012; Tieken, 2014). If their hometowns and high schools, not just their families, lack robust ties to college-educated networks, even those rural FGC students who do enter college may do so with fewer connections and less mentorship than their urban FGC peers.

However, despite what looks from the outside like lower odds of success, and despite lower odds of matriculation, rural students who do attend college are more likely to earn a degree than their urban peers (at 42% vs. 36% within six years; see National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016), suggesting further differences between

the two groups that deserve exploration. A community cultural wealth framework is again illuminating. Much as Yosso (2005) found unique types of capital to be valuable resources for students of color, Nelson (2016) noted ways in which rural students who may lack straightforward college-related social capital still benefit from other types of social capital (family-, community-, and school-based). For example, Nelson found that rural students who attended schools with a college-going climate were encouraged by their school context to pursue college, even if their family or wider community was not focused on college.

Li (2019) described these competing narratives of the rural experience in general: the “rural disadvantage narrative,” focusing on the challenges faced by rural students, such as lack of resources, and the “rural advantage narrative,” (p. 2) focusing on their unique strengths, such as tight-knit families and typically “closer social relationships between families and communities” (p. 12). Li’s research and related scholarship that has suggested that being from a rural area in particular can be both a strength and a challenge for collegegoers first inspired our own focus on academic decision making of students from different geographic contexts.

First-Generation College Students’ Major Choice

Colleges and universities are paying increasing attention to the challenges the FGC student population faces in navigating postsecondary education (Inkelas et al., 2007; Toutkoushian et al., 2018, 2021). Many FGC students see college as their only opportunity to access upward social mobility and a stable, well-paid career, which their parents may not have been able to attain (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Every student faces the daunting task of choosing a major, and major choice is a tremendously complex decision with its own robust body of research (e.g., Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2016). We considered choice of major as the key focus in this comparison of urban and rural FGC students because of the importance of this step in the career choice process and for collegiate success in general.

For FGC students, unequal access to institutionally relevant information is especially influential when selecting a degree program, even when other key factors such as sex, family income, and race are controlled (Trejo, 2016). Research has consistently shown that parents with higher education credentials more actively insert themselves into their children’s decisions related to academic majors than do those parents without higher education credentials (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Mullen, 2010; see also Workman, 2015). In contrast, FGC students are also more likely than other students to change majors (Shaw & Barbuti, 2010), a decision that has been shown to negatively influence their likelihood of degree completion in high

status majors, relative to continuing generation students (Y.-G. Lee & Ferrare, 2019). Many colleges require students to declare a major upon matriculation, and financial or social pressures may make students hesitant to explore different majors or change their minds once in college, especially if this decision might cost them more time and a higher tuition burden or take them away from peers and into unfamiliar social groups. Because FGC students often take longer to complete college, work and/or take out more loans, and are at increased risk of attrition (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004), they may perceive that the increased financial, social, and sheer time pressures of changing majors could limit their collegiate success and, in turn, their ability to benefit financially and socially from their college education.

Differing perspectives about the purpose and value of college can also shape major choices. FGC students who come from lower-income backgrounds may prioritize finding a major that leads into a career opportunity securely in the middle class (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Mullen, 2010). Students from lower-income backgrounds, from which many rural and FGC students emerge, may also gravitate more toward high-paying, career-oriented degrees over those in the arts or humanities (Johnson & Muse, 2017; Ma, 2009). These students often see college as more of a credentialing process than as a growth process (Brint et al., 2005; Brown, 2001).

The literature described above documents some of the unique and overlapping geographic, social, and economic challenges faced by college students from varying backgrounds. We built from this body of literature because we anticipated that rural students may also draw upon unique sources of capital to inform their academic decision making, and that having a rural background may shape students' choices as much or more than commonly emphasized characteristics such as FGC status.

Research Design and Methods

To address our research questions, the present study made use of a longitudinal case study design (Yin, 2017). The case centered on longitudinal interviews with a sample of FGC students during the 2016–2017 academic year at a public flagship university situated in the Southeastern United States. The geographic position of this university made it a highly appropriate case, as it attracts substantial numbers of FGC students from both rural and urban areas across the region. The longitudinal component to our case study was also important given the transitional context of our research questions. Collecting interview data over time allowed for an exploration of stability and change in the sources of capital that students used and created during the transition from high school to college (de Vaus, 2001). We

also drew from longitudinal quantitative data collected from students' academic records to contextualize the trajectory of their academic performance during the transition from high school to college.

Sample

All 556 traditional, first-time FGC students in the 2016 cohort were invited via email to participate in interviews, except for those living in an on-campus living-learning community for FGC students.² First-generation college status, in accordance with the university's definition, included students whose parents did not complete a full four-year undergraduate college degree. A total of 108 interviews were conducted with 62 incoming (i.e., first-time) first-year FGC students. Interviews took place near the beginning and at the end of freshman year. Among the participants in the sample, 23% self-identified as Black, 60% as White, and 7% as Latinx, and small percentages identified as Mixed Heritage, Asian, or Native American. These proportions were similar to the population of incoming FGC students at the university in 2016 (14% Black, 64% White, 9% Latinx). Nearly three-quarters of the sample identified as women, which was a notably larger proportion than the population (56%).

