Helping Students in the Heartland: Student Affairs at Rural Community Colleges

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In this interview study, I examine how student affairs administration (SAA) works at rural community colleges as well as how rural senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) function in their leadership roles. The study purports to understand student affairs in the context of “rurality,” or what it means to be rural. Two primary research questions guide the study. First, how do rural community colleges serve their students? Second, what qualities are needed to lead student affairs at rural community colleges? I employed a semi-structured interview approach to answer these questions, focusing on the experiences of SSAOs at rural community colleges across the Midwest. The rural sociological theory of “urbanormativity” informs my motivation for the study, focusing on the attention and resource disparities between metropolitan and rural community colleges.

The findings indicate that rural community colleges serve their students through a community-informed understanding of their colleges’ missions. Leadership in student affairs at rural community colleges requires flexibility and an understanding of the rural condition and how rurality affects local student populations.

KEYWORDS: community colleges; rural; rural community colleges; rural education; student affairs; urbanormativity
HELPING STUDENTS IN THE HEARTLAND: STUDENT AFFAIRS AT RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES

GABE ESTILL

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Administration and Foundations

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2022
HELPING STUDENTS IN THE HEARTLAND: STUDENT AFFAIRS AT RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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James Palmer
Dallas Long
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It took quite a while for me to reach this point. I would like to offer my appreciation to my chair, Dr. Phyllis McCluskey-Titus, for her patience and guidance. I would like to thank my committee members Dr. Dallas Long, Dr. James Palmer, and Dr. Dianne Renn. My family members have been there with me every step of the way. I would like to thank my wife Stephanie Hlywak, my children (Barrett and Winnie), my parents (John and Sandy Estill), my in-laws (John and Alicia Hlywak), my sister (Erica Estill), my brother-in-law (Steve Hlywak), and other family members and friends for their support. I believe community colleges are America’s greatest educational achievement. I am hopeful this work contributes to a greater understanding of their importance.

G.E.
## CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

**CONTENTS**

**FIGURES**

### CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

- Introduction of the Study
- Defining “Rural”
- What is a Rural Community College?
- Theoretical Frameworks
- Participant Selection and Study Methods
- Delimitations and Trustworthiness
- Significance of the Study

### CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

- Key Attributes of Rural Community Colleges
  - Student Population
  - Relation to Communities
- Rural Community Colleges’ Challenges
  - Enrollment Patterns
  - Lack of National Attention
  - Funding Mechanisms
  - Location
- Faculty and Administrative Leadership at Rural Community Colleges
- Student Affairs Work at Community Colleges
Adaptability 32
Theory in Student Affairs 32
Student Success 33
Research on Student Affairs at Rural Community Colleges 34
Gap Analysis 36
Theoretical Frameworks: Rurality and Urbanormativity 37
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY 41
Thematizing 42
Designing 43
Participant Selection 44
Interviewing 50
Transcribing and Analyzing 51
Trustworthiness 55
Reporting 56
Methodology Conclusion 57
CHAPTER IV: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS 58
The Participants 59
Chapter Organization 59
Findings for Research Question 1 59
Community Characteristics and Relationships 62
Relationship Between the College and the Community 69
How the Community Informs the College 70
Small Town Advantages and Disadvantages 76
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attracting Candidates</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception and Fulfiling the Mission</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Affairs and Fulfiling the Mission</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Affairs and Student Life</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Needs</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covid Challenges</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question Two Findings</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Journey to Student Affairs Leadership</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Leadership Qualities</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling Good Behavior</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Affairs and Academic Affairs Relationship</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small College Benefits</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silos, Success, and Other Challenges</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards and Challenges of Working in Student Affairs at a Rural Community College</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation and Surprises</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS</strong></td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering the Research Questions</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. College Selection Diagram for Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin Colleges</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. College Selection Diagram for Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri Colleges</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction of the Study

Community colleges, once considered the junior sibling of America’s universities, have received increased attention from policymakers, thought leaders, well-heeled foundations, and critics of universities’ ballooning costs (Bellafante, 2014; Davis & Lewin, 2015; Jaschik, 2008; Kelderman, 2014). The bulk of this attention, however, focuses on large urban and suburban colleges found in densely populated regions with large tax bases, growing or recovering economies, and increasing populations (Alvarez, 2011; Gonzalez, 2011; Smith, 2008). Rural community colleges, despite their large collective enrollment, enjoy little of the attention fixed on other 2-year institutions.

Rural community colleges comprise a significant portion of the U.S. community college system (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). Dotting much of the country’s higher education landscape and serving as integral components of their small communities, the colleges are both ubiquitous and vital. Nevertheless, higher education researchers, advocacy organizations, and thought leaders devote far greater attention to urban and suburban community colleges. The dearth of information on rural community colleges can be traced to underlying factors (e.g., geographic isolation, metropolitan clout, wealth concentration) that make these colleges, and rural areas in general, an afterthought in an urban-centric society.

The scholarship on rural community colleges focuses primarily on challenges that rural students face, such as transitioning to college, balancing academic commitments with familial responsibilities, and developing their personal identities (Hetzel, 2012; Hlinka et al., 2015; Miller & Deggs, 2012; Thompson, 2013). Other scholars have devoted attention to faculty matters concerning socialization, recruitment, and hiring practices; needs of part-time instructors; professional development; salary disparities; job satisfaction; and retention (Cejda, 2010; Charlier, 2010; Eddy, 2007a, 2010; Glover et
al., 2009; Isaac & Boyer, 2007; Murray, 2005, 2007; Murray & Cunningham, 2004; Rutherford, 2012; Winter et al., 2007; Wise, 2013). A small portion of the literature covers special leadership qualities needed to manage rural institutions (Eddy 2007b; Leist, 2007a; Leist, 2007b). In the news media, writers tend to fixate on rural areas’ geographic and socioeconomic isolation (Jesse, 2020; Marcus & Krupnik, 2017; Nelson, 2010), often indicating bleak options for students in nonmetropolitan regions. Thus, SAA in rural community colleges is essentially invisible within the larger scholarship on community colleges. This is unfortunate given the increasing involvement of student affairs professionals in addressing challenges often faced by students at open-access institutions. These challenges include the need to juggle career and family responsibilities, meet financial obligations in the face of poverty, and take remedial courses before beginning college-level programming (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019).

Since its inception in the early 20th century, SAA programming has evolved to fit the needs of changing student demographics, expanded its presence at nearly all institutions, increased collaboration with academic affairs units, and confronted numerous challenges as access to higher education has expanded and demands for accountability have increased. Yet, while student affairs work has become increasingly important at community colleges (NASPA, n.d.), few scholars have examined this work in rural settings, and the small body of research examining student affairs work at rural community colleges has focused only on student experiences (e.g., Johnson-Deveraux, 2011; Moeck, 2005; Myers & Sterling, 2016; Stennis, 2004). Scholarship on the leadership of student affairs units at rural community colleges is nearly non-existent. Hence, many scholars are ignoring one of the most important units within rural community colleges as well as how these units serve their institutions and students.

The inattention to student affairs work at rural community colleges is problematic for three key reasons. First, rural colleges are different than urban colleges. Unlike their urban counterparts, rural colleges do not operate in communities with extensive social support systems comprising nonprofit
organizations, community development agencies, and other higher education institutions that play a role in helping underserved populations. They therefore perform an outsized role in their communities, filling the space that abundant urban support networks occupy. Second, student affairs units have taken on more visible and important roles within 2-year colleges, where boosting retention, transfer, and degree-completion rates have become primary institutional goals (Mangan, 2016). Finally, rural institutions include a quarter of all community colleges and enroll a substantial portion of students (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). Because the literature offers few insights into the non-academic supports found within these ubiquitous institutions, we know very little about student affairs work and its impact at rural community colleges, which are often the only accessible and affordable postsecondary education option in rural areas. It is my hope that this study can shed light on how student affairs units at rural community colleges serve their students and what qualities are required of those who lead in student affairs units and programs on rural settings.

I also believe that the public needs to hear from a larger, more diverse swath of rural residents who can offer a more nuanced take on rural life than the often monolithic, and usually unflattering, portraits seen in popular culture and mainstream journalism. I am not alone in my desire to convey richer stories and experiences within rural America. Serving as the bedrock for her website Literary in Place, rural scholar and young adult author Parton (2021) presented three beliefs that govern her work on rural writing and exploring different notions of rurality:

1. Rural stories are worth reading and worthy of study.
2. Rural stories are worth telling.
3. Rural cultures (imperfect as they may be) are worth sustaining. (para. 10)
This study will hopefully add to the small but important body of literature on rural community colleges, postsecondary institutions that are situated across all 50 states but that are far removed from key conversations in American higher education.

Through interviews with student affairs leaders at 11 rural community colleges Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, and Wisconsin, this study therefore examines how rural community colleges serve their students via the services and programs that constitute their student affairs units. Additionally, the study elicits insights into the qualities needed by administrators who lead student affairs units in rural systems. Two research questions guided the study:

1. How do rural community colleges serve their students?
   a. How do the SSAOs at rural community colleges perceive the mission of their institutions?
   b. How do the SSAOs perceive that student affairs work helps their institutions fulfill their missions?

2. How do SSAOs at rural community colleges perceive their work?
   a. How do senior student affairs professionals understand their leadership roles? That is, what is their understanding of what it takes to lead the student affairs effort at rural community colleges?
   b. How do the SSAOs perceive that their experiences prior to assuming their current roles helped prepare them for leading student affairs work at rural community colleges? How do they perceive that their experiences did not prepare them?

The following sections of this chapter examine the difficulties of specifying what the term “rural” actually means, the challenges researchers have had in identifying colleges that might genuinely be
termed “rural,” the conceptual frameworks guiding the study, and the methodology employed to conduct the study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of study limitations and delimitations.

**Defining “Rural”**

The study of rural community colleges is confounded by the competing definitions of rural. A precise definition of the term is elusive. The U.S. federal government has 15 definitions of the word “rural” (“The federal definition of ‘rural’ — times 15,” 2013). Many researchers refer to two primary government sources: the Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget (Isserman, 2005). These sources rely on population data and proximity to urbanized areas, which, the U.S. Census Bureau has designated as areas that exceed 50,000 persons (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). These competing definitions can misdirect distribution of resources, hinder grant-funding opportunities, lead to misconstrued research findings, and cause general confusion (Hawley et al., 2016; Isserman, 2005). They can also prevent rural community colleges from obtaining state and federal resources that might benefit their students. Making matters even more complex is the fact that “rural” is as much about people as it is about place, and it is a concept more than a definition.

The concept of *rurality* is at the heart of understanding rural places. As there is no single definition of “rural,” there is no universal definition of rurality. Scholarship indicates two major types of rurality definitions — descriptive and socio-cultural. Descriptive definitions of rurality include rural qualities that can be measured, such as census variables like population, employment, migration, and housing (Halfacree, 1993). In the United States, the most common measurements of descriptive rurality are provided by the U.S. Census and the Office of Management and Budget (Waldorf, 2007). These descriptive definitions help researchers and government agencies simply identify rural places. A socio-cultural definition of rurality “concentrates on highlighting the extent to which people’s socio-cultural characteristics vary with the type of environment in which they live […]” and “[…] assume[s] that
population density affects behaviour and attitudes” (Halfacree, 1993, pp. 24-25). The socio-cultural definitions of rurality are based primarily on the attitudes, beliefs, and norms that shape rural culture. Nevertheless, these definitions of rurality can be ambiguous, perpetuating the difficulty of arriving at a precise definition of rurality and even identifying a rural place.

The plethora of definitions testifies to the lack of agreement on what constitutes rurality. Waldorf (2007) described rurality as “a vague concept […] which may include low population density, abundance of farmland or remoteness from urban areas…” (para. 1). She goes on to say that “there is no consensus among researchers about how to define or measure the concept of rurality” (para. 2). Rurality, in other academic texts, refers to “a condition of place-based homeliness shared by people with common ancestry or heritage and who inhabit traditional, culturally defined areas or places statutorily recognized to be rural” (Chigbu, 2013, p. 815). In Chigbu’s definition, the adjective “place-based” is apt, as rural identity is tied to intimate communities, coalescing around a shared experience within a familiar rural setting. Many Americans are likely to associate rural America with political conservatism, economic decline, and opioid addiction. While popular media and culture often exaggerate their prevalence, these patterns certainly exist in rural America (Ingraham, 2020; Parker, et al., 2018). However, these qualities do not necessarily contribute to an understanding of rurality, or the qualities associated with places or people being rural.

In his book The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America, Wuthnow (2018) offered a more complex, sociocultural understanding of rural America that many academic and bureaucratic sources fail to convey. Wuthnow and his team interviewed hundreds of rural Americans and captured a more nuanced portrait than many depictions of rural America, which often vacillate between bucolic romanticism or rusted-out decay. Wuthnow (2018) wrote, “[R]ural America is not a homogeneous census bloc. Nor is it a uniform polling category or even a one-party political constituency” (p. 5).
Instead, he argued that rural America is a series of “moral” communities (p. 4). He was not referring to moral in the virtuous sense. Rather, rural America consists of people who are anchored to their communities, where they “uphold the local ways of being that govern their expectations about ordinary life and support their feelings of being at home and doing the right things” (p. 4). Thus, rural America contains traditions and communities that are uniquely rural. Cities and suburbs certainly have traditions and communities, but they are more numerous and often contain communities within those larger communities. Metro areas have enough space, both literal and figurative, for their people to belong in the center of the community, or they can simply choose not to belong without much notice from others. Wuthnow noted that those who keep to themselves in rural areas are often viewed as outsiders.

In my study, I utilize both descriptive and sociocultural definitions of rurality. In terms of descriptive definitions, I have relied on multiple data sources — the U.S. Census Bureau, the Office of Management and Budget, and The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy’s rural county listings — to identify rural community colleges (Health Resources and Service Administration, 2021; Sunstein, 2010; United States Census Bureau, 2019). As for a socio-cultural definition, I rely on the work of multiple scholars (Boyd & Parr, 2008; Wuthnow, 2018) to help inform my understanding of rurality, or what it means to be rural. This understanding, in turn, offers an important framework for identifying the unique character of community college student affairs work within rural settings.

Rural America is different than urban America. It can be as complex as urban America, even if it less diverse. It can be simultaneously intimate and isolated. Most importantly, it is real and unique. Its community colleges, often the sole source of attainable postsecondary education in their communities, deserve greater attention. They are more than places to earn an academic credential: They are cultural hubs, economic incubators, and community linchpins. Given rural community colleges’ unique qualities
and challenges, this study seeks to understand how rural community colleges serve their students and how those who lead student affairs units perceive their work amid the complexities found in rural areas.

**What is a Rural Community College?**

How different groups classify rural community colleges makes studying the colleges even more challenging. A rural community college is surprisingly difficult to define. Official definitions, such as those provided by the Carnegie Classification of Higher Education Institutions (“Carnegie”) from 2005 to 2010, often relied too heavily on narrow criteria set forth by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Data from these sources have not always identified nonmetropolitan areas with precision, and as a consequence, researchers have had trouble determining exactly how many rural community colleges exist. For example, in one of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*’s few articles on rural community colleges, Nelson (2010) stated that rural colleges constitute 64% of America’s 2-year public postsecondary institutions. This sizeable number, however, is misleading: Nelson took these figures from the 2010 Carnegie Classification System, which used IPEDS data as the source for its LOCALE (degree of urbanization) variable. The 2010 classification designated urban and suburban settings as “large,” “medium,” or “small,” and, in addition, designated town and rural settings as “fringe,” “distant,” or “remote” (Carnegie Foundation for Teaching, 2011). This far-reaching categorization labeled colleges in small urban areas, such as Peoria, IL, and Green Bay, WI, as rural institutions.

Fortunately, however, Carnegie has since included additional updates that have allowed researchers to identify rural areas more precisely and, therefore, the number of public 2-year colleges that can be genuinely designated as rural. Data from the 2018 Carnegie update indicate that 25% of all 2-year public colleges are designated as fringe, distant, or remote rural institutions (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). This is a far cry from the 64% figure reported by Nelson.
Although Carnegie has issued a 2021 update, I have relied on listings from the 2018 dataset to select the rural community colleges in this study. I will discuss the challenges associated with Carnegie in greater detail in Chapter Three.

Other sources are less transparent in their identification of rural colleges. Even the website of the Rural Community College Alliance, an important group of rural community and tribal college members, is not forthcoming on what it considers a rural community college. The organization avoids defining what rural community colleges are and relies on Carnegie’s 2010 geography-based classification system, despite the drawbacks I have noted (Rural Community College Alliance, n.d.). Due to these inconsistencies, I have relied on multiple sources to determine which community colleges, I consider “rural” and therefore eligible for inclusion in the study. While the 2018 update of the Carnegie Classification provides a basis for identifying rural community colleges, it is only one of the sources that I have used. My other notable source is the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, an office of the Health Resources and Services Administration, which identifies rural counties throughout the nation (Health Resources and Service Administration, 2021). Because community college districts in rural areas often align with counties, the county listings generated by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy provide clearer indicators of which community colleges should be designated as rural. Taking these sources and their limitations into consideration, I offer that rural community colleges have two defining characteristics:

1. They are found in non-metropolitan counties, generally cut off from the proximity benefits to major cities. These counties do not include more than 50,000 people.

2. They enroll fewer than 5,000 students. This number falls between Carnegie’s 2010 classification for “Rural-serving Medium Colleges, with full-year unduplicated headcount enrollment between 2,500 and 7,500 students” (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of...
Teaching, 2011). This figure allows for the inclusion of some medium-sized rural community colleges. The colleges that I have selected can be classified, per Carnegie, as both small and medium sized.

These descriptive criteria led to the identification of community colleges included in this study.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Two theoretical frameworks govern this study. The first, urbanormativity, suggests that modern urban life is viewed as normal and dominant whereas modern rural life is viewed as abnormal, even savage, and inferior (Thomas et al., 2010). This line of thinking motivated me to conduct the study, especially considering the predominant urban and suburban focus—at the expense of rural perspectives—of research on community colleges (mentioned earlier in this chapter). Two texts provided the basis for my understanding of urbanormativity. The first is *Critical Rural Theory: Structure, Space and Culture* by Thomas et al. (2011), and the second is *Studies in Urbanormativity: Rural Community in Urban Society*, which is a collection of essays edited by Fulkerson and Thomas (2014). My study, however, deviates slightly from the setting within these texts. While the work by Thomas et al. (2011) and many of the essays contained within Fulkerson and Thomas’s (2014) edited collection primarily focus on the rural Northeastern United States (mainly upstate New York), my study concentrates on the central Midwest, where I reside. Specifically, the intent is to understand student affairs work at community colleges, as well as the leadership of community college student affairs units, within rural contexts.