Analytic Sample

From the original sample, we selected 18 FGC students who self-identified their hometowns as rural and 15 FGC students who identified their hometowns as urban. Twenty-two of the 33 participants returned for follow-up interviews in the spring of their first year. While some students indicated during initial interviews that they

² These students were excluded due to concern that their first-year experiences might vary significantly from the norm due to their inclusion in a targeted program, as students in the first-generation living-learning program (LLP) roomed on campus with other FGC students, took courses together, and had access to additional supports such as study groups and workshops. Any FGC student could apply for the LLP, but members were required to live on campus, and membership was limited to one residence hall. Because the LLP seeks to create a micro-community for FGC students and to proactively address many of the issues we explored in interviews (such as finding friends and mentors in college), and because students who seek membership in this LLP may themselves be more motivated than peers to build social connections in college, we chose to exclude this group of FGC students from our interview invitation.

were considering transferring after their first semester (a fact we noted during data analysis), we were unable to know how many of the 11 single-interview participants ultimately left campus vs, simply did not return for another interview. We cross-checked to ensure that self-identifying “urban” students came from cities defined as urban areas by the USDA and that “rural” students came from areas or towns with populations of no more than 49,999 residents (Reynnells & La Caille John, 2016).³ We excluded others who indicated that they came from suburban environments because our focus in this research was to explore the experiences of rural students in particular, and we sought to do so by comparing their perspectives to those of peers from a different geographic background. We found that students who self-identified as “suburban” often grew up with one foot in a rural or urban world. For example, students from suburban communities on the outskirts of much larger urban centers, or those in low-population areas but technically within the suburban radius of a larger city, college town, or military base (i.e., their USDA designation as “nonmetro” status due to population size) would likely have been complicated by an atypical proportion of college-educated adults in the area. In part because of the extreme variation in suburban students’ geographic backgrounds, we chose to exclude this subgroup and focus only on students from more clearly identifiable urban areas in comparison to those from rural areas.

In keeping with this strategy, we also narrowed selection of urban students to those from relatively large urban cities (each of which had a population of 300,000 or more) to avoid comparing students from very small cities with those from the largest nonmetro areas, whose real-world experiences might have been similar despite a difference in urban/rural categorization. The remaining 15 urban participants came primarily from the same region, while the 18 rural participants came mostly from within the same state, usually from small towns.

The design of the study allowed us to closely examine the role of place in students’ academic decision making while accounting for the role of FGC status by limiting all participants to the FGC student population. Importantly, most rural students in this study emerged from small towns as opposed to “open countryside” or other exceptionally

rural contexts (Reynnells & La Caille John, 2016); such students can be found all over the country, across the spectrum of postsecondary institutions. For the purposes of this research, we focused primarily on the role of rural or urban background, but we were able to explore the influence of race among Black students, the largest racial or ethnic minority group among our participants. Overall, out of 15 urban participants, one third identified as White and two thirds as other races or ethnicities, including seven Black participants, two Latinx participants, and one Asian participant. Rural participants, meanwhile, were much more likely to be White (13/18), with two Black students, one Native American student, one Latinx student, and one student who identified as Mixed Heritage. These trends make it difficult to draw conclusions about the experiences of rural and urban students without also considering the potential role of race in students’ experiences; we drew from experiences of Black participants—most of whom were urban—in particular to consider this factor as much as possible.

Both groups in the sample were disproportionately women; six of the 33 participants identified as men (Tables 1–3 provide further details of student characteristics). Therefore, we do not attempt to draw conclusions about gender-specific experiences, although gender may play an important role in students’ trajectories. The large proportion of women in our sample could present a source of bias in our results, especially as it relates to the choice to major in certain fields of study that are known to be imbalanced along gender lines (e.g., education or computer science). With that said, McCabe (2016) found greater gender similarity than difference when examining the social networks of college students. Given our emphasis on how urban and rural students use and create social capital to select a college major—rather than the majors themselves—we anticipate that the gender imbalance did not constitute a substantial source of bias in our primary results.

Data Collection

The interview team consisted of three doctoral students (two women and one man) and one assistant professor (a man). Both women were White and grew up and attended college in rural areas situated in regions that drew many of the rural students in our sample. The other doctoral student identified as Latino and was raised in a rural part of the Southern United States. The assistant professor was White and was raised in a medium-sized urban city in the Rust Belt, an area in which many of the urban students in the sample were raised. Although these geographic and racial identities overlapped with interviewees and helped establish rapport, the lack of a Black interviewer may have hindered the team’s ability to adequately address certain topics with

³ The definition of “rural” is not uniform. The U.S. Census Bureau categorizes “open countryside” and “rural towns” or “settlements” with fewer than 2,500 people as rural. The Economic Research Service, as part of the USDA, also includes “nonmetro counties” in its definition of rural places, which include relatively small “urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas)” (USDA, 2021).

Black interviewees. The team attempted to address this issue through ongoing discussions and debriefs and an intentional protocol design that gradually worked up to controversial topics about race and racism. The candor with which our Black interviewees discussed race and racism suggested that these strategies were at least partially successful.

The initial interviews covered a wide range of topics that were selected to address our research questions and were informed by our community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). We spent considerable time discussing the community contexts in which our interviewees grew up and attended high school. These conversations included the role of mentors, college-going expectations, and familial support. Next, we covered topics about college-going decisions, choice of major, and long-term goals. Interviewers probed these topics for motivations and influences, especially in relation to community and home contexts. Finally, students were asked about their social networks, both from their home communities and their networking activities during the transition to college (including campus club participation, etc.). We were especially interested in how students engaged these different networks to inform their academic decisions.

Follow-up interviews focused on students' experiences across the entire year with special attention to stability and change in their college and career plans, as well as interactions with friends and family from home or with members of the campus community (professors, advisors, friends, etc.). The longitudinal design was pivotal in this regard, as it provided an opportunity to understand the evolving processes of how students made use of existing and new resources to navigate academic decisions related to their choice of major and career trajectory.

Qualitative Coding Analysis and Credibility

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to NVivo software for qualitative coding, and some quantitative data from each student's academic records (ACT/SAT scores, high school GPA, and GPA for each semester during the study) were added as attributes. The first author conducted the qualitative coding of the transcripts thematically via a grounded theory framework, an approach which allows for the inductive development or application of theoretical frameworks based on examination of data—and thus is “grounded” first and foremost in data (Stern & Porr, 2011). All 62 initial interviews from students' first semester, first year of college were read at first, from which the 33 urban and rural-identifying students' interviews were then selected based on students' answers to questions about where they were from. Initial coding focused only on the 18 rural participants, from which tentative findings emerged (e.g., that rural students tended to foreclose their

career choice prior to entering college). Focusing first on rural participants only ensured a grounded approach, illuminating potential trends among rural students without yet considering any comparison group. The 15 urban participants' interviews were then integrated for another round of initial coding, which helped parse out place-based differences (e.g., that urban students tended to have more formal career counseling in their high schools).

The coding process began by combining elements of holistic, descriptive, initial, and process coding (see Saldaña, 2013). Although we did not set out initially to apply Yosso's (2005) theoretical framework a priori, given that our interview protocol was informed by a community cultural wealth framework we were able to initially code large chunks of data into holistic themes. Students' wide-ranging comments on their first-year experiences and college preparation were divided into broad contextual categories as they emerged, such as “hometown,” “parents,” “extended family,” and “high school.” Initial interviews, more than follow-up interviews, tended to focus on students' backgrounds and on their hometown and high school contexts in particular. Second-semester interviews, meanwhile, tended to focus more on the first-year collegiate experience and on students' changing social contexts and mentorship, as well as their changing career trajectories when applicable. For both interviews, broad thematic categories were identified, after which the transcripts were coded and reexamined with particular attention to what students had to say about the process of choosing a college major and how their perspectives may have shifted by the time of their second-semester interviews. The process of creating codes proceeded topically based on what students tended to discuss (e.g., within the topic of high school experiences, students tended to speak of in-school and out-of-school mentors).

As urban students' experiences were added to the analysis after rural interviews were initially coded, more specific trends emerged based on place-based differences (e.g., that college-bound rural students often felt pressure from their hometowns or schools to enter high-status fields, while urban students felt more freedom to explore various careers). The second-wave comparison of all 33 participants' experiences yielded the thematic categorizations that were further examined for causal connections, such as comments on how high school mentors influenced choice of major (Saldaña, 2013). Through this process, the analysis remained attuned to the ways in which place-based qualities shaped students' decisions related to selecting a college major.

Because initial analysis was undertaken by a single researcher, we also employed analyst triangulation via the second author, regularly discussing emerging themes and considering different routes of analysis. In this way we worked to help ensure validity and assess the conceptual

coverage of codes. At this stage, matrix coding facilitated a more systematic comparison between the rural and urban subsamples of FGC students, along with the exploration of racial differences. Finally, where relevant, we cross-referenced students' transcripts with their academic records to examine differences in academic performance.

Findings

In line with our expectations and with existing research on other student subpopulations with arguably less direct access to the typical forms of capital available to college-educated families (e.g., social ties, cultural or economic wealth), both rural and urban FGC students found other types of capital (e.g., aspirational, resistant, familial) to help them navigate the college transition. Rather than being students who lacked social capital, they were students who used aspirational, resistant, or familial capital, much as racially minoritized students have been found to do (O'Shea, 2016; Yosso, 2005). Notably, students from both geographic groups rejected the associations of the FGC label and did not view themselves as disadvantaged, even though some struggled academically. We found that these two groups approached college in starkly different ways, with both disadvantages and benefits related specifically to their geographic backgrounds and the types of resources they used to navigate their college-related decision making.

In the three sections below, we unpack these differences between geographic groups in the FGC student population, which is more often than not viewed at the institutional level as a monolithic category. These three sections describe the primary themes that emerged from our interviews with both rural and urban students; in different ways and to varying degrees, our participants described the importance of their (a) high school curricula and mentorship; (b) family and hometown; and (c) majors and perspectives about college.

High School Curricula and Mentorship

One of the most noticeable contrasts between each group's discussions of their academic decision-making processes came in terms of their differing high school experiences. Urban FGC students explored options via formal high school career preparation, while rural FGC students relied upon local mentors—akin to the “naturally occurring mentors” described by Fruitt and Chan (2018)—to informally guide their choice of career and major and did not cite any high school curriculum or formal mentorship opportunities, although some were shaped by individual teachers or principals. However, rural participants earned higher high school test scores and grades and translated those experiences into better performance in college on average (see Table 4). Thus, there were contrasts between

high school career preparation (more robust among urban students even though they were not top-performing academically) and academic preparation (which rural students, often at the top of their high school classes, were better positioned to receive).

Two thirds of urban interviewees mentioned specific career-preparation curricula in their high schools, usually in terms of tracking systems (e.g., an engineering program or nursing track). Most urban students referenced a college-going environment in high school and spoke of opportunities to meet with recruiters and go on campus tours. Rural students did not mention career-preparation tracks or structured mentorship opportunities in high school. These students saw their rural education (as opposed to their FGC status) as the larger barrier to their career preparation. While the rural FGC students in this study indicated that their high schools did not enact career preparation curricula as extensively as their urban FGC counterparts related, they shared that teachers at their rural schools still pressured their top students. As one student lamented: “It was just like they wanted to look good so they pushed the top students to go to college.” Urban FGC students, however, did not usually identify as high-performing high school students and by extension experienced less academic pressure. Therefore, urban students benefitted from their high school career preparation without feeling the pressure of their top-performing peers, while rural FGC students experienced the opposite: less career guidance and more academic pressure. However, rural students who felt unprepared by their schools to navigate academic decision making such as major choice were quick to look elsewhere for guidance. Rural students were acutely aware of the lack of institutionally valued social capital within not just their families but their schools and hometowns, and they took deliberate steps to offset this lack of guidance by seeking out professional mentors (doctors, veterinarians, etc.) in their towns—a strategy that only one urban student employed.

Rural students extended this trend by clinging tightly throughout high school and into college to a small group of mentors, often only one or two, unlike their urban peers with much more diverse sources of guidance. Rural mentors included a retired professor back home (“I do not know how he ended up in [Town]”), a local professional who inspired career plans (“I want his job”), a friend or extended relative whose trajectory they could mimic (“Well, my cousins went here”), a teacher or principal who pushed them academically (“She scared the crap out [of me] in my junior year. But I like her for it now”), or anyone who could guide them through the college search and application process (“It was my brother's ex-girlfriend”). The small circles of advisors they formed meant that rural students tended to place great importance on the opinions of a few mentors to shape their collegiate trajectories, viewing mentors' advice in ways that

mimicked how continuing-generation students describe turning to their college-educated parents.