Rurality serves as the second theory informing my study. In the most basic sense, rurality refers to the qualities that make a place rural. As noted above, there are both descriptive and socio-cultural definitions of rurality, and I have utilized both in this study. The descriptive definitions helped me identify colleges that might potentially be included in the study, while the socio-cultural definitions—
which focus behaviors, attitudes, and norms tied to rural areas, —are important to the analysis of my findings, helping me understand student affairs work and the experiences and leadership of SSAOs at rural community colleges.

**Participant Selection and Study Methods**

Several steps were taken to identify institutions eligible for inclusion in the study. My original selection of states was based on proximity to my home in Chicago. I had planned to conduct in-person interviews on the SSAOs’ respective campuses. First, I identified 19 institutions [IL, MI, WI] that met the two defining characteristics (noted above) of rural community colleges. The three states have similar funding mechanisms for their respective community colleges (Gabriel, 2014; Illinois Community College Board, 2021; Summers-Coty, 1998). Second, I applied the same two defining characteristics to identify 11 rural institutions in Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri. Through email outreach, I recruited 11 SSAOs from six states. These 11 leaders served as the participants in my study.

The guidelines for this study’s interview approach are rooted in the second edition of Kvale and Brinkmann’s (2009) *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. The text is a seminal work in the explication of interview studies, and it provides a sense of structure to interviews, which, in practice, can otherwise be very unstructured exchanges. I conducted semi-structured interviews with student affairs leaders at selected rural community colleges in the Midwest. Semi-structured interviews allow a study’s participants to freely express their work, professional backgrounds, and thoughts on their places of employment and professional journeys. Additionally, semi-structured interviews permit space for additional questions that may arise during the interview. I conducted one semi-structured interview with each participant. Due to the restrictions surrounding COVID-19, I conducted the interviews remotely using the videoconferencing application Zoom. I added interview
questions as the study progressed. To evenly distribute those questions among the participants, I emailed follow-up inquiries to five participants. Three participants returned responses to the follow-up questions.

I used the Rev transcription service to transcribe audio files from each of the 11 interviews. Once I received the transcript for each interview, I selected the individual responses to each of my fifteen primary interview questions and created a separate text file for each question. I loaded the text files to Quirkos, a cloud-based coding application for qualitative data. This analysis was completed using Quirkos’s coding features, which allow the researcher to extract text from the transcript file and create theme bubbles, or “Quirks” (Step-by-step guide, n.d.). I created two primary Quirks—Interview Questions and Themes. In Chapter Three, I further describe how I utilized Quirkos to code the data from the interviews.

I employed the constant comparative method to analyze the data. Transcripts from the recorded Zoom interviews were analyzed according to the precepts of the constant comparative method, which involves compartmentalizing the data into separate “incidents” or “units” and then coding them into categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used Quirkos to enable easier compartmentalization. Quirkos greatly reduced the amount of time needed when using physical materials like index cards and highlighters and allowed me to focus on analysis and retrieve units of data in an expedited manner.

**Delimitations and Trustworthiness**

Delimitations are exclusions that I can control versus those conditions or faults that I cannot control, which are the study’s limitations (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). My interview participants belong to the population of student affairs leaders at rural community colleges. Based on geographic proximity and other factors discussed in Chapter Three, I have intentionally omitted portions of this population. The study’s participants work at select rural community colleges in the Midwest so my inclusion criteria
for the population of interest serves as one of the study’s delimitations, or the areas around my study are intentionally excluded. During my proposal stage of this dissertation study, I was hopeful that the interviews could be conducted in person. By the time my dissertation committee approved my proposal, COVID-19 had arrived. Social distancing measures and a climate unfavorable to direct contact with participants made conducting the interviews over Zoom more favorable to the interviewees’ health as well as my own. The technology, however, allowed me to interview subjects whose colleges were not part of the original three states (Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin). Despite the ability to interview subjects from nearly any location via Zoom. I limited the participant selection to Midwestern states that funded colleges in a similar manner and contained similar geographic features and socio-cultural rurality.

Another delimitation is the participants’ perspective. I am interviewing SSAOs; therefore, I am intentionally excluding other stakeholders within the rural community college, including students, faculty, and other staff members within student affairs. These stakeholders may have opinions and experiences that differ from those of the SSAOs.

Limitations

One of this study’s main limitations concerns the interviewer’s lack of control over interviewees’ responses. For instance, the participants may not be fully willing to share or describe their experience working within student affairs at rural community colleges. With any interview subject, I am taking him or her at his or her word and acknowledging that the interviewees may be putting forth limitations that are beyond my knowledge and control.

Additionally, due to the small number of participants, I cannot proclaim generalizability from this study’s results. As this is a qualitative study, generalizability is not my intent, but it is worth
acknowledging as a limitation. The limited sample size of my interview subjects is a consideration but not a factor, as it would be within a quantitative or mixed method study.

Assumptions

The assumed expertise of the SSAOs is one of this study’s primary assumptions. However, the interview subjects will likely possess varying degrees of involvement in the daily operations of student affairs at their respective colleges. Thus, their knowledge and experience could be unreliable; they could offer inaccurate descriptions or be disconnected from their subordinates’ views of working within student affairs. External factors could also affect the veracity of the responses. As a researcher, I can only assume that my participants offer candid depictions of life within student affairs at their colleges. Like many researchers, I am unaware of the personal lives, workplace dynamics, and myriad other external factors that can affect the validity of my interviews.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research relies on the assumption that no single truth exists, rather the truth takes multiple, subjective forms (Merriam, 2009). This assumption forces the researcher to confront questions of trustworthiness, or ensuring that the results are credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To help establish trustworthiness, I applied the standards of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability established by Lincoln and Guba (1982). I explain how I upheld these standards in Chapter Three.

Significance of the Study

This study is important for five primary reasons. These factors, briefly discussed earlier in this chapter, reflect location, status, and scholarship around rural community colleges and the student affairs profession. First, rural community colleges are ubiquitous institutions that serve a large portion of the community college student population. In terms of Carnegie Classification listings, nearly 25% of all
community colleges are classified as rural (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). Thus, rural community colleges educate a significant portion of all of America’s degree-seeking students.

Second, despite their ubiquity and sizeable enrollment, rural community colleges exist on the margins of American higher education. This invisibility is an outgrowth of rural America’s marginalized status in larger conversations on civic, cultural, and economic issues. While the colleges are numerous, larger institutions in metropolitan areas overshadow them. Rural community colleges are removed from or significantly underappreciated in the larger conversation on the role of America’s community colleges in student outcomes, short-term postsecondary credential attainment, and preparing the future workforce. As policymakers and thought leaders place further emphasis on community colleges’ importance, they may overlook rural community colleges, failing to recognize their contributions and needs (Ashford & Dembicki, 2018).

Third, rural community colleges provide a postsecondary education to students who may otherwise not have access to affordable local higher education opportunities. Rural community colleges create intellectual, cultural, social, and economic opportunities for students and their communities (Ashford & Dembicki, 2018; Crookston & Hooks, 2012). These opportunities, in turn, enrich students’ lives, creating healthier, wealthier, and more engaged citizens (Boggs, 2011; Hout, 2012; Marcotte et al., 2005; Zimmerman & Woolf, 2014).

Fourth, rural community colleges are important parts of their communities. In remote areas, the colleges are intellectual and cultural hubs (Eddy & Murray, 2007; Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Rural communities do not possess the wide array of cultural opportunities and high concentration of educated residents found in urban centers. Therefore, rural community colleges indirectly link nonmetropolitan areas to the ideas, people, and events found in more densely populated regions.
Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, little is known about student affairs work at rural community colleges. The study addresses two important and overlooked areas of community colleges: rural institutions and student affairs. I am hopeful that the study can provoke a larger conversation on student affairs work in the rural community college setting.

The attention on student affairs comes at a critical time in postsecondary education. With colleges’ emphasis on retention, advising, and students’ mental health, the work of student affairs units is increasingly in demand (Murphy, 2017). As lawmakers, accreditors, and taxpayers demand further accountability from higher education, particularly among colleges with low graduation rates, community college leaders will continue to ramp up retention and persistence initiatives. Student affairs units will carry much of this accountability burden, addressing the myriad complexities of student life outside of the classroom (e.g., students’ finances, mental health, academic advising, new student orientation, and general acclimation to college life).

This study is intended for stakeholders who can help rural community colleges receive the attention and support often afforded to larger urban and suburban institutions. My study may be able to provide insights that senior student officers recognize in their own work or can incorporate into decision-making at their own institutions. The study may also benefit a variety of rural community college stakeholders, including advisors, administrators, and elected board members, helping them direct better resources to student affairs units and improve daily operations and organization to better fit student affairs units’ contributions to the institutional mission. External associates who work with rural community colleges from the outside—community college advocacy organizations and scholars studying student affairs and rural community colleges as well as state legislators and local taxpayers that provide funding for rural community colleges—can also use the study’s findings. For those who see student affairs as imperative to the holistic mission of higher education, I will shed light on student
affairs leadership in places that are often absent from national discussions on student affairs, community colleges, and higher education.

The remaining chapters of this dissertation situate the study in the literature and provide more detailed information about methodology, findings, and study implications. Chapter Two examines the literature surrounding rural community colleges, providing further insights into their primary characteristics, the challenges they face, and the unique demands they make on leadership. Chapter Three describes the selection process used to identify the colleges whose SSAOs I interviewed for this study and details the approach to interviewing that was employed as well as the ways interview data were analyzed. Chapter Four examines findings from the interviews, highlighting the themes that emerged and their applicability to my research questions. Finally, Chapter Five analyzes the findings, their implications, and the questions they leave us with, concluding with suggestions for further research related to student affairs and student affairs leadership at rural community colleges.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The dearth of scholarship on student affairs at rural community colleges points to the need for further investigation. By necessity, researchers must broaden their scope when reviewing current literature to include available resources on demographics and economic patterns in education funding, classification systems that determine what constitutes a rural community college, and higher-level analyses of challenges facing rural communities and their institutions. Scholarship on rural community colleges devotes considerable attention to faculty matters (Cejda, 2010; Charlier, 2010; Eddy, 2007a, 2010; Glover et al., 2009; Isaac, & Boyer, 2007; Murray, 2005, 2007; Murray & Cunningham, 2004; Rutherford, 2012; Winter et al., 2007; Wise, 2013), community partnerships (Betz, 2009; Emery & North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 2008; Garza & Eller, 1998; O’Rear, 2011; Wilson, 2009; Zuchelli, 2010), and the rural student population (Hetzel, 2012; Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner et al., 2015; Miller & Deggs, 2012; Thompson, 2013). This scholarship is limited compared to the general material available on community colleges, which, perhaps unintentionally, emphasizes metropolitan colleges. For many researchers, urban and suburban colleges are the default institutional type in the category.

The literature review in this chapter consists of five sections and makes the case for the proposed study. In the first section, I examine the key themes and college attributes found in the small body of peer-reviewed sources and dissertations on rural community colleges. The second section focuses on scholarship on faculty and administrative leadership at rural community colleges. The third section synthesizes the small body of literature on student affairs as a discipline at rural community colleges. In the fourth section, a gap analysis, I discuss the questions that prior research leaves us, which form the basis of the study. In the fifth and final section, I present the two-part theoretical framework that informs the study: urbanormativity and rurality.
Key Attributes of Rural Community Colleges

The relatively sparse literature on rural community colleges documents the colleges’ numerous challenges, some exclusive to rural institutions and others common among 2-year colleges irrespective of geography. Only a handful of peer-reviewed sources devote attention to rural community colleges. A key collection of literature on rural community colleges is found in the spring 2007 issue of New Directions in Community Colleges, edited by Eddy and Murray. Its nine articles focus exclusively on rural community colleges, highlighting their primary characteristics and challenges. Katsinas and Hardy (2012), two of the scholars from the New Directions issue, authored another major work on rural community colleges, “Rural community colleges: Promoting access and building sustainable regional rural innovation,” which appeared in the 2012 edition of Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research. They argued that the states’ creation and expansion of community colleges during the early and mid-20th century led to an inequitable funding system for public 2-year colleges that has affected colleges’ “missions, functions, organization, and financing,” ultimately stymying rural regions’ abilities to grow and innovate (p. 463). This argument is compelling, yet it overlooks the roles of college personnel—specifically student affairs professionals—and how their efforts might correct the damage done by inequitable funding. As community college leaders place more attention on advising, counseling, completion, placement, retention, transfer services, and veterans’ services, the work of student affairs helps community colleges ensure that students complete their academic goals.

Structural inequities disadvantage many rural community colleges. Due to their smaller enrollments and limited tax bases, rural colleges are especially reliant on state funding. Thus, rural colleges in many states are at the mercy of state legislatures to compensate for the lack of local tax dollars collected. The work of rural institutions is largely ignored in national conversations on community colleges (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Katsinas & Hardy, 2012). These inequities can affect
how the colleges optimally carry out their open-access missions, stay innovative, and acquire additional resources to better serve students. Funding inconsistencies and lack of attention have led to stark divides between the haves and have-nots across community college districts and state higher education systems generally.

From the small body of literature, readers can begin to understand the student populations at rural community colleges, the faculty ranks at those institutions, and the integral role the colleges play within their communities. Furthermore, the scholarship on rural community colleges illustrates the primary challenges the colleges face, namely their lack of national attention, inequitable funding mechanisms, and isolated locations. In the following subsections, I will expound on these themes from the literature and link them to understanding student affairs at rural community colleges.

**Student Population**

In 2011, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching noted that rural community college enrollments vary, ranging from small tribal colleges with fewer than 300 students to coastal community colleges with enrollments of more than 7,500. The colleges may reside in lower-income regions, but they can also be found near affluent vacation communities. Per the 2018 revised Carnegie Classification results, rural public 2-year colleges enrolled 664,041 students during fall 2017 (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). That total covers three classifications for rural institutions (fringe, distant, and remote), depending on the distance of the college’s locale from urbanized areas (defined by the Census Bureau (2021) as “densely developed [territories], [that] encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses” and include at least 50,000 people”) and urban clusters (defined by the Census Bureau (2021) as “as urbanized areas, […] containing at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people). The 158 Rural Fringe institutions—each housed in a “[c]ensus-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area… [or in
a] rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster” (NCES, 2006, Exhibit A.)—carry the highest total enrollment, with 479,227 students enrolled in fall 2017 (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2018). The 45 Rural Distant colleges—each situated in a “[c]ensus-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, …[or in a] rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster” (NCES, 2006, Exhibit A.)—enrolled 141,728 students in the fall of 2017 (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). Finally, 20 Remote Rural institutions—each located in a “Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster” (NCES, 2006, Exhibit A.)—enrolled 43,056 students during the fall of 2017 (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). One college, Eastern Shore Community College (ESCC), enrolled 10,303 students, almost one fourth of all students enrolled at remote rural colleges. The example of ESCC should remind us that average enrollments across institutions are misleading. The Rural Fringe classification, for example, includes McDowell Technical Community College, with an enrollment of 122 students, as well as Chattahoochee Valley Community College, which enrolled 12,790 students (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018).

Rural community college students’ income levels reflect the incomes within rural areas, where average household incomes are lower than those of urban areas (Hawk, 2013). According to the American Community Survey, urban poverty rates declined at a higher rate than rural poverty rates between 2013 and 2017 (“Rural America at a Glance,” 2018). This disparity is important, as it informs the policy arguments surrounding rural community colleges, particularly in relation to their available resources, student demographics, and funding mechanisms. Like many students who attend community colleges, rural students are heavily dependent on financial aid. Writing in 2008, Hardy and Katsinas noted that students at small and medium-sized rural community colleges typically received more
institutional aid, were recipients of more Pell Grants, and incurred more debt than did students at urban and suburban institutions.

The student population at rural institutions is much less racially diverse than at urban and suburban institutions. Hardy and Katsinas (2007) observed that nearly 74% of all students at rural community colleges are white. This portion is substantially larger than the white student populations at urban (45%) and suburban institutions (54%). Scholars have not revisited rural enrollment numbers nationally, but one can assume that the figures remain steady as 80% of rural America in 2018 is white (USDA, 2018). The homogeneity of rural populations can limit students’ and other collegiate stakeholders’ exposure to ethnic and cultural diversity. Diversity in higher education often yields benefits to students, including increased self-confidence, social agency, and better academic outcomes (Bowman, 2010; Gurin et al., 2002; Nelson Laird, 2005). In addition, Cejda (2010) and others (Leist, 2007a; Leist, 2007b; Murray, 2007; Pennington et al., 2006) have commented that rural colleges have difficulty attracting diverse teaching and administrative talent. For the small number of students of color, the shortage of people who look like them could hinder their college experience and lead to less successful outcomes.

Relation to Communities

The literature on rural community colleges indicates that the colleges are deeply embedded in their communities. Rural community colleges are more than just local institutions of higher education: they are also social, cultural, and intellectual hubs for the communities they serve (Miller & Kissinger, 2007). Katsinas (2007) observed that rural community colleges often serve as the primary venue for local access to the visual and performing arts. College theater departments stage annual performances. Colleges book touring acts to provide a source of entertainment to the regions they serve. In addition, colleges partner with area elementary and secondary schools on arts programming or provide a space for
performances by other local artists. In addition to enhancing the arts, rural community colleges, through food drives and other forms of charitable giving, contribute to the economic safety net of their local communities. Rural community colleges also provide college credit coursework at area high schools and allow high school students to attend college classes. These dual-credit and dual-enrollment programs allow colleges the opportunity to recruit future full-time students and provide college-level knowledge and skills to the next generation of learners before they reach the age of 18 (Bragg et al., 2006).

Rural community colleges also serve as local economic engines. Miller and Tuttle (2007) described three economic service activities that rural community colleges carry out. First, they provide contract training to private businesses, enabling colleges to address local workforce needs. Second, colleges engage in small business development, providing low-cost or free office space and consulting services to area businesses. Third, many rural community colleges are directly involved in local economic planning, conducting environmental scans, collecting information on economic trends and state legislative policies affecting local stakeholders, and facilitating community discussions on issues of regional and statewide importance.

Thus, rural community colleges play essential roles in the cultural and economic development of their respective districts. Urban and suburban colleges also play these community development roles, though they do so (as mentioned in Chapter One) as part of extensive systems of community-based agencies, multifaceted educational institutions, and other service-oriented organizations that may not be available to the citizens of rural areas. Community colleges in rural districts are often the primary hub of community improvement and development, playing an outsized role (relative to urban and suburban institutions) in their service districts.
Rural Community Colleges’ Challenges

Rural community colleges face challenges different than urban institutions. Rural community and urban colleges may share similar missions. Preeminent texts on community colleges by Cohen and Brawer (1996) and Vaughan (2006) cite common elements that constitute the comprehensive mission for all community colleges: open admissions; comprehensive curricula that cover transfer, vocational, continuing education, and remedial coursework; community outreach and service; and an emphasis on teaching and learning above scholarship and research. Rural community colleges, however, face challenges that are unique to their setting. These challenges relate to enrollment, the lack of national attention, insufficient funding mechanisms, and the isolated locations in which the institutions are situated.