While at least half of urban students noted that they made their own academic decisions and did their own research to consider various career options, rural students listened almost exclusively to their hometown mentors. These mentors were usually identified via close relationships with students and/or experience in a profession. Students gravitated toward people who could affirm a preexisting interest in a field and would not necessarily encourage them to consider other interests. Many rural FGC participants were highly interested in postgraduate training as a clear way of enabling them to return to and be successful in their hometowns. Thus, their choice to carefully follow the examples set by local professionals makes sense here for rural students as a purposeful use of their available community social capital.

Family and Hometown

One of the ways in which rural and urban FGC students' interviews were most similar concerned their parents' views of college. Both groups frequently cited parents as important influencers, but not usually in terms of their choice of academic major, unlike other non-FGC students (see Workman, 2015). Parents instead provided familial and resistant capital via motivation and support for attending college. As Quinn (rural hometown, psychology major) put it, "They just always say you'd have a better life than what we had ... go further than we did." Parents, and especially mothers, demonstrated the use of resistant capital: purposefully training their children to build skills and expectations which would challenge existing inequities. Both urban and rural FGC students found ways to wield these familial resources, in contrast to the resource-poor stereotype often attributed to the FGC population.

While both types of families prioritized college-going, rural students described families and hometowns as a source of stress as well as motivation. In a glimmer of both resistant and aspirational capital, Blake, a biology major who planned to attend medical school, expressed a desire to challenge the narrative that students from his rural county "don't ... come up here and be successful," He explained, "And so, I said, I can't let this happen. I've got this dream ... and I know it can happen. So I'm pushing me harder than anyone else is pushing me." Some urban students expressed similar sentiments rooted in resistant capital, but only because of their FGC status, not their urban origins: "With me being a first-generation [college student] I kind of want to prove to my family that I can do it, because they are all looking up to me." In this way for both rural and urban students their FGC status was a source of motivation via resistant capital,

but rural students felt doubly motivated to resist the norms of their home communities as well.

Even for students who were not supported by resistant capital, familial capital was an important resource. While most students in both groups were emotionally close to their families, very few went to parents for advice on choosing a college major or career but still relied upon them for general support. In our study, this reliance on family for general but not academic support was in part because students recognized their parents' lack of knowledge about the college experience. As one student explained, "[M]y mom tries but like she has no idea how it all works." In addition, this approach also worked to shield their parents from stress. Jenna (rural hometown, medical lab sciences major) carefully shielded her rural father from her academic life: "I don't tell him everything that I guess I should tell him.... But it's more of I just want [him] to be hearing the good part of it and not the bad part of it." Racquel, a rural political science major who hoped to enter law school, took great pains not to insult her parents in explaining why they were not key to her career plans:

I did a lot of stuff on my own because ... I learned very early that my parents were never going to ... like they just kind of couldn't help me with school stuff because like, they were not like, book smart.... They are older, wiser and all that stuff but they can't sit down and help me with my math or my science or anything like that.

Although parents were generally kept out of the career decision-making process, some rural students were nevertheless influenced by an urge to contribute to their families' legacies, echoing the importance of "connection to our community" and a key component of familial capital (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Many children of college-educated parents follow their parents' career trajectories, and a few FGC rural students found ways to do the same. Quinn, a Hispanic woman from a rural area, shifted from a neuroscience major in the first semester to a law enforcement trajectory by second semester, explaining, "Almost everyone in my family had served in the military and so growing up I always wanted to do that and my dad ... didn't really want me to.... And so I think we found a compromise here." Whitney, a Black woman from a rural area, chose a kinesiology major with the hopes of becoming a physical therapist and working with injured athletes. She was influenced by her family and sports-loving hometown: "Since I am from where I am from, we are big sports people." Another rural student chose to pursue an elementary education degree after watching her mother and sister work at daycares over the years. These

rural FGC students, therefore, found their career decisions shaped by a family history in a field and fueled by a desire to build upon existing familial capital in certain careers, but in the postsecondary world. Rather than being constrained by familial expectations, these students were proud to find ways to expand upon their families' traditions and legacies.

Both student groups sought to improve upon parents' educational attainment and socioeconomic status, but urban students much more frequently mentioned relatives or close friends who were also attending college or who had already graduated, saying things like, "I have a lot of people in my family that graduated college." Rural students were more often the first in their extended families, friend groups, or even high school peer groups to attend a four-year college. While for some rural students this position proved stressful, many instead deployed aspirational capital with the goal of being a trailblazer in their family or peer group. As Nora said, "I don't mean to doubt my siblings, but I don't think they're going to even make it to college." A few rural students expanded their familiar capital by forming deep connections with relatives who were also college graduates or college students. For example, Marshall bonded with a cousin who was attending another institution out of state: "So, me and him are pretty much do or die ... we know we got to get through and keep the family name up." As she progressed into college, Jenna saw herself as the anchor for the rest of her college-aspiring rural social circle. She mentored and encouraged her boyfriend's younger sisters:

I take a lot of pride in them ... they get excited about school because I always tell them like you guys are going places. Like keep it up.... They'll call me and ask me what kind of classes they should take in high school or how they should go about looking at colleges.... So that just melts my heart that I'm able to be that connection ... to show them how it can be different, but it could be better.

Even when she temporarily broke up with her boyfriend, Jenna was proud that his sisters continued to call her for academic advice:

It was kind of like, OK, I still mean that much to them for them to be able to call me and say that. That made me feel better because I don't want to just do well for me ... I want them to see me do well because there's more than just what's back at home.

For this student, being the first to break into the collegiate world and blazing a trail for her own mentees to follow felt empowering, not isolating.

Overall, when students spoke specifically about whether their hometowns (as opposed to their families or high schools) influenced their choices, rural students were much more likely to cite the presence of a pressure gap between their hometown and postsecondary worlds, while urban students usually saw their home environments as neutral or safe places to which they could return with relative ease. Around one third of urban participants indicated that they chose to attend the state flagship university in this study to get away from home; rural students chose the university because it was the best they could attend or because it had the major they needed—there was no comparable choice at home.