Enrollment Patterns

Hardy and Katsinas (2007), citing IPEDS data, indicated that the average enrollment for rural community colleges in the year 2000 was 2,100 students. While Carnegie’s classification changes for rural community colleges (as described in Chapter One) have made annual comparisons to the numbers Hardy and Katsinas cite difficult, Slepyan (2021), citing data from the National Student Clearinghouse, noted a 9.9% drop for rural community college enrollment between spring 2020 and spring 2021. Enrollment is unlikely to improve soon amid continuous population declines in rural areas (Cromartie, 2017; Swenson, 2019). A strong post-recession economy and low birth rates are two factors responsible for the continually declining enrollment at 2-year colleges nationwide (Smith, 2018). Rural community colleges will have to weather those obstacles as well, making enrollment a perpetual challenge.

Lack of National Attention

The marginal status of rural community colleges in higher education is one of their greatest challenges. While community colleges had a vocal advocate in President Obama, none of the 13 papers
published as part of the 2010 White House Summit on Community Colleges directly addressed rural community colleges (Katsinas & Hardy, 2012). Katsinas and Hardy wrote that murky and inconsistent classifications have contributed to the invisibility of rural community colleges in American higher education. Absent accurate classifications of higher education institutions, scholars do not always have reliable data on rural community colleges. In addition, rural education generally receives far less attention than education in urban areas, a problem that Sherwood (2000) attributed to (a) the failure to differentiate between the problems and challenges faced by rural educators and those faced by urban educators, (b) more media and policy attention around urban initiatives, (c) an absence of networking among professionals in rural education, (d) a lack of sustained scholarly work focusing on rural education, (e) scholars’ failure to respond to and coalesce around rural education research priorities, and (f) the lack of a sense of crisis concerning rural education in discussions of urban schools. These factors make it difficult for rural community college leaders to gain footing in the national conversation around higher education and draw attention to the issues that their colleges face.

**Funding Mechanisms**

Rural community colleges often encounter fiscal challenges related to the low tax property revenues generated in many rural areas. As Katsinas and Hardy (2012) argued, the reliance on local taxes in many states has separated community colleges into the haves (mainly large suburban districts with abundant resources for infrastructure and student services) and have-nots (rural districts that struggle to survive in districts with low property tax bases). In 2007-2008, small rural community colleges received a paltry 1% of their total revenue from local sources, and medium-sized rural community college received only 10%. These numbers pale in comparison to the relatively sizeable 30% that suburban community colleges received (Katsinas & Hardy, 2012).
Amid a decades-long decline of state funding, rural colleges, which are heavily reliant on these funds, suffer more than suburban institutions that can rely on local taxes and greater enrollment numbers (Katsinas & Palmer, 2005; Katsinas & Hardy, 2012). Because state funding in recent years has been erratic, colleges are at the mercy of their states’ politics, fiscal health, and other financial commitments and priorities (Phelan, 2014). Hopefully, recent upticks in state funding as documented by the Grapevine report for fiscal year 2022 might signal at least a modest recovery from last recession (State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2022). Yet the up-and-down history of state funding for higher education over the past three decades suggests that student affairs units at rural community colleges operate in an atmosphere of fiscal uncertainty, affecting the scope of programming the colleges can offer and the level of service they can provide to students.

**Location**

Perhaps the most significant challenge for rural community colleges is the location of the colleges. Rural regions have far fewer financial and knowledge-economy industries than urban areas (USDA, 2015a). Rural households are more likely to fall below the poverty threshold than urban or suburban households. In 2017, the rural poverty rate was 16.4% compared to a 12.9% for urban areas (USDA, 2018). These numbers dispel the myth that America’s poor are mainly concentrated in cities.

Health problems present another challenge for rural community colleges. Mortality rates have improved at a much slower rate in rural areas (James, 2014). Additionally, obesity affects rural Americans at higher rates than urban dwellers. Forty percent of rural residents are obese compared to 33% of urban Americans. Obesity has led to a higher rate of chronic disease among rural Americans (Befort et al., 2012). Thus, rural college students are likely to encounter health challenges at a greater rate than their urban peers. These concerns may keep students away from the classroom, contributing to attrition and hindering students from achieving academic and career success.
Research indicates that the rural settings in which these colleges operate enable close contact with the local community (Cejda, 2012; Eddy, 2007b; Miller & Kissinger, 2007). However, the relative isolation of these rural communities may also prevent the colleges from growing, attracting diverse populations, and garnering their share of public attention. These geographic challenges are the root of other obstacles, including limited local tax revenue and declining enrollment.

**Faculty and Administrative Leadership at Rural Community Colleges**

Geographic isolation of many rural areas contributes to the colleges’ difficulty attracting outside talent. Murray (2007) drew attention to the colleges’ inability to recruit and retain faculty, as prospective applicants may be dissuaded from applying to rural teaching vacancies due to low salaries, the communities’ limited cultural and commercial options, and the lack of racial and ethnic diversity. Because educated rural citizens often leave for metropolitan areas, the communities are left with fewer educated individuals to fill local college teaching vacancies. Further, rural community colleges are often at a geographic disadvantage when it comes to attracting qualified applicants for teaching vacancies (Cejda, 2010; Leist, 2007a, 2007b; Murray, 2007; Pennington et al., 2006). Their isolated locations usually include fewer cultural institutions, shopping destinations, and recreational choices than urban and suburban areas (Cejda, 2010).

It is difficult to assess the number of college faculty members employed at rural community colleges. Even though rural community colleges are often smaller than urban colleges, Maldonado (2006) indicated that they employed a considerable portion (42%) of all community college faculty in 2003-2004. The 2018 Carnegie Classification dataset does not contain complete information on the number of full- and part-time faculty found at rural community colleges (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). Therefore, determining precise figures for the number of community college faculty employed at Carnegie-designated rural institutions is difficult. Scholars have not widely
studied the volume, demographics, and traits of rural community college faculty. The literature does, however, speak to the challenges faced by rural community college faculty. These challenges fall under three primary themes: (a) cultural fit, (b) multi-faceted duties, and (c) salaries that are typically lower than those offered at metropolitan institutions.

Twombly (2005) argued that cultural fit is an important factor in the hiring practices of rural community colleges. However, Murray (2007) noted that the local communities served by rural colleges contain few qualified applicants for faculty posts, requiring the colleges to rely on internal candidates or recruit from outside the region. Thus, rural community colleges face a conundrum: internal candidates may not be qualified, but external candidates may not be good cultural fits. A rural lifestyle, with relatively affordable housing and often close-knit communities, will be a draw for some applicants, but can serve as a deterrent for many others. Colleges will likely have the same challenges in recruiting professional student affairs personnel, including directors, deans, and senior officers.

Rural community colleges have fewer personnel members and resources than urban and suburban institutions, thus placing more demands on faculty. Rural community college faculty members often teach a wide variety of courses, often including some coursework outside their primary discipline (Cejda, 2010). Twombly (2005) found that, for instance, physics instructors may also have to teach astronomy and geology. In addition to heavy course loads, rural community college faculty members are often expected to perform noninstructional duties, such as serving as lab technicians, tutoring center directors, advisors, recruiters, curriculum facilitators, placement specialists, or leaders of other academic and nonacademic functions (Eddy, 2007; Murray, 2007). These administrative duties do not tend to fall as heavily on their peers at larger urban colleges, which can distribute the work more evenly among personnel and commit to hiring specialists who meet specific student needs and address emerging trends (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007).
The discrepancy in resources is also apparent in the salaries between metropolitan and non-metropolitan community colleges. Faculty salaries at rural colleges are not competitive with metropolitan community colleges. Maldonado (2006) found a nearly $10,000 difference between community college full-time faculty salaries at rural versus urban and suburban institutions. Of course, it should be recognized that not all rural community colleges are uniformly disadvantaged in terms of faculty salaries. Nearly 10 years after Maldonado’s (2006) study, Mayhall et al. (2016) found sizable salary differences between rural community college faculty members working with collective bargaining agreements and those without collective bargaining agreements; salary differences were also seen between colleges in districts supported by local tax appropriations and those in districts that are not supported by local taxes.

Due to geographic isolation, rural colleges often have difficulty attracting faculty and retaining students. Additionally, the colleges often cover geographically large districts, which means increased commuting time for students and additional hours on the road for leaders who need to meet with stakeholders, sometimes across hundreds of square miles. As rural districts can include multiple counties and communities, leaders face limitations on taxing authority as well as and challenges related to the socioeconomic diversity within small communities.

Shifting our attention from faculty to administrative leaders, scholars have argued that a thorough understanding of rurality is imperative for leadership success at rural community colleges. The rural community college leader must be cognizant of the college’s rural context and its related challenges. In his analysis of rural college presidents, Leist (2007a) identified the challenges in terms of geography, politics, and culture. These challenges and Leist’s conclusions are applicable to any leader at a rural community college, including SSAOs.
Within small communities, according to the presidents that Leist (2007a) interviewed, leaders are highly visible members of the community, losing any sense of anonymity that they may have enjoyed prior to taking on a leadership role at a rural community college. They also must interact with a wide array of leaders, many of whom may lack strong educational backgrounds but often serve as social, political, and economic influencers within rural communities. Similarly, Eddy (2007b) cited the loss of anonymity, importance of internal and external relationships, relatability to community members, and participatory management practices as key characteristics of the rural community college president.

When exploring geographic differences between community college presidents, Leist (2007a, 2007b) stated three special characteristics for rural leaders: situational awareness, which refers to an understanding of the college’s place in its community and how their leadership can help address internal and external challenges; rural roots, that is a rural background or, at the very least, an appreciation for rural culture; and what Leist termed “telling the story” of the college through a mix of communicative skills to advocate and market on behalf of the institution. These qualities, Leist argued, are unique to rural leaders who operate in smaller, closely interconnected bucolic settings. Finally, Leist (2007a) wrote that rural community college leaders must weigh cultural considerations when making important decisions. Rural communities, Leist noted, are often politically and culturally conservative, which is at odds with the perceived liberal tilt in urban and suburban areas. Rural areas’ conservative political bent forces college presidents to be deft political players in areas where their beliefs may be at odds with the community.

In his dissertation, Kools (2010) surveyed college presidents at urban and rural community colleges on their prioritization and interpretation of the American Association of Community College’s leadership competencies. Kool’s study indicates that rural leaders need to adopt different strategies and approaches to fit their institutions’ locations and characteristics. Compared to leaders at urban colleges,
Kools (2010) found that rural community college leaders placed greater emphasis on community college advocacy and resource management. The findings on resource allocation and management align with the financial struggles of rural community colleges. Rural resources have always been relatively meager and may continue to be scarce in the coming decades.

In Kools’s (2010) study, both rural and urban presidents cite communication as the most important competency needed to lead their institutions effectively. While this result might be unsurprising, the communication tactics and outreach methods that urban and rural leaders use to interact with stakeholders illustrate some divergence between institutional types. The approach used by rural community leaders must typically be intimate, harnessing small groups at small institutions in small communities. Urban college leaders have a wider, more varied network of stakeholders, but they also have an organizational chart that contains more middle managers to carry out daily operations and be deployed for civic functions and community outreach. Staffing at rural colleges is leaner. Upper-level administrators, in addition to their executive duties, may perform work that is typically designated to specialists and coordinators at larger metropolitan colleges.

No community college would function effectively without its student affairs unit, which includes the campus services and programs that constitute the non-classroom support students receive. Student affairs professionals have played an important role in the story of American postsecondary education. The following section turns to the literature on student affairs work at community colleges generally as well as its place within rural community colleges specifically.

Student Affairs Work at Community Colleges

Within higher education, student affairs typically includes the services and support functions outside classroom instruction designed to enhance students’ development (NASPA, n.d.). However, as community college students often differ from university students, student affairs units at 2-year
institutions have adapted to fit their students’ needs and adhere to an open access mission. Culp (2005) wrote that a set of core values guides much of the work of student affairs at community colleges. These values include “ensuring access and opportunity for all, developing the whole student, providing quality services to meet student needs, believing that all students matter, facilitating student learning and success, and believing in the educational richness and power of the out-of-classroom environment” (Culp, 2005, p. 77). The literature on student affairs in community colleges reflects these values, focusing on three related themes: (a) adaptability to fit students’ needs, (b) practices that are rooted in cognitive and psychosocial theories, and (c) a growing emphasis on student success.

**Adaptability**

A wide variety of students with diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and varying academic abilities enroll in community colleges. Therefore, the student affairs units at community colleges must be adaptable, a theme that is emphasized in the literature. Helfgot (2005) wrote that a “recognition and appreciation of individual differences” (p. 9) is a touchstone value of student affairs within community colleges. Thus, community college student affairs units need to be adaptive, tailoring programs and services to fit the students’ needs. Culp (2005) emphasized how colleges must refine student services to serve students more effectively, focusing on a variety of factors that help create informed programming that upholds the community college mission of open access and opportunity and the core value of adaptability. As new learners (online students, displaced workers, students with mental health challenges) emerge, student affairs units need to retool their approach to better serve students.

**Theory in Student Affairs**

Cognitive and psychosocial theories form the bedrock of understanding student development at community colleges. Community colleges often struggle to sustain students’ extracurricular involvement (Pannoni, 2015; Song, 2015) and increase persistence and retention rates (National Student
Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement has significantly shaped how many colleges have designed physical spaces for learning (Harrington, 2014; Hunley & Schaller, 2006; Painter et al., 2013), rationalized service-learning programs (Astin et al., 1999), and developed student activities (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement is highly relevant to student affairs leaders at 2-year colleges, as the importance of keeping students enrolled has become just as essential as giving them access to postsecondary education. Two-year colleges’ emphasis on retention has also been informed by Tinto (1975), who stressed the dual importance of both academic and social integration on student persistence.

While some of these theories are inherent in the work of nearly all student affairs units, little is known about how they may play out within rural colleges specifically. As students’ needs change, new theories are likely to emerge, shaping the future of student affairs work at community colleges including those serving rural districts. Nearly every initiative, however, will align with one overarching goal: increased student success.

**Student Success**

Compared to 4-year institutions, community colleges’ retention and completion rates are relatively low: only 53% of students persist to their second semester. Retention rates for first-semester students at four-year colleges is much higher at 76%. (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020). In response to this trend, scholars have devoted considerable attention to student success measures. In the fall 2016 issue of *New Directions for Community Colleges*, Carales et al. provided an overview of organizations, initiatives, and recent literature on student success programs directed at community college students. The authors offered a snapshot of the work being conducted by organizations such as Achieving the Dream, the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, the National Academic Advising Association, and the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience, and
Students in Transition. During recent years, scholars connected to these organizations have produced some of the most influential literature on student success in community colleges. In *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges*, scholars from the Community College Research Center provided new frameworks for student affairs work, namely breaking down silos between instructional and student service staff, adopting electronic advising methods, bolstering early alerts when students are struggling, and strengthening student success courses (Bailey et al., 2015).

At many 2-year institutions, student affairs units often lead college-wide retention efforts. While 2-year colleges’ retention and completion initiatives have received considerable attention (Hagedorn, 2010; Luke et al., 2015; Rankin et al., 2010; Travers, 2016), fewer studies have devoted attention to persistence efforts at rural colleges. The authors of *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges* (Bailey et al., 2015), focus predominantly on large metropolitan institutions such Miami Dade College, Central Piedmont Community College, Queensborough Community College, and Valencia College.

The core values that Culp (2005) identified also inform practices across community colleges. The small body of scholarship on student affairs at rural community colleges indicates how the colleges often make do with fewer resources than their metropolitan counterparts and achieve success despite geographic obstacles. The next section of the literature review explores the scholarship on student affairs within rural community colleges.

**Research on Student Affairs at Rural Community Colleges**

Few researchers have examined student affairs administration at rural community colleges. Hirt et al. (2003) explored the nature of job duties, rewards, and relationships of professionals serving in admissions, financial aid, counseling, programs for special populations, and student activities at two rural community colleges located in the same state. The authors found that student service work at these colleges often occurs at a hectic pace, with service providers required to perform multiple duties beyond
their specialty. Small staffs and tight resources contributed to this challenging environment.

Furthermore, many of the providers indicated that much of their work was guided by individuals primarily working in other areas outside of student affairs of the college, or individuals who did not have strong backgrounds in student affairs. The scenarios described by the professionals in Hirt et al.’s (2003) study could reflect the smaller workforce and fewer specialized positions at rural community colleges, where both faculty and staff often cover areas beyond their field of study or experience.

Other studies on student affairs at rural colleges tend to focus on students rather than student affairs leaders and service providers. Mostly written as dissertations, these studies (Hale & Bray, 2011; Hash, 1985; Jefcoat, 1991; Larson, 1983; Martin, 2001; Myers & Sterling, 2016; Smith, 2010; Stennis, 2004), provide some insights into rural community college students (e.g., student perception of student services; student satisfaction with advising services; the benefits and promise of new advising models; student outcome differences between rural and urban institutions; attitudes towards student services among residential, commuter, traditional, and nontraditional students; efficacy of first-year orientation programs; and program evaluation within student services). However, it is difficult to connect themes between these studies. A few are case studies at one or two colleges, and overall, the scattered studies involving rural institutions focus on a differing aspects of student affairs work, providing a fractured picture of the student affairs enterprise within rural settings. If any line of research can be traced, it emerges in the form of advising practices at rural community colleges. For instance, Hash (1985) discovered that full-time and career students were more pleased with the colleges’ advising services than transfer and part-time students. Jefcoat (1991) examined the goal attainment/effectiveness of four academic advising models employed at rural community colleges across 27 states. Jeffcoat’s study revealed that supplementary and split advising models correlated with higher levels of student goal
attainment. Even though many colleges still utilize the models that Jefcoat (1991) cited, few other studies place advising and related student services in a rural context.

Studies of student affairs work at rural community colleges have been conducted over the course of the last four decades. The scholarship is intermittent, often with gaps of several years between related analyses. In addition, the literature on student affairs work at rural community colleges does not account for new and emerging trends within the student affairs profession. The literature may not present a holistic picture of recent developments in student affairs at rural community colleges.

**Gap Analysis**

A survey of the literature reveals four important gaps in the study of student affairs at rural community colleges:

1. The extant research says little about the organization and daily operations of student affairs units at rural community colleges.
2. Studies convey few details on how student affairs units’ help rural community colleges fulfill their missions. As community college missions evolve, perspectives from the sizeable number of rural college leaders could provide new insights and best practices.
3. The literature reveals relatively little about the professional backgrounds, motivations, and aspirations of student affairs professionals at community colleges or the contributions they make to the institutions they serve. This stands in stark contrast to the relatively strong body of research on community college faculty, presidents, and students.
4. Few works offer insight into the professionalization of rural community college student affairs practitioners, namely the professional development, career trajectories, and employment outlooks for these important players in the community college profession.
These gaps in the literature make it difficult to decipher how community college student affairs work plays out in rural contexts and how student affairs units help rural colleges fulfill their missions and achieve greater institutional effectiveness. Moreover, little is known about the people who lead student affairs work in these institutions, which serve such a substantial portion of the community college student population. Additional research could fuel new conversations about leadership and service in rural communities, propelling further study and policy considerations that could benefit rural community colleges.

**Theoretical Frameworks: Rurality and Urbanormativity**

For several decades, sociologists have contributed to the body of rural theory research. Much of their work has formed the more recent field of critical rural theory. I drew much of the rural theory referenced within this chapter from Thomas et al.’s (2011) *Critical Rural Theory: Structure, Space and Culture*. The authors examined rural social hierarchies, systems, geography, values, and norms through a critical theory lens. Although the authors of *Critical Rural Theory* do not use the exact term, I will refer to these items collectively by the term *rurality*, a composite quality that encompasses the politics, geography, and culture of rural America. Rurality, in other academic texts, refers to “a condition of place-based homeliness shared by people with common ancestry or heritage and who inhabit traditional, culturally defined areas or places statutorily recognized to be rural” (Chigbu, 2013, p. 815). Cloke (1977) using multiple variables, developed an index of rurality for England and Wales. He sought to measure the degrees of rurality among different parts of the two regions of the United Kingdom. Cloke developed four classifications to indicate different degrees of rurality: “extreme rural,” “intermediate rural, intermediate non-rural,” and “extreme non-rural.” Cloke intended this index to be useful for regional planners and policymakers. In Chapter Three, I discuss my selection process for the rural...
community colleges under review. While not as quantitatively sophisticated as Cloke, I harnessed multiple sources to filter down to the colleges that best meet my understanding of rurality.

Other scholars such as Boyd and Parr (2008), both geographers, have devoted attention to rural mental health issues, mainly in Australia and the United Kingdom. Their understanding of rurality moves away from the stereotypical differences between urban and rural people, focusing instead on understanding rural mental health issues through rural geography, mental health geography, and the social geographies of caring. Their statements on rurality are pertinent to this study as my findings indicate students face considerable mental health challenges in a rural landscape where access to treatment is scarce and attitudes surrounding mental health are geographically influenced. Boyd and Parr (2008) wrote that rurality is “is a social construction with multiple meanings ascribed to it” (p. 2). They also emphasized that, until recently, much of the literature on mental health has focused on metropolitan areas, noting that rural health has different dimensions, primarily due to the scarcity of treatment facilities and perceptions surrounding mental health issues, than urban and suburban mental health.

While I do not spend a considerable amount of time on rural mental health issues in my study, it is important to note that care for students’ mental health needs often falls to student affairs units. Additionally, as I mention throughout the study, rural colleges, and rural areas in general, are often viewed as secondary to metropolitan institutions and places. For the purposes of this study, I employ the dimensions of rurality identified by previous scholars (Boyd & Parr, 2008; Chigbu, 2013; Cloke, 1977), applying them to America’s rural landscapes, particularly in the Midwestern states on which I focused.

The concept of urbanormativity, the second theoretical underpinning of my study, includes the cultural assumption that “urban is normal and rural is abnormal or even deviant” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 5). Urbanormativity indicates that structural forces favor urban over rural interests. This tendency has caused urban society, where most public policy originates, to either neglect or scorn rural society.
Thomas et al.’s (2011) explication of urbanormativity illustrates rural America’s perceived secondary status when compared to urban America. I have applied this concept to examine how rural community colleges fit into the current conversation on American community colleges.

Urbanormativity also extends to the world of community colleges. Rural colleges, despite their prevalence, live in the shadows of larger metropolitan institutions. This invisibility, as Katsinas and Hardy (2012) noted, excludes these institutions from major national initiatives focused on community colleges. Rural community colleges rarely receive the spotlight that lawmakers and foundations bestow on urban 2-year institutions, such as Miami Dade College, Valencia College, and the vast California Community Colleges System, which includes several large urban and suburban colleges (Aspen Institute, n.d.; League for Innovation in Community Colleges, n.d.; Zanville, 2017). While these large urban 2-year colleges educate many underrepresented students and struggle (like all colleges) with declining state funds, they are not the sole providers of higher education in their communities. Two-year urban colleges co-exist alongside trade schools, skills training facilities, community support networks, and other entities supported through tax dollars or philanthropic foundations. Urban community colleges also benefit from being in metropolitan hubs, where employers cluster and companies tend to expand and invest, or in suburban areas with relatively high property taxes and mostly steady population growth (Frey, 2018).

The prevalence of urbanormativity was a primary motivation behind my decision to conduct the study, which gives voice to an otherwise overlooked group of community college professionals who play important roles in the lives of a significant portion of students attending public two-year institutions. Urbanormativity also serves as the theoretical lens, or framework, through which to view the inequities surrounding rural community colleges. Creswell (2007) described how researchers can use lenses to examine phenomena, which, in the case of this study, focuses on student affairs work and
leadership rural community colleges. I examine how student SSAOs at selected Midwestern rural community colleges perceive that student affairs work supports the missions of their colleges, as well as their perceptions of what it takes to lead the student affairs efforts at rural community colleges.

Creswell (2007) described five approaches (narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study) to qualitative inquiry or research. My study incorporates a phenomenological approach, as it includes multiple individuals around a shared concept or experience, senior student affairs leadership at rural community colleges. The next chapter explains the study methodology in greater detail.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

I conducted a qualitative interview study to answer my research questions. I utilized the semi-structured interview method to elicit responses to my interview questions. Semi-structured interviews fit this study because the interviews are typically conducted one-on-one, include open-ended questions, provide opportunities for follow-up inquiries, can relax participants, and generate thorough responses that convey the interviewees’ attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Adams, 2010).

Four factors guided my decision to select the semi-structured interview method. First, the study has a small number of participants. This number is intentional. Prior to the onset of COVID-19, I had planned to visit the rural community colleges where the participants work. Given the distance between colleges, participants’ schedules, and my own time constraints, I expected to interview 10 to 15 SSAOs. This range aligned with the typical number of subjects recommended for an interview study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The second factor in selection of the interview method included my desire to evoke in-depth responses that reflect the participants’ experience leading student affairs units at rural community colleges. Semi-structured interviews are conversational, allowing the participants to freely express themselves and provide honest and thorough responses (Adams, 2010). Finally, the semi-structured interview method allows the interviewer to deviate from their original interview questions. This flexibility includes opportunities for additional questions during and after the interview (Adams, 2010).

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) prescribe seven stages of an interview investigation. The seven stages include thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I followed these stages to plan, conduct, and analyze my interviews. Throughout this chapter, I have included these seven stages, with some slight language variations, within my four main sections.
Thematizing

Kvale’s thematizing stage addresses the purpose and conception of the theme under investigation, also known as the *why* and the *what* (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The purpose of this study (Kvale’s *why*) is to better understand how rural community colleges serve their students and how SSAOs perceive their work in leading student affairs units at rural community colleges. As discussed in Chapter One, my study is motivated by the theory of urbanormativity, which refers to urban as the dominant influence on modern society. I applied this theory to the study of community colleges, emphasizing how urban community colleges receive a far greater amount of attention than rural community colleges. As I mentioned in Chapter One, nearly 25% of community colleges serve rural areas (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). Few scholars, however, have studied rural community colleges despite their ubiquity and the numbers of students they enroll. Per the 2018 Carnegie Classification System dataset, rural community colleges enrolled over 660,000 students in the fall of 2017 (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). Even fewer researchers have explored the student affairs at rural community colleges. Looking at student affairs through the lens of the local setting—in this case, rurality—makes sense in the case of community colleges, which are mandated by states to serve specific geographical regions (Katsinas, 2003). Consequently, the work of each community college must be understood in the context of the community it serves. Rural community colleges are deeply embedded in their small communities. Rurality helps define the colleges not only geographically but also culturally. Rurality can also have a profound effect on students, as mentioned in Chapter Two. As student affairs units manage co-curricular functions, their connection to the rural student population extends beyond the classroom.
Designing

Maxwell (2013) writes that “Your research questions identify the things that you want to understand; your interview questions generate the data that you need to understand these things” (p. 77). I employed Maxwell’s notion when designing my interview questions. My interview questions reflect my primary research questions and the accompanying sub-questions. Within Appendix A, as well as within the text of Chapter Four, I have inserted the interview questions to their applicable research questions and themes. I asked interviewees about their career paths and how they feel that student affairs work contributes to the mission of their rural community colleges. I also inquired about their perceptions of how student affairs work mainfested at rural colleges, using the results to determine if their responses aligned with the literature discussed in Chapter Two or revealed new insights not previously found in the literature. I also sought the senior officers’ insights of what it takes to lead student affairs work at rural colleges. The full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

While I had intended to conduct the interviews on the respective campuses of the SSAOs, COVID-19 made in-person interviews infeasible during the fall 2020 semester. Instead, I utilized the videoconference application Zoom, under my Illinois State University-issued account, to conduct the interviews with the SSAOs. Although I held the interviews remotely, I was still able to observe interviewees’ facial expressions, record and reflect on moments when they emphasized points, and, at the very least, establish virtual eye contact. The Zoom format was a suitable compromise when I could not hold these interviews in person. On the other hand, I was not able to experience other attributes that emerge in a physical interview setting, such as handshakes during introductions. I was also not able to observe much of the SSAOs’ office environment. In fact, many of the SSAOs were participating in the interviews from home, as they were only working on campus periodically during the first year of the COVID pandemic.
Per Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), interview studies typically have 10 to 15 subjects. Taking this into account, my initial outreach included interview requests to 19 SSAOs at rural community colleges across three selected states. Due to a low response rate, I later expanded my criteria to include invitations to rural SSAOs from Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri. In the Participant Selection of this chapter, I will discuss the selection criteria and outreach strategies, as well as their slight modifications, that I employed to select, contact, and interview the SSAOs.

**Participant Selection**

An important delimitation of the study is my decision to confine the selection of study participants to rural community colleges in Midwestern states. When preparing my proposal, I had planned to visit the selected institutions if feasible. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic began about six weeks before my proposal hearing. I held out hope that the pandemic may have a swift end, so I continued to plan for in-person interviews. As COVID refused to let up during the summer 2020 months, I pivoted to all virtual interviews. While I had originally selected three states (Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin) low response rates provoked further outreach. Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin (its technical colleges rather than the two-year college branches affiliated with its state university system), share common characteristics in funding and governance: All states selected divide their community colleges into districts, and each district is partially funded by local property taxes in addition to tuition and state tax appropriations. To fit these criteria as closely as possible, my second round of outreach included states—Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri —characterized by similar attributes in funding mechanisms and governance. In the case of Iowa and Missouri, should the pandemic let up, I was hopeful that I could visit both states’ participants on their respective campuses. It should be noted that Wisconsin is unique in that two-year colleges are divided between those governed by the Wisconsin Technical College System, which focuses primarily on career-technical education, and those that are
part of the University of Wisconsin System, which focuses primarily on lower-division transfer education. This division of roles is not a characteristic of the community college systems in Illinois or Michigan. For the purposes of this study, all selected Wisconsin colleges are members of the Wisconsin Technical College System as their missions and curriculum are more closely related to the other community colleges selected from other states. No colleges from the University of Wisconsin System are included.

The Carnegie Classification System’s 2018 dataset was the primary mechanism used to identify rural two-year colleges in these states. As mentioned earlier, Carnegie’s rural classification is not devoid of problems. Within the 2018 classification system, for example, a preliminary search for rural two-year public colleges identified Scottsdale Community College in Arizona as a rural institution. The college resides in a large suburb with a population over 240,000, located only twelve miles from the Southwest’s largest city, Phoenix (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Cities like Eugene, Oregon (population 166,575) and Rapid City, South Dakota (population 74,048) are also identified as places with rural community colleges.

Carnegie’s 2018 dataset, which I downloaded in the form of an Excel spreadsheet, contains a sheet that lists all variables, which are taken from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Another sheet from the downloaded file contains labels, which denote the variable codes used for easier identification. To determine the initial list of interview requests, I first utilized the sector and level variables within Carnegie’s 2018 data set for all colleges. The sector variable code is a combination of two other variables—control and level. It identifies whether an institution is publicly or privately controlled, in addition to its two- or four-year status. This variable code contained six labels, including public two-year, which includes the first group of colleges that I extracted from the larger list of institutions.
The locale variable referred to the degree of urbanization among colleges. Locale is derived from IPEDS, which designates four locales (city, suburb, town, and rural). An initial search for two-year public rural colleges nationwide yielded 224 results. Confining the search to the three initial states narrowed the results down to 32. However, as mentioned earlier, the rural label can be misleading; some of the 32 colleges are in suburbs and metropolitan areas. Adding further complications, the rural filter produced some colleges with sizeable county populations, and a handful of these “rural” colleges have rather large districts. For instance, Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey, Illinois, serves a district of 220,000 people across parts of seven counties (Lewis and Clark Community College, n.d.). Godfrey, despite its population of approximately 17,000 people, is close to metropolitan St. Louis yet far enough from that city to be considered a rural institution (US Census Bureau, 2010). Therefore, I narrowed the colleges down even further, which provided a more genuinely rural set of rural institutions. This was accomplished by crosschecking Carnegie’s listings with the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy’s list of rural counties (HRSA, 2016).

From the list of 32 “Rural” colleges in the first three selected states, I added the two criteria that define this study’s definition of rural criteria—colleges with total enrollment under 5,000 students and located in counties with fewer than 50,000 residents. County populations and proximity to urban centers proved useful when filtering results. The county is often the best indicator of the primary service area for rural colleges. It should be noted that rural colleges can house multiple counties within their districts. When county populations are considered, the results more closely align with The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy’s identification of rural counties (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2016). The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy is a branch of the Health Resources and Service Administration, an agency of the US Health and Human Services Department devoted to improving access to healthcare. The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy relies on a nuanced definition of rural,
incorporating Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes, and the Goldsmith Modification, which are both relatively new methods of rural identification developed in the 1990s. Based on Census data, the RUCA codes classify Census tracts according to a combination of population density, urbanization, and daily commuting. The Goldsmith Modification, which preceded the RUCA system, recognizes small towns and rural areas found within Metropolitan Statistical Areas (Goldsmith, et al., 1993). This led to the exclusion of nine colleges located in cities or counties that contained over 50,000 people, which is the threshold for inclusion in the Census Bureau’s Metropolitan Statistical Area. Second, to eliminate the threat of bias, I removed another college at which I was a finalist for an administrative position in 2016. Lastly, I excluded three tribal two-year colleges. Tribal colleges rely on state and federal appropriations to a much a greater extent than other community colleges (Nelson & Frye, 2016). This funding distinction makes comparing the institutions to other rural two-year colleges difficult. In the end, 19 rural community colleges remained for the first round of outreach. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of my selection process.
I applied the same criteria when identifying institutions in Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri for the second round of outreach. The initial Carnegie search yielded 12 two-year public rural colleges between the three states. One of the Kansas colleges was an applied sciences branch of a four-year university. It was also located in a metropolitan city; therefore, I eliminated it from the potential selection pool. I took liberties with one institution, Birch Community College. Birch served a single county but its county population exceeded 50,000 people. However, its largest city had a population of 20,000, and it exhibited many characteristics commonly associated with rural America. Its sizeable population was likely due to its proximity to a large Midwestern city. Birch contained suburban and exurban areas that
increased its total county population. Nevertheless, Carnegie’s 2018 Classification identified the institution as Rural Fringe. Birch’s enrollment was still fewer than 5,000 students, one of my other defining characteristics of a rural community college. Thus, I included Birch to broaden the scope of participation. Its inclusion boosted the total number of invitees, between both rounds, to 30.

*Figure 2*

*College Selection Diagram for Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri Colleges*

Through a search on each of the 30 colleges’ staff directories, available via their websites, I identified the 30 respective SSAOs. Their titles varied, but each was identified as the senior student affairs officer at their respective institutions. I sent interview requests to 19 officers from Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin in August 2020. Seven participants from these three states are included in the interviews. Throughout the fall 2020 semester, through multiple emails and several voice messages, I
attempted to contact the remaining officers from these three states. Two officers declined interviews. One college eliminated the position. Nine other invitees did not return emails and voice messages. In November 2020, I increased the number of prospective participants and emailed interview requests to 11 officers from the second round of states, which included Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri. Three of the 11 officers agreed to an interview. The seven other invitees from the second batch of states did not respond to multiple emails and voice messages. My email invitation template can be found in Appendix D. The Participant Consent Form can be found in Appendix C. A complete list of the SSAOs can be found in Appendix B.

**Interviewing**

I conducted my interviews from September 2020 to February 2021. The interviews were held over my Illinois State University Zoom account. As I mentioned in Chapter One, the COVID-19 climate prevented in-person interviews. I began each interview with a series of closed-ended questions to gather some basic information about the participants’ backgrounds and establish rapport as the literature indicates that these measures build trust between the interviewer and interviewees (Jacob & Fergurson, 2012). I confirmed the full title of their position, inquired about their years of service, and asked how many employees reported to them. I wanted to ask these closed-ended questions near the beginning of each interview as most inquiries produced short answers that verified background information. The closed-ended questions also saved me time so I would not have to gather this information in follow-up correspondence via a survey or additional emails to busy administrators during a pandemic. The information gathered during the closed-ended question portion of the interviews is reflected in Appendix A. If I forgot to ask a close-ended question, I verified the information via the participant’s respective college websites and LinkedIn profiles. My interview questions as well as the research questions that they align to are available in Appendix A.
Transcribing and Analyzing

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) refer to transcriptions as “…translations from an oral language to a written language” (p. 178). To avoid questions of reliability, I crosschecked the content of the transcriptionist’s work with my written notes to identify any misinterpretations that resulted from the transcription process. Except for a lack of punctuation in some run-on sentences, the transcripts proved an accurate reflection of the conversations. My alterations do not affect the meaning of the text; they are mere punctuation corrections that I employed to make my analysis easier. I also wanted to present my findings in complete sentences whenever possible so the quotes are comprehensible to the reader.