Urban students could also return to their hometowns for benefits such as summer jobs or internships; they tended to plan more for summer *résumé* building than their rural peers, who instead saw summer as a furlough in their postsecondary progress. Several urban students mentioned being told by their advisers to drop tough STEM classes and take them in the summer, which they could do at community colleges near their homes, and they also knew that they could transfer to a school back home if needed. For rural students who worried about struggling academically or being homesick, a primary fear was that there was no postsecondary opportunity back home, and thus, going back meant failure as opposed to another opportunity.

One of the ways in which race most noticeably complicated the role of place in students' views came in the form of the perspectives of urban Black students, particularly those from the largest city in the state. Several of these urban Black students wanted to "get away" from their home city because they felt unsafe there. Other urban students viewed their hometowns as a capital-rich asset, but in these cases, urban Black students' perspectives aligned more with the rural students who were also hesitant or outright unwilling to return to their hometowns. This hesitation to go home, albeit for different reasons, thus may have facilitated urban Black students' adoption of brokerage positions in college in a manner similar to that of rural students who sought to leave home permanently.

The contrast in views of their hometowns did not lead to rural students' exhibiting more symptoms of dissonance from their brokerage position as suggested by prior research (i.e., Jehangir, 2010; E. M. Lee & Kramer, 2013). In fact, rural students seemed more aware than urban peers of the need to transition wholly into the collegiate sphere, while urban students had the luxury of being able to keep a foot in both worlds. The pressure placed on rural students to achieve above the norm, either to escape their hometowns or to be able to find work upon returning to them, spurred many to ensure their academic success, although in some cases it also added stress to their postsecondary experiences.

Majors and Perspectives About College

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that given the differences in how hometown environments shaped them, urban and rural students developed notably different college majors and unique attitudes about the purpose of college in general. Both White and Black rural students urgently ascribed to the idea that a college degree is a credential to be earned as quickly as possible and were not focused on exploration or self-discovery along the way (Brown, 2001). These students seemed genuinely interested in *following* their passions but had closed the doors on *finding* their passions before entering college. Meanwhile, White and Black urban students felt more prepared for college decision making and were much more open to changing majors, to considering less career-focused majors, and to seeing college as a process of self-discovery. Urban students had the freedom to explore their interests and to say things like, “I’ve created my own self here,” while rural students who felt that college was beginning to change them worried that “I felt like I wasn’t being what people expected me to be.” Mikayla, one of several out-of-state urban students to attend the university, described her mission as “to find myself” and “do my own thing,” sentiments which no rural student echoed. Rural students focused instead on career preparation, a common strategy for financially constrained students in general and FGC students in particular (e.g., Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Mullen, 2010). While we did not have economic data, some urban students approached choice of major much more like higher-income students (as an exploratory process), while nearly all rural students made choices more in keeping with lower-income students (as a credentialing process).

These broad differences in attitudes toward college trickled down into the types of majors students chose once in college. Some urban students considered majors that were not explicitly career-focused (philosophy, psychology, etc.), while rural students not only chose highly career-focused majors, but 11 out of 18 also aspired to terminal degrees (medical school, law school, veterinary school) that could maximize financial and status payoffs (Johnson & Ma, 2017; see Table 1) and, in many cases, enable them to return to their hometowns as professionals (see for comparison Howley, 2006).

Urban students considered healthcare jobs such as nursing and administration, while rural students who were interested in healthcare aimed to earn doctorates in medicine or dentistry. Some urban students targeted credential-focused majors such as nursing and teaching, but this trend did not hold for urban Black students, whose nonterminal trajectories were more open-ended, such as business degrees (see Table 2). In addition, half of urban students overall listed several potential careers, said they

were not particularly committed to their current major, or mentioned fallback options, while nearly all rural students were entirely committed to seeing their chosen majors through. Rural students’ goals seem to have limited their willingness to be open to change once in college while also motivating them to perform at high levels by serving as aspirational capital.

Overall, rural students sought steady, high-prestige careers in healthcare (10), education (4), law (3), and engineering (1), with 14 of 18 planning to earn at least one graduate degree. Urban students gravitated toward healthcare as well (6), along with business (3), engineering (2), law (2), education (1), and research in geophysics (1). However, fewer urban students expected to go to graduate school (6 of 15). Five urban students aspired to a terminal degree (including two who were also considering other less competitive careers). Among all adults who have earned undergraduate degrees, 37% have gone on to earn any graduate degree, and around 3% have earned a doctorate or professional (i.e., terminal) degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), indicating that both FGC student groups in our sample had plans to attend graduate school at much greater rates than the overall college-educated population. Such goal setting may be another way in which aspirational capital functions to motivate FGC students’ academic success. That is, even if they do not all ultimately pursue graduate school, high aspirations still fuel their academic goals.

While Black students at times described differing experiences of the transition into college, their general process of choosing a college major was similar to that of White peers from the same geographic backgrounds. Notably, four of seven urban Black students planned to pursue graduate degrees; three aspired to terminal degree careers. Overall, urban Black students in our sample were just as likely as urban White students to aspire to terminal degrees (3/7 vs. 2/5, respectively), and no other nonwhite urban students (two Hispanic students and one Asian student) described terminal degree plans. Among rural Black students, both students (also both women) planned to pursue terminal STEM degrees as a physical or occupational therapist and as a veterinarian, respectively. While this group is too small to draw broad conclusions, it is notable that both Black rural students had very high academic goals, as did two of three other nonwhite rural students. Table 3 summarizes gender, race/ethnicity, and major choice differences between subgroups.