All researchers who conduct interview studies need to be explicit about how transcriptions are created. This process involves being transparent about who transcribes the interviews and any related technology used during transcription. Due to time constraints, I hired a professional transcription service, Rev, to transcribe my 11 interviews. On its website, the vendor states “All customer files are encrypted both at rest and in transit. Communications between you and Rev servers are encrypted via industry best-practices (HTTPS and Transport Layer Security 1.2). TLS is also supported for encryption of emails” (“Storage & Transmission,” n.d.). As Zoom produces both an audio and video file for each recording, I only uploaded the mp3 recording to Rev’s secure site. Rev also has an Information Security & Privacy Program Overview document on its site. I have included this document as an item in Appendix D. The transcriptionist transcribed the entire interview for each participant. Upon receiving the transcripts, I checked the transcription against the recordings, which I stored on my personal computer.

Saldaña (2009) divides the coding process into two cycles. In first cycle coding, the researcher performs the initial coding, which first consists of naming each word, line, and segment within the transcript, followed by a “generic” analysis. Per Charmaz (2006), the initial coding process allows the researcher to discover other analytic possibilities that may emerge while analyzing data. My first cycle coding informed the second cycle, which is more focused, using the initial coding to “…help synthesize and explain larger segments of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57).

Upon receiving the transcripts, I split each transcription into two separate files—an Interview Question file, which allowed me to have all 11 responses to each interview question in a single document, and an Interview Subject file, which provided a slightly edited version of the interview with the participant. Within the Interview Subject file, I removed what I considered filler material that did not relate to the interview question. This filler material included greetings, side conversations on matters unrelated to the interview question, and speech disfluencies like “um” and “ok.” These minor edits enabled a cleaner reading of the transcripts, which proved helpful when transferring the material to Quirkos, the application that I used to code my data.

Quirkos is a coding application for qualitative data. Within Quirkos, users upload their transcripts to a secure cloud server or onto their personal computer with Quirkos’s standalone desktop application. I paid Quirkos’s three-month subscription price for its cloud service storage in early spring 2021, which I have subsequently renewed. On its site, Quirkos states that “Our servers are hosted with SOC 1 Type II, Type II, ISO/IEC 27001:2013 and PCI-DSS compliance as well as physical security measures” (“Frequently Asked Questions,” n.d.). In addition, I have set a password to my research project on Quirkos that encrypts my research project’s data, providing an extra layer of security.

In first cycle coding, I created what Quirkos terms a “Quirk” for each of my interview questions. I used the Interview Questions files to create my initial Quirks. When I found a relevant piece of data
that I believed directly answered the interview question, I dragged it over to the appropriate Quirk. The Quirks appear as bubbles within a digital canvas in the Quirkos project space. Thus, the user can move the Quirks to better position data on the canvas. As the researcher drags more text to the Quirk, the size of the Quirk (represented as a color-coded bubble) grows.

Saldaña’s (2009) seminal text on coding is written with a researcher using note cards or a spreadsheet to identify these descriptors. Using Quirkos, I was able to perform all coding within the application. After I imported the Interview Subject files and Interview Question files (originally saved as .docx files produced by Rev) to Quirkos, I performed what Saldaña (2009) would characterize as first cycle coding. My first cycle coding involved four methods identified by Saldaña (2009). All four methods are appropriate for novice qualitative researchers, and they proved useful in extracting and organizing information for an interview study. The first method, attribute coding, refers to the coding of basic descriptive information. Attribute coding can include demographic information about the participants. I used attribute coding to create “Quirks” related to the responses to the closed-ended questions that I asked at the onset of each interview. I also used attribute coding to create Quirks for responses to my interview questions on the participants’ career pathways in student affairs as well as their characterizations of the rural communities their colleges serve.

I also employed structural coding, another first cycle coding method. Within structural coding, the researcher “applies a content-based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a specific research question used to frame the interview” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 66). Within my study, structural coding proved helpful for the analysis of responses to every interview question as the interview questions aligned with my research questions. As structural coding involves question-based codes and labeling and indexing, it proved essential in organizing my Quirks and the method enabled easy retrieval of information for use within the manuscript. Structural coding marked
the period when I felt comfortable turning my codes into text that would eventually end up in my final manuscript.

The first cycle coding allowed me to identify and compartmentalize data, begin to develop meaning and connections among my coded material; and become acclimated to my interview subjects’ language and viewpoints (Saldaña, 2009). For second cycle coding, Saldaña (2009) advocated using pattern coding, which developed category labels among similarly coded data and identifies themes and explanations emerging from the data. Within this second cycle, I identified patterns among data and then formulated my conclusions emerging from the data analysis. I identified the themes within the initial Interview Question Quirks. Within these Interview Quirks, I was able to create subcategories based on the highlighted text material that I dragged over to each Interview Quirk. My subcategories were emergent themes within the data from the Interview Questions files. For instance, a Quirk sequence, if you will, would read as “Q12: Greatest Need for Students -> Transportation,” which indicates that transportation was one of the needs that SSAOs identified for students at their rural community college. The highlight would include the source of the quote or quoted material I extracted to create the Quirk.

Although the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis is most associated with grounded theory studies, it has applicability to other types of qualitative research, including phenomenological studies like my own. In the constant comparative method, the researcher develops concepts through continuous comparisons between their data units and other pieces of information and resources (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). I employed the constant comparative method throughout my data analysis. As I analyzed the data from the initial round of interviews with SSAOs from Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, I noted similarities and differences between the interview testimonies, noted shared and contrasting themes and observations, and grouped the data into units based on my constant comparative analysis. I met monthly with my advisor to share my observations, particularly the
similarities that began to emerge between units of data. Throughout my analysis, I checked the data against the literature, noting where scholarship supported or refuted the data. The constant comparative analysis provoked additional interview questions, including questions related to the participant’s college and the local community. My research on rurality and rural affairs generated additional questions on the subjects’ characterization of the rural communities their respective colleges serve. As the constant comparative method is a cyclical process, I employed it to continuously compare my data between individual units, related literature, and observations from my advisor. The constant comparative analysis allowed me to better organize my data into categories, which produced themes. For instance, the participants’ consistent mention of Internet access woes, particularly during the pandemic, led me to further literature on the discrepancies between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan Internet access. This, in turn, allowed me to formulate one of my conclusions that reliable Internet access is one of higher education’s foremost equity issues. This conclusion has major policy implications for higher education as community colleges, in my view, have an obligation to provide stable Internet access in areas where it is lacking. The study did not yield a grounded theory, as much of the constant comparative method often does (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, my use of the constant comparative method led me to draw conclusions related to my findings, which I will discuss further in Chapter 5.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to a researcher’s attempts to establish rigor within their qualitative study. The concept also serves as a response to historical claims that qualitative research lacked merit. To achieve trustworthiness, researchers apply a variation of concepts typically associated with quantitative research, such as internal validity, reliability, objectivity, and external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative researchers perform activities related to trustworthiness to answer fundamental questions to
persuade their audience “…that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to…” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290).

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) four criteria for assessing trustworthiness in qualitative studies include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In the context of qualitative research, credibility establishes confidence that participants view the study’s results as convincing or credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although I spent a relatively short amount of time with the participants, I was able to deploy some tools that helped achieve credibility. Shenton (2004) described an array of different approaches to help qualitative researchers increase their study’s credibility, ensuring that the recording of the interview is accurate. Due to travel limitations brought on by COVID-19, I was unable to visit the SSAOs’ campuses. The travel restrictions prevented me from performing observations, which could have served as an additional data collection method to achieve triangulation. To compensate for this loss, I analyzed supporting materials on student affairs from the participants’ institutional websites and LinkedIn profiles. This measure allowed me to cross-check their testimony with resources that reinforced claims about their institution and communities.

I employed other ways to enhance the study’s credibility, including honesty assurances for informants (allowing refusal-to-participate stipulations), and peer scrutiny of the research project (my dissertation committee members’ analysis and feedback). Unfortunately, I was not able to perform a formal member check with my participants. I did seek clarification on a certain items and asked follow-up questions via email. I was satisfied with the initial interview and did not want to place additional demands on my participants’ time during a global pandemic.

**Reporting**

Kvale and Brinkmann’s seventh and final stage of interview investigation is reporting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In the context of interview investigations, reporting refers to the researcher’s ability
to communicate their study’s findings and methods according to accepted scientific criteria, sound ethics for an investigation, and through a readable product, most likely reviewed by peers. As a dissertation submission, my study meets these criteria by design and through Illinois State University’s Graduate School’s standards and practices.

**Methodology Conclusion**

Using Kvale and Brinkmann’s (2009) seven-stage interview process, first and second cycle coding informed by Saldaña (2009), and the constant comparative method grounded in the work of Taylor and Bogdan (1998), I journeyed from interview questions to clear connections between research questions, interviews, and analysis. Through a robust filtering process, involving multiple federal data sources and several attempts to reach potential participants, I arrived at 11 SSAOs. In the next chapter, I share the stories of these student affairs leaders who provided a rich tapestry of responses related to their professional backgrounds, views on their local communities, and the students who serve as the foundation for their work.
CHAPTER IV: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

In this study, I examined how rural community colleges serve their students via the services and programs that constitute their student affairs units. Additionally, based on interviews with student affairs leaders at select rural community colleges, I explored the qualities needed to lead student affairs units at rural community colleges. I employed two primary research questions with two sub-questions each to achieve these aims:

1. How do rural community colleges serve their students?
   a. How do the SSAOs at rural community colleges perceive the mission of their institutions?
   b. How do the SSAOs perceive that student affairs work helps their institutions fulfill their missions?

2. How do SSAOs at rural community colleges perceive their work?
   a. How do senior student affairs professionals understand their leadership roles? That is, what is their understanding of what it takes to lead the student affairs effort at rural community colleges?
   b. How do the SSAOs perceive that their experiences prior to assuming their current roles helped prepare them for leading student affairs work at rural community colleges? How do they perceive that their experiences did not prepare them?

I interviewed 11 senior officers from student affairs units across 11 different rural community colleges in Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, and Wisconsin. I conducted all interviews over Zoom’s video chat feature due to COVID-19 conditions that discouraged travel. I described the selection criteria for interviews in greater detail in Chapter 3.
The Participants

Eleven participants agreed to remote interviews conducted via Zoom. I assigned a pseudonym to each participant, selected among popular names cited in the United States Social Security Administration’s list of the most popular baby names of 2019. I then aligned the first letter of each pseudonym to the fictitious name of the interviewees’ rural community colleges. The fictitious institutional names are derived from trees commonly found in New York State and identified by Cornell University’s L. H. Bailey Hortorium (Cope & Welch, 2002). I then assigned matching beginning letters to each pseudonym and institution. Appendix B provides the pseudonym for each interviewee, the fictitious college name, the actual state where the college is located, the interview subject’s general title, and the self-reported number of years they have worked in their current position.

Chapter Organization

Chapter 4 includes a summary of my study’s findings. I have included some synthesis of these findings, which I further explicate in Chapter 5. The presentation of my findings is organized around responses to my primary research questions and the supporting sub-questions. The narrative for each sub-question section includes the findings for each related interview question. In Chapter 4, I also introduce applicable themes and support from related literature. I will further analyze these themes in Chapter 4, where I will also convey the policy implications and recommendations for future research.

Findings for Research Question 1

Most community colleges share the same broad purposes: provide an accessible and affordable postsecondary education to all students willing to learn (Baim & Baume, 2016). As a response to the Great Recession of 2008, the broader community college mission took on a new sense of urgency as the institutions were viewed as the great hope for reskilling displaced workers and reducing income inequality. “As America gets back on its feet, community colleges will play a huge, huge role, whether
health care jobs, green energy or tech jobs. As families get back to work, community colleges will help them get there,” declared Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in 2010 (as cited in Krieger, 2010). Thus, the community college mission is now viewed as not only essential to students and institutions but vital to the nation’s economic future.

My first research question and its sub-questions concern my participants’ ideas about the mission and service of student affairs offices and community colleges. I linked six of my interview questions to the first research question. As my first research question seeks the participants’ views of the community college mission in the context of student affairs, I wanted to understand how SSAOs interpret their colleges’ mission as well as how student affairs supports that mission. Two interview questions covered student affairs and the mission: 1.) How do you explain the mission of this institution and its obligations to students? 2.) How does the work of student affairs help the college fulfill its mission? In most instances, these questions landed near the beginning of the interview shortly after I asked the question about the individual’s career journey. When discussing their perceptions of the mission, the participants highlighted the essentiality of community and the colleges’ ability to “meet students where they are,” a common refrain that conveys the community college ethos to help all students regardless of their skills upon arrival.

As several participants indicated, the community where the college is located is vital to the college’s mission. Many participants interpreted the mission through a community-focused lens. When asked to describe the mission of Ash Community College, Ava said “It's more than just an obligation to students, but it's an obligation to a community, because they are who fund your college as a community college…at a rural college, you’re just ingrained within your community.” Charlotte from Catalpa delivered a more succinct assertion: “Our mission is to serve and lift up our communities.” Milo, another senior student affairs officer, mentioned his college’s role in shaping the community when he
commented, “I like [Maple Community College] mission because it's just about bettering lives and community, and making it a better place to live and work.” Thus, Milo sees the college as providing a service to the community. He continued, “It's [the mission] so much about community and being involved in the community, and really being a hub for the community in terms of an educational hub, a cultural hub, even exercise and fitness.” Community colleges contribute to the intellectual growth and physical health of the communities they serve. The benefit is financial too. Walt from Willow Community College noted his college “helps our economic viability of the region.” Delilah from Dogwood Community College struck a similar note when she mentioned that the college is responsible for “enriching communities” through its contributions to the communities’ economic development via graduating students with skills that make them employable and increase their economic contributions to the communities in which they live.

The participants are not alone with their emphasis on community when interpreting the community college mission. Troyer (2015) noted that responsiveness to community needs is one of the three main areas of commitment within community college missions. Wang et al. (2007) examined mission statements at two- and four-year colleges across Texas. They found “community-focused” as one of the major themes in over 57% of all mission statements within their study. Even as other elements of mission statements may change, community is a constant. My interview participants were quick to note the community’s influence on their understanding of the mission.

The mission’s emphasis on community is essential to understanding the symbiotic relationship the colleges have with their communities. Their relationship is grounded in reciprocity and the “it takes a village” approach to carry out the mission. Thus, I was curious to learn how the SSAOs characterized the communities they served, interacted with their community stakeholders, and what role rurality played in how student services and, more broadly, community colleges function.
Community Characteristics and Relationships

During my first few interviews, I asked the participants to characterize the college’s relationship to the community, hoping to extract how each entity understands and affects the other. After completing a handful of interviews, I realized a shortcoming: I had not asked the participants to characterize their communities. While some descriptions of the communities emerged within answers to the relationship question, these responses did not always provide a clear indication of how the communities look and feel. While I performed some cursory virtual research on the areas surrounding each college, the businesses within the district, and any other notable landmarks or historically significant events within the community, this research falls short of being in the physical environment where artifacts are more tangible. As I was unable to conduct these interviews in person and visit the colleges and their districts, the characterization of the communities’ question became even more important. I wanted to know how these student affairs officers saw the community since they indicated it was so crucial to their perception of the mission.

The rural communities within this study share some attributes. Of course, the communities have small populations. In many cases, since these are Midwestern states, agriculture is prevalent, woven into the area’s culture and identity. Ava from Ash Community College states, “The primary industries in the region include agriculture and manufacturing.” Henry from Hawthorn Community College further acknowledged agriculture’s place in the community, “Corn and soybeans are [an] inescapable and a vital part of our economy.”

Many participants expressed their fondness for the rural beauty found throughout in their districts and considered it a selling point for the colleges. Brook from Birch Community College said, “It's so beautiful in the fall. Everybody that steps on the campus says, ’What a nice [place].’ They really enjoy it and like it.” Charlotte from Catalpa Community College described the appeal of a rural
landscape. “I think our rural areas are very beautiful. They're very untouched. Life is easier in a rural area, in a smaller community, if that's what you want. I think people are starting to see that everywhere.” Indeed, the pandemic could serve as an unexpected boost to rural communities as urban dwellers fled crowded and expensive housing for more spacious, affordable locations across rural America (Whitaker, 2021).

“We are very, very rural. It is hilly. It's beautiful country. It's just not beautiful for the internet world,” concluded Iris from Incense Community College. Iris conveys one of the direst shared challenges that nearly all senior officers expressed: the lack of reliable high-speed Internet across rural areas. “Internet. Rural access internet is still a big issue,” said Charlotte from Catalpa. “In the Northern areas we definitely have significant parts of our district that don't have broadband or cell service for that matter,” Walt from Willow Community College shared. Milo from Maple Community College reiterated this concern when he expressed that “We have so many students that do not have access to the internet where they live. They don't even have cell phone service where they live.”

COVID-19 exacerbated the long-standing challenge of reliable and fast Internet for rural community colleges that unexpectedly had to pivot to remote learning. Such a sudden transition can be difficult for any community college, but rural institutions had geography working against them. They were forced to adapt quickly to accommodate students in need. “We started beaming our Wi-Fi into the parking lot,” said Jeff from Juniper Community College. Other senior leaders shared similar responses, expressing the need for more reliable Wi-Fi in their service areas. Ava from Ash Community College said, “We never realized exactly how the need for technology and reliable Wi-Fi access…when we made that switch in March to online, we had students who were like, ‘I don't have access to technology. I have Internet access at home, but it's so spotty that I can't do anything online. I'm working from my phone.’” Brook at Birch Community College echoed rural students’ technology concerns, including
hardware, and shared a similar institutional response. “We had some Wi-Fi availability in our parking lot, and there were students who didn't have access to a laptop. We tried to help those students. We had the faculty members let them know, 'If you need the technology, let us know. We'll help get a laptop to you.’” Milo from Maple Community College acknowledged this issue on his campus as well, “We set up Wi-Fi in our parking lot, so they could at least drive in and sit in our parking lot and do their homework. We had a huge number of students actually doing that, like a surprising number of cars that would be there each day with students just sitting in their cars, working on their laptops.”

As it is fast becoming an equity issue, the free public Wi-Fi movement may gain momentum during the pandemic, benefiting America’s community college students who will need reliable Internet for coursework and accessing employment opportunities. Rural communities’ economic growth may also hinge on enhanced broadband services. Even though the interview participants cited agriculture economies, a recent Brookings Institute Report indicated that the agriculture industry constitutes only 6% of employment in rural America (as cited in Rural America Needs High Speed Internet, 2021). The vast amount of farmland in the rural Midwest may be misleading: It consumes space but does not always provide many jobs. The Brookings Report authors argue that more reliable and faster Internet could propel entrepreneurship and attract more non-agricultural employers willing to provide a significant investment in rural America (Piper & Geismar, 2020).