Academic Performance

Differences in academic performance between the two groups were also stark and may encourage or complicate students’ graduate degree plans. In high school and college, rural students consistently earned higher scores than urban

Table 1
Rural Students' Major and Career Plans

Name (gender)	Race	Chosen major	Intended graduate education/career	Terminal degree route?	Graduate degree route?
Abby (f)	W	Equine science management	Veterinary school		
Blake (m)	W	Biology	Medical School		
Nora (f)	N	Public health	Dental school		
Olivia (f)	W	Human nutrition	Medical school	Terminal degree plans (medical) 7/18	
Ruby (f)	M	Animal science (plans to switch, undecided)	Veterinary school		
Tessa (f)	B	Animal science	Veterinary school		
Whitney(f)	B	Kinesiology	Physical or occupational therapy school		
Haley (f)	W	Political science	Law school		Graduate degree plans 14/18
Mary (f)	W	History	Law school	Terminal degree plans (law/academic) 4/18	
Racquel (f)	W	Political science	Law school		
Sarah (f)	W	Agriculture education	Professor or school principal (PhD)		
Bethany (f)	W	Agriculture education	Teacher		
Jenna (f)	W	Medical laboratory sciences	Physician's assistant school	Master's degree plans 3/18	
Leah (f)	W	English and geography (started in engineering)	Humanitarian/academic		
Emily (f)	W	Public health (started in psychology)	Healthcare administration		
Katie (f)	W	Elementary education	Teacher	Undergraduate degree plans 4/18	
Marshall (m)	W	Computer science	Engineer		
Quinn (f)	H	Psychology (started in neuroscience)	FBI		

Note. Racial categories as indicated by rural students on questionnaire: B (Black), H (Hispanic), M (Mixed Heritage), N (Native American), W (White).

Table 2
Urban Students' Major and Career Plans

Name (gender)	Race	Chosen major	Intended graduate education career	Terminal degree route?	Graduate degree route?
Kennedy (f)	B	Clinical leadership (plans to change)	Medical school		
Mikayla (f)	W	Biology (plans to switch to nutrition)	Dental school		
Ross (m)	B	Political science	Law school (open to other options)		
Valerie (f)	W	Philosophy (plans to switch to family sciences)	Law school	Terminal degree plans (medical) 3/15	Graduate degree plans 6/15
Yvonne (f)	B	Psychology	Dental school or counselor		
Marisa (f)	B	Physics	Geophysicist	Master's degree plans 1/15	
Derrick (m)	B	Integrated strategic communication	Business		
Ellen (f)	A	Civil engineering	Engineer		
Grace (f)	H	Nursing	Nurse		
Kevin (m)	B	Computer engineering	Entrepreneur		
Lincoln (m)	B	Electrical engineering	Engineer	Undergraduate degree plans 9/15	
Miranda (f)	W	Nursing	Nurse		
Nikki (f)	W	Nursing	Nurse		
Rebecca (f)	W	Business management	Business		
Sofia (f)	H	Elementary education	Teacher		

Note. Racial categories as indicated by urban students on questionnaire: A (Asian); B (Black); H (Hispanic); W (White).

Table 3
Summary of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Major Choice by Subgroup

Trend	Urban students	Rural students
Gender	16/18 women; 2/18 men	11/15 women; 4/15 men
Race or Ethnicity	13 White 2 Black 1 Hispanic 1 Native American 1 Mixed Heritage	7 Black 5 White 2 Hispanic 1 Asian
Major choice trends	9 STEM 7 law or academia 2 K-12 teaching	9 STEM 3 business 2 law 1 K-12 teaching
Graduate school aspirations	14/18 plan to pursue graduate degrees	7/15 plan to pursue graduate degrees

participants (see Table 4). However, neither student group was on track to meet academic expectations for most terminal degree programs during their first year. Of the 16 students who aspired to earn terminal degrees, half earned a first-year GPA below 3.0, with only three—all rural students—earning a 3.5 or higher in their first year (the average undergraduate GPA among incoming medical students at the same university’s medical school, as an example, is above a 3.5). In fact, there was no major difference in academic performance among students who aspired to highly competitive graduate degrees and those who did not. Urban students who planned to earn a terminal degree averaged a 20 on the ACT and a 2.64 first-year GPA (both lower than their nonterminal-route peers); rural students aspiring to terminal degrees earned a 25.18 on the ACT and a 3.24 first-year GPA (both comparable to their nonterminal-route peers). While these measures alone are not predictive of graduate school success, students who score relatively high on the ACT are more likely to pursue graduate school, and first-year collegiate GPA can be important for students interested in competitive graduate programs (see Mattern & Radunzel, 2015). Therefore, while rural students were

more likely to set their sights firmly on advanced graduate degrees, students in both groups underperformed relative to those goals during their first year.

Building Networks

Students from both rural and urban areas made a concerted effort to network and improve their social capital and, therefore, their resources for academic decision making. Professors in particular were key sources of advice for rural students, nearly all of whom mentioned going to office hours and attempting to make personal connections with all their instructors. In some cases, professors singlehandedly convinced rural students to change their career plans. One student recalled of a professor, “He really pushed me.... He kind of made me realize, like, that’s what I wanted to do.” While rural students were especially eager to “plug in” socially on campus, perhaps due to a lack of preexisting collegiate social ties, many urban students had an early advantage in doing so because of the existing collegiate ties and/or social networking skills they brought with them. For example, Kennedy, a Black student from a major city,

Table 4
Academic Performance of Urban and Rural Subgroups

Academic performance	Urban students	Rural students
High school ACT average	20.46 (High score: 26)	26 (Five scored 30+)
High school GPA average	3.52	3.69
Undergraduate GPA average	2.74	3.20
Intending to leave university by end of year	4/18 (26%)	2/15 (11%)

described how her large urban high school prepared her for collegiate networking:

So high school didn't really prepare me for college academically but socially it did. In high school I went through a lot of friends, a lot of situations, so that now coming into college I know how to interact with people.

In contrast, Kennedy expressed exasperation at the limited perspectives of rural peers and suggested that the university consider requiring an anti-discrimination course because "some people that are from the country have sometimes only seen ... one African American person in their life and they don't know how to react. Maybe if you taught them, maybe that will change." At this predominantly White institution, such problems may have influenced many of the Black students we interviewed to turn to the Black student community on campus for both academic and social support. Black students described building collegiate social capital via historically African American Greek organizations and clubs like the Black Student Union (BSU), where they found friends, mentors, and opportunities to engage with the university.