Delilah from Dogwood provided an overview of local industry in her rural district: “The largest employers in this district are typically healthcare and government related. We've got some major healthcare chains up here that have hospitals and clinics. Another major employer are the municipalities, and then another employer are the K-12s. With 150 employees, we're [Dogwood Community College] right up there as well.” The colleges maintain a sizable footprint in their districts. In many cases, as Delilah mentioned, they are one of the largest employers in their service areas. In this employer role,
rural community colleges walk a delicate balance between being a skills provider to community members as well as a job provider for the community members. So, the colleges offer dual benefits to the community. I did not ask questions about the community’s view of the college as an employer but, with growing distrust of government in rural areas (DelReal & Clement, 2017), the colleges, and the public sector jobs with often more stability and benefits than local service industry employment, may be viewed with increasing skepticism. Researchers and journalists have explored town-gown tension in urban areas that house four-year institutions (Condon, 2019; Ibarra, 2021; Jackson 2014). Despite some recent unrest between an Idaho community college and its board of trustees (Pettit, 2021), less is known about the relations between two-year public colleges and the communities they serve.

The communities where the participants’ colleges are not monolithic. This is important when examining rural issues, as many popular media portrayals, particularly since the 2016 election, paint rural America as a place full of angry people hardened by economic decline, skeptical of multiculturalism, and reluctant to embrace change (DelReal & Clement, 2017; Greenblatt, 2016; Kramer, 2017; Kruse, 2018). Of course, any demographer or sociologist could easily find rural Americans that fit that characterization, and there is little doubt that rural Americans vote overwhelmingly for the Republican Party in local, state, and federal elections (Greenblatt, 2016). The media’s depictions, however, do not illustrate the full picture of rural Americans and can hinder the region’s ability to prosper. Charlotte from Catalpa Community College offers a wise assessment that rural critics should heed when viewing rural communities: “I would tell you, I would never, ever assume to understand all the nuances…they [rural communities within her institution’s district] all function differently.”

Indeed, other characterizations of the communities were more idiosyncratic. Delilah from Dogwood Community College cited the area’s numerous lakes and the tourism industry that has built up
around them. This influx of new residents and visitors has had a mixed effect on the local community. “The lakes are littered with people who don’t necessarily live here full time and have homes which are dramatically higher in value than the typical home that you would see in downtown,” Delilah said. The tourism industry has created another strand of the local economy, which, according to Delilah, “then dictates a need for a lot of services like spa services, caretaker services. Services that are not necessarily those positions or jobs that create a living wage for the employees.” Thus, Dogwood’s service area has an imbalanced economy, creating the haves and have-nots with a small middle class making up the difference. Many of the seasonal visitors pay taxes that support the college, but they are unlikely to register for classes or serve as vital community partners. Like Walt, Delilah expressed her institution’s relationship with its neighboring tribal communities. The students represent a small slice of the enrollment at Dogwood, but their needs are unique. Delilah states that Dogwood’s tribal partners “prefer to have face-to-face instruction at their location with, for the most part, their tribal members. And as you can imagine, from a scalability standpoint that poses a challenge for us, but we're committed to figuring that out and making sure that we serve all populations.” Indeed, the rural districts are a tapestry of varied communities and needs. Walt from Willow Community College also described a district of varying geographic qualities and income levels: “We have a variance in the communities.” Walt went on to describe the district as a mix of tourist-heavy vacation areas, Native American reservations, and farming and manufacturing-centric small towns. Still, Willow’s service area only has one town with a population over 10,000.

Although the district is still considered a small rural two-year public college per the 2018 Carnegie classification, Birch Community College includes a few suburbs of a sizable Midwestern city. Thus, Carnegie considers it a rural fringe community. However, Birch’s district also contains villages and towns with small main streets and just a couple hundred residents. Brook, Birch’s senior student
affairs officer, pointed out this diverse landscape in the district. “The communities, I don't know how to describe them. They're each kind of different. I live in [redacted], and it's just right outside of [major Midwestern city], but there are parts of [redacted] where there are more lower-income, middle-income, and then there's some high-income.” The wide economic spectrum that Brook recognized was also cited by other SSAOs like Walt and Delilah. While recent census data depicts rural America as poor (Rural poverty and well-being, 2021), the interviews suggest that rural areas contain pockets of wealth and middle-class stability. Thus, rural does not always correlate with low-income status.

Ava from Ash Community College, in a follow-up response to the community characterization question, cited her county’s income level that is 17.1% lower than the rest of the state. “The median household income for a family of four [in our district] is only $34,000. The state of living is quite low here,” said Jeff from Juniper Community College. “Our communities have been steeped in coal production, and so a lot of those coal plants, coal mines have shut down. Families just can't make it anymore, and so we have a lot of students working two, three jobs just to make ends meet for their family, not necessarily just themselves.” Brook from Birch Community College emphasized the high percentage of Birch students on financial aid, even at a community college where tuition is much lower than the entry costs found at four-year colleges. “We have a significant number of students with a zero EFC [Expected Family Contribution], so they're getting full Pell. We have a lot of A+ students [a state scholarship program],” she shared.

It is no secret that community colleges educate many students who fall below the poverty line (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). My participants’ testimonies reinforced the notion that poverty is not exclusive to urban areas. While readers may not be unsurprised that the senior officers cited poverty as an issue within their communities, the level of food insecurity, and the poverty it entails, caught me by surprise. Ava shared one of the most telling testimonies on poverty in her district:
We see the food insecurity thing, housing insecurity, that's huge for us...We're, I believe, 70% Pell eligible. When we started housing three years ago, the need for food assistance in our community really just hit us in the face. We anecdotally heard that students were going hungry, but now we had a set of students living on our campus that we were all leaving food in our office, just saying, “Here. Take some stuff,” because we knew that they had nothing to eat and their financial aid paid for housing and paid for their tuition and fees and textbooks, and now they've got $40 to live off of the rest of the semester.

In response to these circumstances, Ava’s college established a food pantry on campus. Leslie, an SSAO officer, also acknowledged the growing food insecurity among students at Larch Community College: “That's one of the big things that we're seeing now, is that food insecurity.” Nationally reported figures reinforce these observations. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that nearly 45% of community college students report some degree of food insecurity. The same study reported that a sizable percentage of students skip meals due to a lack of available money to purchase food (Dembicki, 2019). Maroto et al. (2015) found that food insecurity may have adverse effects on students’ academic performance, directly resulting in lower GPAs. That study focused on urban and suburban community colleges, but as my study indicates, the problem of food insecurity among students affects all types of community college locales.

Two additional interview questions concern the notion of community and its importance to rural community colleges. First, as more participants expressed the significance of community to the mission, I wanted to know “How would you characterize the college’s relationship with its community?” This allowed me to compare participants’ descriptions of the relationship to their previous comments on the community’s importance to their colleges’ missions. Second, I wanted to gather insights about how the college, particularly student affairs, and the community work together. Therefore, I asked the
participants, “How does your local community, including its qualities and its needs, inform your student services offerings? I was curious to determine if the participants could offer some more concrete examples to reinforce the effectiveness of the relationship between college, community, and student affairs.

**Relationship Between the College and the Community**

When discussing the colleges’ relationship to their communities, the participants emphasized partnerships that the colleges have with local groups and organizations. Student affairs leaders repeatedly referenced their colleges’ relationship with local high schools. “We've built up our partnerships with our high schools, and we started an early middle college program with our county, and so we've really seen our relationships blossom over the last five, six years,” said Ava from Ash Community College. The early pipeline, as Ava mentioned, keeps starting earlier. Through programming for local K12 students, the colleges can help destigmatize community colleges, grow future enrollment, keep students in the community, and involve parents early and often.

Other participants underscored the close partnerships with area high schools. Henry from Hawthorn shared how programming with local high schools has become a larger part of his role as the senior student affairs officer. He shared, “We have a group of seniors who …spend the whole day together in cohorts…We also have dual credit out of the high schools where their faculty are qualified to be adjunct faculty... I will say that is a big part of what I do, actually, because there's so much management and communications needed there.” Walt from Willow Community College also cited high school as critical to his institution’s relationship with its community, citing the growth of dual credit as a key piece of the partnership and connection to the community. Partnerships with secondary education were even more prominent in the responses to my interview question that focuses on how student affairs leaders view their work as supporting the college mission. The frequent mention of high schools could
reflect the participants’ direct role in the oversight of dual credit and enrollment programs. In fact, several interviewees mentioned management of dual credit and dual enrollment as one of their supervisory responsibilities. For the interviewees, high school partnerships were a nearly universal piece of their understanding of the college’s relationship to its community. Although not cited as frequently or as in depth as the association with area high schools, partnerships with local civic organizations and groups such as the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, and local chambers of commerce were also mentioned as key relationships between the college and the community. Iris from Incense Community College cited the Rotary Club’s frequent use of campus facilities. At Birch Community College, college leaders serve on local Rotary Clubs and Chambers of Commerce. Dogwood Community College representatives are active on local United Way boards and chambers of commerce.

Strong ties to area feeder high schools are not new to community colleges or exclusive to rural colleges. Dual credit and dual enrollment programs at community colleges have significantly increased amidst declining enrollment among traditional-age students (Smith, 2017). This trend has accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ashford, 2020b). Whereas high schools were once viewed as a pipeline to the local community college, secondary institutions are now significant enrollment drivers. They have become a necessity to help ensure the colleges’ survival. These students will constitute more and more of a community college’s total headcount. Ava has seen the trend emerge at her institution: “We're at almost 50% high school students in our dual-enrollment population. Last year we were actually at 60 [percent].”

**How the Community Informs the College**

Each college in the study relies on its community to help inform its curricular and co-curricular programming. To learn more about how this communication unfolds, I asked the participants two interview questions, including “How does your local community, including its qualities and its needs,
inform your student services offerings? How do they communicate it to you?” The answers indicate that the colleges rely heavily on their K12 partners, local civic organizations, and advisory boards as primary sources of information and collaboration. The interviewees also provided anecdotes and examples that indicate that word-of-mouth is still an impactful practice for sharing information. This mix of formal and informal methods forms the communication channels that keep the colleges connected to their communities.

K12 Partners

Interviewees recognized K12 partners as vital contributors to their respective colleges. Not only do these schools form the local pipeline from district elementary and secondary schools to the local community college, but they are also relied upon as current enrollment sources through the popularity of dual credit and enrollment programs, where high school students earn college credit while still pursuing their high school diploma (Moody, 2021). With declining enrollment hitting rural community colleges particularly hard (Slepyan, 2021), these dual-credit and dual-enrollment students are increasingly important to the colleges.

Programs like the Early Middle College initiative that Ava mentioned were found at Hawthorn Community College as well. Henry, the vice president, stated, “We have what's called the [Hawthorn] Academy...where we have a group of seniors who…spend the whole day together in cohorts. But then we also have dual credit out of the high schools where their faculty are qualified to be adjunct faculty. So, we put classes right in high schools too.” Milo from Maple Community College added, “We do a lot of work with our local high schools, for example, and that's dual enrollment, early colleges, and teaching first year seminar directly in the high school.” Other senior officers cited close relationships with district superintendents (Fir Community College) and the placement of college success coaches in local high schools to offer early college students support (Catalpa).
Boards

High school partners can serve as de facto advisory groups, helping students transition to college-level work. Iris from Incense Community College shared, “We really depend a lot on our high schools to be our advisory councils and work with them closely to try to collaborate in what their students need, especially in regard to transitional developmental classes.” My interviewees mentioned the term “advisory council” or “advisory board” frequently. While these councils and boards may serve the same general purpose of advising the college, the terms are not interchangeable, and the functions differ based on the college or unit of the college. Conroy et al. (1996) examined advisory boards at two- and four-year colleges and found that boards primarily assist in curriculum efforts. Their work, however, can include fundraising, development, and proving other recommendations related to equipment and facilities. In community colleges, advisory boards typically counsel career and technical programs, connecting the colleges with area employers and industry experts. For instance, advisory committees at the College of Lake County, a large suburban two-year college in Illinois, provide feedback on curriculum, industry skills, industry changes, along with professional development opportunities for faculty (Career advisory committees, n.d.). As the leaders I interviewed do not always work in academic affairs, their use of “advisory board” may refer to community advisory boards in addition to programmatic advisory boards like those mentioned in the literature. Nonetheless, the interviewees acknowledged boards as one of the primary links between the colleges and their communities.

“We always have advisory council meetings for every program. It's made up of professionals and high schools and industry members. Our own faculty, of course, they're all on there. All the services that tie into being in those programs are involved,” said Henry from Hawthorn Community College. “On the academic side, anytime I hear somebody tell me they want to change a program, I…say, I need to know what your advisory council thinks.” As a Vice President of Academics and Student Services, Henry is
referring to the program advisory committees that counsel mostly career and technical education programs. Other interviewees mentioned advisory boards in a similar capacity. Faith from Fir Community College, however, mentioned advisory boards in the context of the president’s advisory council, which contains key community members from within the district. Other interviewees, like Charlotte from Catalpa, mentioned blends of community boards, separate from a traditional board of trustees, to support and advise the college.

The student affairs officers I interviewed also acknowledged civic organizations’ role in linking the college to the community. These organizations, like the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, and the Chamber of Commerce, are woven into the fabric of small-town life. Thus, the colleges rely on them as means of checking the community’s collective pulse. As the colleges are often one of the larger public spaces in the towns they serve, civic organizations also look to the college as a community space. “Not only do we have plays and those kind of bigger events here, but our college is…used for rotary conventions and recognition dinners,” said Iris from Incense Community College. Ava, (Ash Community College), Brook (Birch Community College), Delilah (Dagwood Community College), and Faith (Fir Community College) all referenced the local Chamber of Commerce as a frequently visited space among their colleges’ leaders, as board guests and members.

Delilah from Dogwood Community College offered one unorthodox partner that other student affairs leaders failed to mention: jails. “We have three county jails in our district, so we partner with them in the area of providing GED and HSED preparation and testing,” said Delilah. She mentioned partnering with specific groups catering to underserved populations, treating mental health, and supporting survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence.

Other student affairs leaders cited their participation in local boards and similar groups. “A lot of us are involved in different organizations within the community. “I sit on a board for Human Services
Commission, and that consists of agencies such as DHHS and community mental health and our hospitals, healthcare…we're able to share resources in the county,” said Ava from Ash Community College. This level of service benefits students too. “[Serving on the boards] allowed me to get great connections with people. So, if I've got students that I'm like, ‘Hey, we've got these students with transportation needs,’” I know who to call from our transportation authority and the county.” Charlotte from Catalpa Community College further characterized this level of commitment: “Our mission is to serve and lift up our communities. So, we have all of us in the community. I'm on one of the nursing hospital boards, my president's on the other. One of our other vice presidents is a lead on the Y [YMCA] board. We're all encouraged to be part of our communities and be out there because our goal is to serve our community.” Leslie from Larch Community College also discussed her college’s leaders’ direct service to local organizations. “A number of us sit on different boards or participate in different community events…a number of employees participate in chamber commerce (sic) or different business opportunities…we have some people that sit on school boards.” Some of these connections originate in more unlikely settings, and the close relationships that student affairs and other institutional leaders have with their local communities can create opportunities to connect. Jeff from Juniper Community College offered a range of ways in which the community informs his institution. “I think just the proximity to it [the community]. We live and we work in this community,” he said. “So, whether it's in church or at Walmart or civic organizations, different things like that, at the ball field with kids, you're always talking to people, and they're asking, 'Hey, I have this idea or I have this thought. Does the college do this? Do they do that?’ It's almost like we have a constant form of feedback.” The informal settings that Jeff mentioned play a significant role in communication between the colleges and the communities. Of course, four-year colleges are scattered throughout rural America: Carnegie’s (2018) most recent dataset identifies over 175 colleges located in rural settings. Given the imperfections in Carnegie’s LOCALE
variable, it is likely that even more four-year colleges are found within rural America or non-metropolitan areas or towns well under 50,000 people. Community colleges, however, are open-access institutions. Their recruitment pool is almost entirely local, with enrollment incentivized for in-district students. Thus, community colleges, much like local primary and secondary schools, are dependent on their districts. This is not always the case with rural universities. Word-of-mouth and other unceremonious interactions outside the academy help community colleges connect to their communities and provide opportunities to exchange ideas.

**Word-of-mouth**

The small community is fertile ground for the information exchanges that can help colleges connect to their district members. As college administrators often serve in rural community leadership posts, as interviewees expressed, they have ample opportunities to solicit and receive input from community members. Per the study’s results, most mechanisms by which communities inform the colleges of their needs are not unique to rural colleges. More casual word-of-mouth efforts, however, indicate that visible college leaders often gather feedback and suggestions from community members in informal settings. “Our visibility, keeping our doors open, depends on how well we serve our communities,” said Charlotte from Catalpa Community College. “And that means being a part of it and understanding what those expectations are. Having an open ear, it's very common for me to have [name redacted], the President, email me and say, 'Hey, I saw so and so. They asked about this. Can you connect with them?’“

In small towns, college leaders can reach community members easily and in non-academic settings outside the college. Eddy (2007) refers to this phenomenon as “grocery store politics” where rural community college presidents, due to their lack of anonymity in the small communities they serve, often connect to the community off campus. Eddy’s work also stresses the importance of relatability and
visibility among rural community college leaders. Other literature on rural college leaders bore this out. According to the rural community college presidents that Leist (2007a) interviewed, leaders need to be highly visible members of the community, losing any sense of anonymity they may have enjoyed in previous roles. They also must interact with a wide array of community leaders, many of whom may lack strong educational backgrounds, but often serve as local social, political, and economic influencers. College leaders are likely to encounter community members, gadflies or otherwise, whether they like it or not.

While the participants revealed the channels of communication, they did not offer many specific examples where the community provided input that propelled the college to create an initiative to meet that need. The participants mostly spoke in general terms, conveying that advisory groups drove some academic programming, namely in career and technical education fields. Further research on how the community helps shape local colleges’ curricular offerings, community events, and other forms of service could help scholars, postsecondary institutions, and community members better understand the link between colleges and the communities they serve.

The close relationship between the college and community can benefit stakeholders greatly; after all, many people know each other in a small town. On the other hand, the interviewees also shared how rurality can be disadvantageous too, citing drawbacks related to diversity, resources, and project scale. The next section details how the intimacy of small-town life and related elements of rurality serve as advantages and disadvantages to the colleges and their communities.

**Small Town Advantages and Disadvantages**

I asked an additional question related, albeit more loosely, to the officers’ perception of their communities and rural locations. As small colleges and small communities, for better or worse, place
stakeholders in proximity, I wanted to know, “Does the rural location/small community work to the college’s advantage? If so, how?” The responses illustrated a mix of benefits and drawbacks.

Proximity has its advantages. The participants indicated that the close relationships that they have with their area high schools are a result of the camaraderie found in small communities. Even if these secondary schools may be miles from the main college campus, the relationships between the entities are strong, cultivated over years of partnerships and activities.

Skilled leaders help too. Ava from Ash Community College noted, “The [President] relates very well to our community, which is heavily into skilled trades, manufacturing, and things like that. So, he's been able to go out and have those just down-to-earth conversations with people.” This relatability and handshake-ready attitude can make or break rural community college leaders. In a piece on the effective qualities of rural community college presidents, Eddy (2007) found that rural presidents need to be perpetually visible because they will get recognized nearly everywhere in their home communities. They need to practice consistent relationship building since rural college presidents will need community support to an even greater degree than metropolitan presidents. Lastly, rural community college presidents must understand the communities they serve as they do not want to be viewed as outsiders or carpetbaggers and risk relationships due to a lack of relatability within the local community.

Small communities have fewer people and resources, so this perpetual relationship-building with the community can blossom in a small community setting. “I believe our size is our strength. A rural community college focuses heavily on relationships and growth both for the student and the community. Knowing our many partners enables us to be at the table for as many meaningful conversations as possible,” shared Henry from Hawthorn Community College.

Proximity is mostly a boon to rural community colleges. However, some of the benefits merit further context. While rural districts contain many small towns that have sparsely populated, close-knit
communities, several participants within this study work in districts that encompass many square miles. One college’s district covers over 10,000 square miles. For the colleges in these massive districts, the feeling is more isolated. Delilah from Dogwood Community College cited difficulties with reaching the outskirts of a district so large: “Something that also keeps me up at night is keeping our products and services top of mind for those folks who are on the fringe district area. It gets harder and harder when you don’t have a physical presence, and when you transition more and more of your products and services online, it's even less of a physical presence there.” Thus, the small-town feeling gets lost when communities, even if they are sparsely populated, are so far apart. For rural community colleges, this distance creates an equity issue, as students on the fringe of the district either travel great distances to reach campus or rely on often lackluster Wi-Fi to access courses virtually. While branch campuses, either standalone college-owned buildings or rented spaces located within other businesses, are common among rural community colleges, these satellite locations present other challenges around equity. The branch campuses usually offer fewer courses, amenities, support resources, and activities than the college’s main campus. These factors can create a stigma for students who primarily attend the branch campus. Norby (2006) states, “These students are marginalized as “off-campus students” or “nontraditional” students who have limited opportunities to impact the way colleges provide services that recognize their uniqueness” (p. 10). Delilah also mentioned community members’ lackadaisical and last-minute tendencies as a point of frustration:

People don't sign up for that kind of stuff [community events, activities, non-credit courses] ‘til the last minute. They figure out, “Well, let's see what the weather's going to be. If the weather's nice, I'm not going indoors for a class. I'm going to stay out on my kayak,” or whatever. So, we end up allocating a lot of resources and time and effort, and then, inevitably, a lot of that kind of stuff doesn't end up running.
While Delilah’s observation could be nothing more than potential attendees’ passivity, it could reinforce the challenge in creating student life and extracurricular activities in community colleges. When the colleges are in a rural area, a few dozen people skipping an event can make or break the prospect of future activities. Brook from Birch Community College also noted a disconnect within certain elements of the rural community, namely drawing people to college-sponsored events and programming:

I don't know that it [small-town advantage] does. They don't come necessarily to our athletics...performing arts, and cultural enrichment. So, we have tried to do things for the community or to get them partnered and involved, and people don't always participate in that. Not even the faculty and staff, sometimes. People who live in [location of branch campus], which is 25 minutes away, don't necessarily want to come to...our main campus.

Despite the drawbacks that some participants noted, proximity is an advantage to these colleges. This proximity benefit relates to the community’s important place in the college mission and how the student affairs leaders explain the college mission and its obligation to students. Upon closer review of the data, another theme related to the research question “How do the SSAOs at rural community colleges perceive the mission of their institutions?” emerged. Multiple participants identified the colleges’ ability to “meet students where they are,” referring to the broader community college ethos of accessibility for all learners. As their colleges enroll students with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and numerous academic challenges, the SSAOs recognized the importance of this strand of the community college mission and its applicability to their individual colleges and student affairs units.

“We have to meet the goals of the students wherever they are and whatever they are,” said Iris from Incense Community College. Henry shared, “When I think about the mission of our college, it's really transformation. We get students from all walks of life. Our [the community college] job is to mold
those people, give them all the different types of experiences they're there for.” Jeff from Juniper
College added, “You're providing access to higher ed, especially to, typically, a demographic that just
doesn't have that sort of access and a lot of times, doesn't even have that expectation.” The student
affairs officers were under no pretense about the students they served and why they served them. These
responses are not exclusive to rural community college leaders nor student affairs senior personnel.

Attracting Candidates

Rural America’s population has been shrinking over the last few decades. Even though rural
America experienced a small population uptick between 2016 and 2017 (Cromartie & Vilorio, 2019),
years of zero or negative net migration, low fertility rates, aging populations, and increasing mortality
rates make rural community college enrollment patterns unlikely to improve soon (Cromartie, 2017;
Swenson, 2019). Taking these population trends and cultural tendencies into effect, I wanted to know if
the college officers found drawing strong candidates challenging. The senior officers’ replies indicate
that, for most colleges, the rural setting is a barrier to attracting talented staff and faculty.

The responses illustrate that the colleges mostly reflect the communities they serve; however,
this point can be problematic when it comes to drawing candidates from underrepresented groups and
attracting qualified regional applicants. Entry-level positions and even some mid-level positions within
student affairs can be relatively low paying (Buchanan, 2012). One interviewee, Jeff from Juniper
Community College, put the local salary picture in bleak terms: “people can get a job at a hotel or a gas
station and make as much as someone working at student services, which requires a different level of
expertise.” While salary was not mentioned frequently, the interviews revealed that the rural
communities’ lack of diversity and options and the limited number of qualified local applicants can
adversely affect the type of staff that rural community colleges can hire. “We do not have a ton of
diversity. We don't get a big applicant pool that's different than the population,” said Brook from Birch
Community College. The data reinforce Brook’s claims: Her college’s district population is 96% white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Other officers conveyed similar sentiments related to diversity, inclusion, and community as well as their colleges’ struggle to hire more diverse applicants. “Just demographically, we are not diverse…we're trying to get more intentional. We're trying to hire more faculty members that represent more diversity…we're falling short on that,” stated Henry from Hawthorn Community College. The community makeup is beyond college leaders’ control, further compounding hiring. “Historically, we're very homogeneous in appearance. I might have three people of color…I have no faculty of color…it is because of the communities they're coming into. You have to feel that you fit. You have to see people like yourself,” shared Charlotte from Catalpa. She continued, “We've had candidates from LGBT that the community didn't offer anything to support them.” The political leanings of the states where the colleges are located was also cited as a deterrent to hiring diverse candidates. “Some like to say we're in a more conservative state, a small rural (sic), and so I think that sometimes plays to our disadvantage,” said Faith from Fir Community College. “[The college’s] County is conservative and lacks diversity, which can limit an individual’s desire to take a position,” confessed Ava.

In addition to the communities’ lack of diversity, the small number of qualified local applicants hurts the colleges’ hiring abilities. Ava told me, “It can be difficult to attract qualified candidates to vacant positions in Student Affairs, especially mid-level administrative positions. We typically do not have a shortage of applicants, but we have a shortage of qualified applicants with the educational level or work experience desired for the positions.” In terms of hiring lead administrators for student affairs, Jeff from Juniper College added, “Those sort of positions are very difficult just because there's not usually people in the community with that background.” This dearth of qualified candidates often forces the college to promote less qualified internal candidates. Faith from Fir Community College states, “In
some cases, have had to look within or just hire and then train our own, which doesn't always lend itself to advancing things as quickly.” The officers’ assessments of local candidate pools reflect national figures: rural counties contain far fewer college graduates than urban and suburban counties (Campbell, 2019). These demographic and geographical challenges compound the ability to land top-tier or even qualified candidates for student affairs vacancies.

**Perception and Fulfilling the Mission**

If a student gets a flat tire, we're probably buying the tire for them to keep them coming to college every day.

—Milo, Maple Community College

While the first piece of my opening research question focuses on SSAOs’ perception of institutional mission, the second sub-question concerns how senior officers feel the work of student affairs helps colleges fulfill their missions. Amidst a decade-plus-long push for enrollment and retention, the work of student affairs has become vital at community colleges (NASPA, n.d.). This notion is especially true as two-year college enrollment has plummeted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Anderson & Douglas-Gabriel, 2021). I wanted to hear the officers’ views on how their units’ work helps their colleges’ missions, which encapsulate much more than simply providing coursework and degrees.

I connected four interview questions to sub-question 1b, “How do the SSAOs perceive that student affairs work helps their institutions fulfill their missions?” The four applicable interview questions include:

1. How does the work of student affairs help the college fulfill its mission?
2. It can often be difficult to create student life at the two-year commuter colleges. How does your Student Affairs unit help foster student life?
3. What are the greatest needs for your students and rural community college students in general? They could be personal or academic needs.

4. What challenges has the COVID pandemic presented to student affairs at your college, and how would you say the college has responded?

**Student Affairs and Fulfilling the Mission**

I began by asking the officers the parent question, “How does the work of student affairs help the college fulfill its mission?” The answers indicate that student affairs plays a vital role in helping colleges fulfill their mission, through providing holistic support for students, making college less intimidating and more tangible, and serving as the initial point of contact for students. Collectively, the colleges provide students accessibility and support, helping their institutions fulfill their open access, student-focused missions.

Student affairs support is multifaceted, focusing on different elements of the student experience. This support addresses critical student needs that transcend coursework. Throughout my interviews with SSAOs, interviewees reiterated the holistic support that they offer students. This support addresses the nonacademic elements of college life and illustrates how student affairs units help students navigate the unfamiliar and often intimidating terrain of higher education.

Despite the age of their research, Cantrell et al.'s (1996) work on rural community college students’ needs is still relevant. The authors named arduous commutes and balancing family and work responsibilities as major needs for rural community college students. Twenty-five years on, these needs are still prevalent as indicated by my interviewees’ testimonies. Thus, as they address the non-academic, outside-the-classroom needs, student affairs support mechanisms serve as key contributors to student success. Karp (2011) provided a framework of four non-academic supports that contribute to student success at two-year colleges. The framework includes creating social relationships, clarifying aspirations
and enhancing commitment, developing college know-how, and making college life feasible. The student affairs leaders I interviewed offered responses that reflect these four frameworks and illustrated how their student affairs units help the colleges fulfill their missions.

Higher education is a foreign entity to many beginning two-year college students. The language of community college missions is inclusive and welcoming, but the realities the students encounter upon enrollment can be daunting. They are often navigating an unfamiliar system full of alien terms and practices. “We have so many students that need that support. They don't have the support from home; their first-generation parents don't understand. We help them facilitate that process and get through that process,” said Ava from Ash Community College. Ava’s response reflects two of Karp’s (2011) support mechanisms—developing college know-how and making college life feasible. Other responses indicate similar commitments to helping students understand the non-academic dimensions of college as well as student affairs’ place as one of the first touchpoints for students. Jeff from Juniper Community College shared that student affairs is accustomed to “Being the initial point of contact and many students’ first exposure to college life and first contact to help them navigate college. They are likely to see student affairs before they see a professor.” This early contact with students can play a pivotal role in shaping students’ perceptions of college as well as quelling anxiety around entering the world of postsecondary education for the first time. Walt from Willow Community College provided context on how many students feel when they take the initial step into postsecondary life and how student affairs units’ early contact with students helps allay student fears, teach new concepts, and help students manage additional responsibilities:

Students who don't know anything about college and their parents aren't helping them with curbing their anxiety, so there's a lot of those students, and then we have a lot of older adults too who end up either losing their job or...getting divorced...They're back in school. They didn't
plan on it, and anxiety is sky high. So, all the support services, the counseling and advising, and
the financial resources, everything we can provide at that point helps.”

Walt’s quote, which I have condensed for clarity, encapsulates the circumstances that have led
many students to community colleges and the emotions many feel when entering college for the first
time. Student affairs’ array of services and supports are designed and have been adapted to address these
students’ challenges. The services and supports within student affairs can boost students’ confidence and
help mitigate the anxiety associated with starting college. “I think everyone [in student affairs] has a role
in building academic momentum and confidence,” expressed Delilah from Dogwood Community
College. With this objective in mind, Dogwood has employed its own “concierge model” that relies on a
homegrown “predictive analytics” practice as well as intrusive coaching to help address the “boatload of
complexity” in students’ lives. This level of support can be pivotal for students, helping them “build
confidence, grit and momentum towards reaching their end goal.” Colleges often view their work as life-
changing, their missions illustrating higher education’s transformative qualities. Based on the
interviewees’ testimony, student affairs lives up to these lofty goals through anxiety-reducing practices
such as being transparent when explaining how to finance college, providing emotional support to
students when their parents do not understand higher education, and directing them to an array of
college services beyond mere classroom support. These student affairs practices and a host of often less
visible day-to-day interactions make higher education more tangible to the uninitiated.

Student Affairs and Student Life

Per the American Association of Community Colleges (On campus housing, 2016), only 28% of
community colleges provided some form of on-campus housing in 2015. The same dataset revealed that
only one percent of all community college students live on campus, a dramatic difference from living
arrangements for students at public universities, where, during the same year, according to the National
Center for Education Statistics (2019), 33% of all full-time undergraduates reside on campus. A sizeable body of research demonstrates that living on campus is associated with positive student outcomes, including increased persistence and social adjustment (Terenzini et al., 1996). As they are primarily commuter institutions, two-year colleges cannot often provide the robust level of co-curricular and extracurricular programming found at universities. The colleges may find many of their students leaving campus immediately after their class concludes or arriving only during the evening hours when several services and programs have already ended. Given this challenge, I wanted to know how rural student affairs leaders viewed their units’ role in helping foster student life or the non-classroom elements that constitute the holistic experience for college students.

The responses indicate that rural leaders and colleges are earnestly trying to create student life on their campuses but often face the dual challenges of being commuter and rural institutions. Interviewees stressed the importance of campus activity boards, strong residence halls, and programming that reflects local interests. The challenges, however, seemed more prevalent. Every response to the question on student life conveyed an undercurrent of difficulty. The main challenges included offering equitable services and activities at satellite campuses as well as the limited nature of students’ time on the physical campus and the relative brevity of their enrollment periods. Leslie from Larch Community College characterized the major conundrum that undergirds student life at rural community colleges and many other two-year institutions, describing the small amount of time colleges have with the students: “They’re here, they take their classes, and then they’re gone.”

Like many four-year institutions, rural community colleges rely on a circle of student leaders to help nurture student life. “We have a Student Life Impact Team, which is students who have been asked to join the leadership team in the college,” said Charlotte from Catalpa Community College. Other leaders acknowledged similar groups, such as Ash Community College’s Campus Activities Board,
which provides two campus events per month. Milo from Maple Community College mentioned its Student Life Committee. Other leaders cited the work of the Student Government Association (Birch Community College and Hawthorn Community College) as well as important contributions from local Phi Theta Kappa community college honor society chapters (Dogwood Community College and Incense Community College).

The presence of residence halls can enhance colleges’ student life programming and activities. Residence halls are less common at community colleges, but they are far from nonexistent. Over a quarter of all community colleges offer on-campus housing (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). Per Moeck et al. (2007), rural-serving community colleges can benefit from offering on-campus housing as it can bolster student development, increase student diversity and access, draw students to specialized programs, and balance out male to female student ratios. In their study, nearly three of four respondents noted campus housing’s positive impact on institutional finances, and two of three respondents cited lowering transportation cost to commuting students, believable given the large number of square miles that comprise many rural districts.

In my study, interviewees from colleges with residence halls recognized student housing as an important piece of student life for those few students living on campus. All officers that mentioned student housing were quick to recognize the high number of student athletes that reside in on-campus housing. Brook from Birch Community College claimed that over half of students who live on campus are student athletes. Their presence creates new opportunities for programming and the proximity to the students’ living space makes that programming easier. According to Ava from Ash Community College, “We've had to be a little bit more cognizant of what can we do to keep them [student athletes] entertained. Only Faith from Fir Community College mentioned student housing as a piece of recruiting and housing international students.
Student housing provides leadership opportunities for students who take roles as resident assistants. Interviewees recognized these assistants as student leaders, albeit with limited time at the college. Brook from Birch College shared, “We have RAs…it's like, you get them trained, and then they take off in a couple of years…you train them…and then they’re graduating.” This theme of limited temporality was a running thread during discussions about student life, serving as one of the primary challenges when creating student life at rural community colleges.

Most community college students do not earn their degrees or certificates. Many of these students attend college irregularly, sometimes stretching their enrollment over several intermittent years (NCES, 2019). These erratic attendance periods present an immense challenge for student affairs leaders. Additionally, community college students juggle multiple non-academic responsibilities like work and family commitments, further compromising their commitment to the college. Unlike many residential students at four-year colleges and universities, community college students’ primary role is not being a student but being an adult inhabiting the role of a student when they can carve out time for that role amidst competing responsibilities. The officers I interviewed conveyed how these challenges stymie attempts to create a dynamic student life program at rural community colleges.

“We do have student clubs and organizations, and it's challenging to get students involved, just because of the nature of the population here,” said Brook. “And it's mostly allied [allied health program students] students who get involved, occasionally, non-traditional students, but so many of our students have families and full-time jobs, and they don't have time to do those things.” Interviewees acknowledged the differences between their 18- and 19-year-old students compared to older students, typically dubbed nontraditional students. “Given the fact that 85% of our population is part-time and adult learners, they just don't have time to be in clubs and co-curriculars,” added Delilah from Dagwood Community College. These divergent groups present programmatic challenges that attempt to reflect the
needs of different student groups. She continued, “We're trying to respect and appreciate the fact that they have very little time to commune and support each other, so we're trying to support them in ways that make sense, given the situation that we're all in and the busy lives that they lead.” Delilah’s comments reflect the effort that rural student affairs leaders put into creating student life despite the challenges their student population presents. The comments, however, indicate a sense of resignation among the student affairs officers. Faith from Fir Community College summarized the conundrum many student affairs professionals at rural community colleges face: “We can provide a lot of social activities around athletics and events and things, which are fine to supplement, but a true social life is not really something we can offer.”

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, satellite and branch campuses take on an even more vital role at rural community colleges. When rural districts stretch many square miles, facilities in closer proximity to students prove critical. Despite college leaders’ best efforts to replicate programs and services, the branch campuses often lack the amenities found at the main campus. In my study, interviewees indicated their attempts at creating equity among all campuses within their district, ultimately falling short due to resources and the perplexities of the commuter student population. Brook from Birch Community College noted, “One of the things we've struggled with in the past is doing activities at all of our locations. To make those students who are at a satellite campus feel like they're part of the college, we’ve had to be a little more cognizant of what we can do to help keep them entertained.” Other interviewees echoed Brook’s sentiments. “We work very hard to make sure one end of the district doesn't end up with something the other end doesn't,” shared Charlotte from Catalpa Community College.