In contrast, the two Black women from rural areas did not connect with the Black community on campus to the same extent as their urban Black peers, and one left the university after her first year to move closer to home. That student, Whitney, joined the BSU and a second organization focused on diversity during her first semester, but by her second semester she was no longer actively participating in these organizations. She planned to transfer to a regional university and continue to pursue a physical therapy degree. She attributed her move to homesickness, especially for her mother, to whom she was especially close. Since our sample of rural Black students was small, it was unclear to what extent different forces may have been interacting to complicate the experiences of rural Black participants. At least in Whitney's case, her efforts to form new social connections on campus did not outweigh her struggles with distance from family, but it is unclear whether the typically positive familial ties held by rural students was the root of Whitney's difficulty to bridge into a collegiate network.

On the other hand, Tessa, the other Black participant from a rural area, immersed herself in the collegiate social context with apparent success. While she did not emphasize in her interview that she had formed relationships with the Black community on campus, like many rural students she actively sought out new mentors to augment the influence of her initial hometown mentor and her mother (for example, by reaching out to a professor and keeping in frequent contact with her advisor). Like some peers from both rural and urban backgrounds, she was motivated to succeed

academically in part as an opportunity to move away from her hometown. She was also eager to be the first in her family to complete college after two of her older siblings started but dropped out. For Tessa, her siblings' experience proved to be motivating rather than discouraging—her own aspirational capital at work.

In both urban and rural groups, students who struggled academically or left the university exhibited symptoms of dissonance associated with their brokerage position, but these symptoms were surprisingly more frequent among urban students despite their prior postsecondary ties and high social and career confidence. Marisa, for example, acknowledged that her upbringing in a nearby large city meant that she constantly saw faces on campus that she recognized: "I know them from somewhere." Yet she did not feel comfortable reaching out to professors for guidance and felt a growing urge to return to her hometown and her family. Rural students had far fewer hometown options for jobs or higher education and thus felt increased pressure to stay in college and fit into their new contexts, no matter what—a pressure that appeared to encourage them to successfully bridge into new networks and establish brokerage positions.

Notably, out-of-state urban Black students were also highly social and accessed structural holes much like many of their rural peers in general, quickly forming new ties in college. One out-of-state Black student experienced a uniquely positive situation due to his status as a non-stigmatized outsider. He was known among his peers for his East coast accent but did not feel pressure to adapt or hide his accent like some rural peers did, perhaps because his difference was not tied to negative stereotypes (see Woldoff et al., 2011). Being an outsider for this student is simply a point of pride, whereas rural students described navigating a more complex balance of hometown and collegiate expectations.

Discussion and Conclusion

The experiences of these FGC students indicated both successes and challenges related to their unique geographical and cultural backgrounds. As anticipated by the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005), rural and urban FGC students in our sample frequently used aspirational, resistant, and familial capital to successfully navigate many aspects of their transition from high school to college and to offset the perceived challenges of their various backgrounds. In other instances, students struggled to establish positive brokerage positions (e.g., Obstfeld et al., 2014), which in some contexts left students feeling stranded between their families or home communities and the collegiate context (e.g., Jehangir, 2010; E. M. Lee & Kramer, 2013).

Students from both groups navigated their FGC status deftly. For example, they carefully divided their parents from their academic mentors and maximized the utility of both. Parents still provided much-needed familial capital (as seen also by O'Shea, 2016), while mentors and peers served as the sources of academic insight and social capital (e.g., McCulloh, 2020; Nelson, 2016). While Workman (2015) found that non-FGC students went to parents for academic advice such as choice of major, our findings corroborate McCulloh (2020), who found that FGC students rely upon family for general support, not academic advice.

There were key differences in the ways rural and urban students used and created capital to facilitate their college major and career decision making. The rural students in our sample had fewer social connections in college than their urban peers—as the USDA (2017) found—and relied on small, close mentorship circles, especially with hometown professionals and professors (McCulloh, 2020). Yet while consistent with prior research that has found that rural students have especially tightknit kinship networks (e.g., Byun et al., 2012; Howley, 2006), our results suggest that for some rural students this positive association can backfire if it hinders their ability to form ties in collegiate social networks.

Our study's rural students' unique tendency to rely on hometown mentors was consistent with Fruht and Chan's (2018) findings among FGC students more generally, in which naturally occurring mentors "can serve as compensatory resources to FGC students" (p. 7). Interestingly, many of the naturally occurring community mentors who were important to our rural participants were highly educated – principals, judges, and doctors included. As Howley (2006) found, "rural children seek higher education within the context of their families' commitment to place" (p. 76). However, while Howley found that this valuation of their rural home communities meant participants were less likely to stay in college longer for postgraduate training, for many of our rural FGC participants, the opposite appears to be true as they sought ways to use graduate degree plans as a means to return successfully to their hometowns.

This act of maintaining relationships between two unrelated social networks allowed many rural students to take advantage of a brokerage position (Burt, 1992; see also Borgatti & Foster, 2003). Our findings suggest that rural students in particular, despite data that suggest that they are especially likely to experience the dissonance associated with brokerage positions (NCES, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), avoided this experience by assiduously making new connections in the postsecondary world.

Importance of Geographic Variation in the First-Generation College Student Population

While research on FGC students often considers the group as a whole (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004), our findings underscore the importance of considering variation within student populations—at least as it relates to selecting a major and early career trajectory. Rural students felt the influence of and identified with their rural backgrounds much more than they did their FGC status (Byun et al., 2012; Howley, 2006; McCulloh, 2020). Urban students in general more readily identified with the FGC label than did their rural peers, but Black urban students more frequently mentioned the importance of making ties with other minoritized students (as opposed to the broader FGC population) through various campus organizations. Student affairs professionals and other stakeholders who seek to support FGC students might have better success getting rural students to engage with them if they offer support on the basis of their rural backgrounds, rather than on the basis of FGC status, and minoritized students may also identify more with groups associated with their racial backgrounds than with monolithic FGC support.

Contrary to the typical labels associated with FGC status (Choy, 2001; Jehangir, 2010; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004), rural students in our sample saw themselves as highly capable of postsecondary success, eagerly sought out mentorship, performed at higher academic levels, and had better retention rates than their urban peers. However, although these students were adept at finding brokerage positions that facilitated the collegiate transition, we found that their relative lack of earlier ties into college networks meant that rural students' processes of choosing college majors were focused much more narrowly than their urban peers. That is, brokering relationships across disparate social networks helped rural students fit smoothly into the college environment, but came too late to help them consider a wide variety of information sources regarding career and major options. The long-term implications of this early foreclosure of career choice warrant further study. Postsecondary professionals seeking to help rural students match into appropriate majors should also consider how they can engage with students at the high school level, partner with high schools to encourage career exploration, and support broader consideration of different majors, particularly during the first year of college.

Influence of High School, Family, and Community Expectations on Student Attitudes

The importance of high school curricula that focus on career exploration was clearly demonstrated by the choices of the urban students, whose attitudes toward college and careers were much more open minded than their rural peers. However, urban students did not have a unanimous advantage in this context; several still felt academically unprepared for college, and urban students earned much lower ACT scores and high school and postsecondary GPAs than their rural peers. This finding complicates our understanding of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model and encourages us to consider ways in which even students who emerge from areas relatively rich in resources and college-going culture can still be ill prepared for the postsecondary transition. The influence of career preparation programs should be examined in the future, and a key goal of related work should be to better understand the extent to which career exploration programs shape the academic advice-seeking networks that students use to align their interests and aspirations to the appropriate major and career trajectory.

College-bound rural students were able to experience the best training their schools could offer, while urban students often attended larger, more diverse schools and faced increased competition and, consequently, less academic pressure than rural students. While both rural and urban families tended to pressure students to succeed in college, rural students faced additional pressure from high schools and hometowns, yet they adeptly converted this pressure into aspirational, resistant, and familial capital to motivate rather than paralyze their academic efforts (Yosso, 2005). Nelson (2016) found that the vast majority of college-going rural students in a different region described their high schools as decidedly "pro-college" environments (p. 266) and a source of beneficial school-related social capital, without describing the negative combination of high college pressure and low career guidance that we noted. In both cases rural students were motivated by their home contexts to be successful in college, but our findings suggest rural high schools may create additional strain for their graduates when robust career guidance does not accompany high expectations.

Implications for Collegiate Stakeholders, Researchers, Mentors, and Families

Collegiate stakeholders, researchers, mentors, and families should be concerned about the impact of low career guidance once students enter college. While rural students were clearly motivated by aspirational and resistant capital to embark on competitive career trajectories, their academic

performance during the first year of college was not always aligned with terminal degree expectations, and their hesitancy to consider changing career plans (or even having backup plans) could complicate their long-term collegiate success. Less than 1% of FGC students earn terminal degrees (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). By the end of the first year of college, less than one fifth of students in this study with plans to attend medical, law, dental, or veterinary school had maintained a GPA of 3.5 or higher. Nevertheless, rural students in particular remained unwilling to consider other options, which may place them at heightened risk of failing to earn degrees which would allow them to reach their economic and social goals.

Many students change majors, often multiple times; Shaw and Barbuti (2010) previously found that FGC students change majors more than others. At least for the first year of college, our findings suggest that rural FGC students appear much more hesitant to change majors than their urban FGC peers. If FGC students have high aspirations, and rural students in particular are set on professional school trajectories, they may require additional support to reach these goals or to create new goals if necessary. This hesitancy may be due to limited exposure to mentorship before college or a big-fish-little-pond effect for those from less competitive school environments, which led them to aspire to terminal degrees without yet building the skillsets needed for success in such competitive contexts (see Fang et al. 2018).

In this sense, the network context of rural students—i.e., relatively limited ties to collegiate mentors before college—may inhibit finding the right major fit and thus timely degree completion (USDA, 2017; see also Fruht & Chan, 2018). Advisors, mentors, and offices that help students connect with professional mentors early in their collegiate trajectories may find that this focus on early mentorship helps students broaden their understanding of their interests and potentially helps them adjust their goals. Beyond exposure to mentors, students at both the high school and college levels need to be made fully aware of the academic performance expectations for their chosen trajectories and should be encouraged by advisors to seek help early if they struggle to meet those expectations or wish to consider other fields or routes.

Study Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it considers experiences of a relatively small group (33) of first-year students at one type of postsecondary institution (a flagship state university). Future in-depth surveys and/or interviews with a larger sample collected longitudinally across institutions could provide more generalizable insight into the ways in which universities can provide differentiated support for

unique subsets of FGC students. A larger sample would also allow for a more in-depth analysis of how racial, ethnic, and place-based identities interact to shape students' academic trajectories. Our findings illustrate important differences in the experiences of Black and White students from urban and rural contexts. However, the rural students in our sample were predominantly White, and thus our understanding of Black rural students' experiences is more limited than that of Black urban students. In addition, the experiences of Latinx and Native American students in both settings was limited in this sample. Finally, this study did not set out to emphasize the role of gender in students' experiences. Nevertheless, these factors can be central to students' career choice, network building, and academic performance and should remain relevant to future study (Chang et al., 2014; Grier-Reed, 2013; Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019). Further study of the experiences of rural Black and Latinx students in particular could help to identify the ways in which they may uniquely approach the transition to college and choice of major.

An additional limitation of our study is that rural participants were more academically selective than their urban counterparts. While we compare subsets of the FGC population, students from different geographical backgrounds also emerge from different academic backgrounds, with rural students in our sample often graduating near the top of their relatively small high school cohorts. Thus, the decision to pursue terminal degrees in selective fields more often than urban peers is likely a function of prior academic performance. It is plausible that the higher performance and aspirations of rural FGC students related to the fact that in less crowded or less competitive secondary school environments, they were given access to more advanced coursework and encouragement from teachers. Future studies that make use of large-sample surveys would be in a better position to tease apart these processes.

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