The senior officers I interviewed are managing student-life challenges that many community colleges encounter, but their rurality could further complicate the situation as students often travel long
distances to get to the physical college or struggle with reliable Wi-Fi when the classroom moves to an online setting. In the context of being a college student, these items qualify as basic needs in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Basic Needs (Maslow, 1943). The students need to access the campus or the Internet to be enrolled and be engaged in their studies. Community-conscious programming has proven helpful to some of the colleges I studied. Jeff from Juniper College shared how local interests shape his programming. “We have a shotgun team,” he said. “We have a handgun team. We have an archery team, a national championship archery team that competes against the [Division I conference opponents] places like that. So those sorts of things match with who we are in the community.” Delilah from Dogwood Community College also cited the popularity of outdoor programming that could remain active during COVID. Interviewees cited other programming related items that fit their colleges’ needs. For instance, colleges with residence halls host outdoor movie nights and other activities that can be socially distanced amid COVID-19 concerns. Two interviewees acknowledged socially conscious programming that addresses community needs even if the targeted populations are meager. Delilah noted Dogwood’s LGBT student group and its related programming. Milo cited Maple Community College’s recent diversity, equity, and inclusion programming: “We've had some really good success with activities that we've done around equity and diversity, and that's something that's a big need in our region because we don't have a lot of diversity where we live.” These two examples are unique, as they address the communities’ knowledge deficits rather than reflect local culture and practices.

**Student Needs**

Throughout the interviews with SSAOs at rural community colleges, the leaders repeatedly referred to student needs: poverty, transportation, or reliable broadband. These socioeconomic needs become even more complex when placed in a geographic context. Rural student challenges can mirror urban community college student challenges, but the obstacles can also be more place-based in rural
settings. I wanted to know which student challenges rural student affairs leaders identified. Thus, I asked the leaders, “What are the greatest needs for your students and rural community college students in general? They could be personal or academic needs.” Nearly all the interviewees cited students’ personal needs rather than academic challenges as the area of primary concern. Nearly every need the officers mentioned is rooted in socioeconomic disadvantage and rurality. The principal needs include broadband access, food security, childcare, transportation, mental health, and challenges involved with being predominately first-generation students.

Even though high-speed Internet has joined major utilities like heat, water, and air conditioning in the lives of many Americans, substantial portions of rural America still lack widespread access to broadband Internet in their homes. The heavily forested area encompassing Dogwood Community College is no exception. Delilah, Dogwood’s Executive Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs, cited broadband as the first need among Dogwood students: “For our students, the biggest need, given how they are accessing information, products and services, is having reliable broadband.” Delilah mentioned the high cost of running Internet cables in remote areas often full of rugged terrain. Dogwood’s Delilah and Leslie from Larch Community College noted that many Americans take stable and fast Wi-Fi for granted, assuming access to it is widespread. Leslie commented, “Even though many people assume that everybody has high speed internet, unfortunately that’s not the case in our area. Some people have Internet that can’t handle logging into a classroom and then watching a video.” Thus, the relatively new demands of online learning that require web cameras and speedy signals to transmit video are out of reach for many students. Nearly every senior officer cited Internet access as a major need for students. One leader did not mention the issue, and another stated that, despite her college’s rural location, Internet connectivity is relatively fast and stable due to the college’s location in the more densely populated part of the state. Charlotte from Catalpa Community College pinpointed the
magnitude of the digital divide when she mentioned Internet access as an equity issue. She shared, “I have faculty who need to come to the college because they can't get on at home. We still have that. Those are basics. Those [reliable technology and fast Internet service] are becoming fundamental pieces for equity.” This inability to get online easily has created an additional barrier to student success for rural community colleges. The digital divide now exists alongside other longstanding challenges for rural community college students.

In the interviews, food insecurity emerged as a primary problem for students. Multiple senior officers referenced food insecurity among their student populations as well as their surprise that it has become such a prevalent issue. “When we started housing three years ago, the need for food assistance in our community really just hit us in the face,” said Ava. “We anecdotally heard that students were going hungry, but now we had a set of students living on our campus that we were all leaving food in our office.” Milo from Maple Community College mentioned that addressing students’ food and housing insecurity has consumed a larger portion of his staff’s responsibilities. The college has even added a position that is partially funded by the United Way and designed to help students navigate community resources like local charities and service agencies. Milo recalled his staff members driving homeless and housing insecure students to local agencies so the students can obtain food bank memberships and link up with other basic need providers.

Childcare is another key need for many students, according to the SSAOs I interviewed. While only two interviewees (Charlotte and Milo) directly mentioned childcare, other officers repeatedly referenced students’ family commitments and the responsibilities they juggle while enrolled in community college. Charlotte noted the disproportionate level of childcare service that her rural college can provide to parents. In a rural district that covers many square miles, college funds do not allow for an even distribution of childcare services across satellite and branch campuses. The interviewees’
observations on the need for greater childcare services at their colleges are supported by national data. According to a 2020 report from Generation Hope, an organization devoted to helping student parents complete college, student parents are more likely to enroll at community colleges and nearly 25% of community college students have children. The same report mentions that nearly half of student parents feel isolated on their home campuses (as cited in Ashford, 2020a).

Transportation is another non-academic need that multiple officers mentioned during the interviews. Rural community college districts encompass many often sparsely populated square miles. Thus, students can have lengthy commutes to get to the nearest campus or the necessary campus, as many specialty programs and a wider selection of general education courses are likely housed at the main campus rather than a branch campus. This distance equates to more time on the road and an increased chance for car trouble for many low-income students. While a car repair is an inconvenience for most, it can be detrimental to low-income rural community college students. They live in areas where cars are a necessity due to the distance to campus and the lack of public transportation. Walt from Willow Community College characterized how critical vehicles are for his students: “A student's car breaks down, and they can't afford to fix it. They just do not have the money to fix it, and then they drop out of school.” It is these life circumstances that can derail students’ persistence to degree completion.

Academically speaking, many of the students are already in precarious situations. These life issues, however, can have a much more sizeable effect on academic success. While four leaders (Charlotte, Delilah, Milo, and Walt) directly acknowledged transportation issues, other interviewees alluded to large districts, branch campuses, long commuting times, and a lack of public transportation in their rural districts and service areas. Literature on rural community colleges affirms these long commutes and limited transportation options. Per Randy Smith of the Rural Community College Alliance, rural students, on average, travel 52 miles round-trip to attend classes (as cited in Smith, 2016). Other
literature on student success at rural community colleges illustrates transportation woes as a major obstacle for student enrollment. Scott, et al. (2016) cite insufficient and inconsistent transportation as major non-academic barriers to student enrollment at rural community colleges.

SSAOs I interviewed mentioned addressing mental health issues as a major student need. Ava from Ash Community College noted the COVID-19 pandemic’s toll on students’ mental health. She shared, “We have seen an increase of students with mental health issues. And I think some of them being in quarantine, especially if they're by themselves, if they're in isolation that has been very challenging.” Like Ava, Faith from Fir Community College experienced an increased demand for mental health services prior to COVID’s arrival. The pandemic, however, has accelerated the demand for counseling and other mental health services. Walt from Willow Community College also acknowledged mental health as a primary need for his students. Cadigan et al. (2020) reported that mental health is a major issue among community college students, and the mental health issues students face are largely identical to those identified by four-year university students. Brook from Birch Community College identified one contributor to students’ mental health challenges. “We have students that truly don't have the support of their families,” she said. “They don't always come from stable backgrounds. I think that contributes to some of the mental health needs and the support that they need. But once again, we have students who are low-income, first-generation students, and they just don't have the support.” Brook was not the only interviewee to mention first-generation status or a student whose parents did not complete a four-year degree as a challenge for rural community college students.

Leslie from Larch Community College observed that their first-generation status hinders students’ ability to understand financial aid and how to pay for college. She cited how difficult it can be to watch first-generation students navigate college without help from home. Their parents have no frame of reference for college and the responsibilities it entails. Higher education can be an abstract concept
for those who have not experienced it. Walt from Willow Community College acknowledged the complexities in serving first-generation students: “We have a lot of first-generation students, a lot of economically disadvantaged students, students who don't know anything about college, and their parents aren't helping them with curbing their anxiety.” These first-generation students belong to a category that permeates much of rural America, where the number of college degree holders is often much lower than metropolitan areas. According to a report on geography and degree attainment from the Center for American Progress, most of the counties that fall near the bottom of degree attainment rates are rural (Campbell, 2019). It is not difficult to imagine that many rural first-generation college students were surrounded by friends and family members who did not earn college degrees. This environment can make college less attainable for rural community college students. This is evident in the student struggles that the leaders described in the interviews.

Based on the responses from SSAOs, I would include first-generation status as one trait in the students’ socioeconomic portfolio of characteristics. The interviewees pointed out their students’ financial circumstances as a source of significant need. While some officers did not cite food insecurity, transportation, and childcare, they did reflect on students’ broader financial picture and non-academic commitments that often make college success more challenging. Ava noted the cost of textbooks. Delilah referenced the work and family obligations that crowd out students’ study time and hamper their academic persistence. Work is a necessity for many community college students. Nearly two-thirds of all community college students work a full-time job while enrolled. Twenty-one percent of those full-time students are working full-time jobs. Nearly three-quarters of part-time community college students balance employment alongside their academic commitments (Fast Facts, 2021). Jeff from Juniper Community College characterized the work commitments that many of his students hold while pursuing their coursework. “Our communities has [sic] been steeped in coal production, and so a lot of those coal
plants, coal mines have shut down,” he confessed. “Families just can't make it anymore, and so we have a lot of students working two, three jobs just to make ends meet for their family, not necessarily just themselves.” A loss of income or a major household expense can derail students’ academic progress and make completion more difficult. Jeff continued, “They just get hit with a job loss, or car breaks down, or something like that. I know that's not unique to just rural students, but down here, it just seems like it's amplified to a certain degree.” Other rural community college scholars identify differences, albeit not specific, between urban and rural poverty. Jared Reed of Southeastern Community College compared rural poverty to “survival mode”:

Poverty in the rural community just looks different from poverty in urban areas…Trying to have a discussion about the importance of attending class falls to the back burner if a student is in survival mode. They may understand what you’re saying, but they also haven’t had anything to eat, or haven’t had a shower in days because their power has been cut off (as cited in Smith, 2017).

While many urban students also face tremendous economic hardship, recent data from the USDA indicates that nonmetro regions experience higher rates of poverty than metropolitan areas. How that poverty manifests, however, may be more nuanced or have underlying conditions that make rural poverty more difficult to overcome. Rural areas have smaller job markets, more residents without college degrees, and greater geographic distances between students and their community colleges. Regardless, non-academic factors have a greater effect on student success than academic performance, per Milo’s experience working at community colleges. “I think it comes down to the life issues more often than not,” asserted Milo. “When a student is not successful, rarely to me does it seem like it's related to some academic issue or intellectual capacity or whatever. It's so often food insecurity, housing insecurity, childcare needs, transportation issues.” Milo cited a few issues included in Porter and
Umbach’s (2019) study on the challenges that community college students face. The authors surveyed community college students via the Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges (RISC) Survey. According to the survey, work commitments, financial issues, and family relationships were far greater challenges to students than the rigor of college-level coursework. Still, some interviewees cited academic preparedness as a significant need. “Many of our students are just underprepared for that college-level rigor,” stated Faith from Fir Community College. Most who mentioned academic preparedness or the ability to handle college-level coursework acknowledged it early in their response to the question or in other interview questions and quickly moved on to discussing students’ non-academic needs. This tendency seems logical, as student affairs is a non-academic division and the student affairs senior officers, and their practitioners may be more informed on the non-academic facets of the students’ lives.

Rural and urban community colleges face many similar, even identical, challenges. They enroll many students who are not ready for college-level work. According to postsecondary aid data, their students face socioeconomic hardships on a scale far greater than students who begin at universities (Radwin, et al., 2018). The responses support the findings in the literature. The student affairs leaders I interviewed conveyed students’ needs around academic readiness, which is common for many community college students (Jaggers & Stacey, 2014). Rurality and COVID-19 were the two undercurrents that colored the responses to the interview question around students’ most significant needs. Senior student affairs leaders identified issues that reflect the challenges rural community colleges face in the national conversation about community colleges.

**Covid Challenges**

As COVID-19 has permeated the world, I wanted to determine how student affairs leaders at rural community colleges described COVID-19’s effect on their services. The interviewees’ responses
indicate that COVID-19 has presented sizeable challenges to student life programming and general student engagement. The pandemic has exposed technology knowledge gaps among college students and staff. In the case of some students, even access to reliable technology proved difficult. Many of the colleges saw their enrollment sharply decline during the pandemic, which affected nearly every aspect of operations. However, COVID-19 has presented new opportunities. The pivot to online instruction and services forced colleges to adapt. It boosted staff’s technological prowess and allowed for the delivery of services in a new virtual environment. All colleges are still managing COVID-19, existing in a grey area between pre-COVID normalcy and the new unknown reality that is post-vaccination America. The colleges are in a precarious place, and I wanted to know how student affairs units managed the stressors of the COVID era.

“It's hard; student engagement is tough. We tried, just during the pandemic, to do a couple of things student engagement-wise that were virtual, and they didn't work out,” said Jeff from Juniper Community College. Throughout the interviews, a sense of loss because of COVID-19 was evident. When your job is directly helping students, most often face-to-face, the absence of physical interaction makes service providers forlorn. “I think we're so known for being so small and so personalized. That friendly atmosphere. Knowing that it doesn't matter what your question is, you can come to one of the advisors and they're going to find you the area that you need to go to if they don't know the answer. You miss so much of that,” lamented Leslie from Larch Community College.

Ava from Ash Community College acknowledged the toll that COVID-19 has taken on the students her unit serves. She mentioned the difficulty students face with inconsistent practices during online learning. Ava noted, “Each faculty member handles things a little bit differently. There are some that you [sic] Google Meets [holds class synchronously] for every class…There are some who will just…let them [students] do alternative assignments, and there's not consistency.” Herein lies the
frustration for some student affairs practitioners: the silos between instructional and service units leave the parties uninformed of the other’s practices. Much of instructional work takes place in isolation; on the other hand, a sizeable segment of the faculty can be unaware of the nuances, and in some cases the basics, of student affairs work. The literature cites the need for increased collaboration between academic and student affairs, even as the relationship poses challenges to stakeholders (Arcelus, 2011; Kellogg, 1999; Philpott & Strange, 2003). COVID-19 may have heightened these challenges as the colleges’ internal stakeholders lost the face-to-face contact that was once part of their daily lives on campuses. The culture around here was very much a drop-in, walk in whenever and we'll help you,” said Ava. “And now we're getting more to, “Nope, we want you to set appointments so that we can be better prepared for you, so that you're better prepared when you come in.” Henry from Hawthorn Community College captured the sudden and seismic effect that COVID-19 had on both student affairs service philosophy and operations:

That [the shift to mostly online services] has been our biggest challenge…not being able to sit across a desk from someone in somebody's personal advising office and really help them through and then say, “Here, I'm now going to walk you over to this next person who already has your financial aid paperwork ready to go, and we're going to keep walking you through this process, and you're going to leave here today being a registered student with maybe books in hand.” That has just all been reinvented right now in light of this.

This shift represents a sea change for student affairs units, as COVID forced them to rethink the delivery of their services and even the idea of what constitutes a service space. Many student affairs units design their facilities and develop their programming around an in-person experience. Historically, they deliver the bulk of their services via their campus space. Recent design trends include consolidating student services into one building and aligning those services in a sequential walkway or applying
universal design principles (Salmen, 2011). Because of these design and delivery factors, student services may have even had a greater learning curve during COVID than academic affairs. Classes, some but not most, were already online. Many services, however, were not. The transition to fully online was a heavier lift for many student affairs units at traditional brick and mortar community colleges, particularly rural institutions that rely on the proximity to stakeholders and the community to help foster the sense of belonging and connectivity common in rural areas.

COVID-19 forced most colleges to become largely online institutions. Suddenly, nearly every college was Southern New Hampshire University. Despite the unreliability of broadband Internet in many rural areas, community colleges had to adapt or perish. Internet access, or the lack thereof, was a common refrain throughout the interviews with SSAOs. Earlier in the chapter, I placed rural areas’ digital shortcomings in the context of student access. In terms of providing student services, the issue shifted to operational wherewithal and staff knowledge. Most leaders cited a lack of digital infrastructure for providing remote student services as well as significant digital knowledge gaps for staff, faculty, and students.

“When our governor closed down our school districts throughout [the state], and in turn, our community colleges and state universities also went to remote, we immediately took that next week…our spring break week…to shift immediately into virtual world,” reflected Faith from Fir Community College. “Our services area had not done really anything online or virtually.” Faith stated that her team transitioned as best as they could. Her college was nearing its early registration period, so recruitment and campus visits had to be conducted virtually. Exclusively online work was unfamiliar to all student affairs employees, and the college found itself improvising like much of higher education in spring 2020. “A couple weeks after that initial [transition], then we switched to remote working for most of our workforce…but we had at least one person in each services area…So, of course we had not ever
done that either.” Other interviewees attested to the lack of readiness that pervaded their operational units. When asked how COVID challenged his college’s student affairs unit, Milo from Maple Community College offered, “Definitely just the continuity of operations. We were not probably where we should have been before the pandemic hit in terms of things like online services.” His unit was so accustomed to in-person services that the practices were engrained in staff members’ routines. The staff then had to create online services. “So, to do advising, you pretty much came to campus and met with an advisor. There was no way to even schedule an appointment with an advisor online at our college.” Milo and his staff adapted through developing a makeshift digital infrastructure for student services operations, combing the campus for any available PC or laptop so staff and students could work remotely.

In addition to leading training efforts for student affairs staff, many leaders mentioned the need to get students up to speed on learning technology, including Zoom, the proprietary name that became a staple during COVID. Ava reflected on the sudden transition to online services: “We very quickly had to become Zoom experts and to do virtual advising appointments and walk students through. We use Student Planning [software application] to create their academic plans. And so, it’s training new students via Zoom.” Before students could access their first Zoom call, many had to find reliable Internet service as rural America still struggles with broadband access (Vogels, 2021). The senior student affairs leaders repeatedly cited the broadband access challenge as a major barrier for students transitioning to exclusively online learning.” Delilah from Dogwood delivered a statement that would likely resonate with many of the interviewees: “I would say, for our students, the biggest need, given how they are accessing information, products and services, is having reliable broadband.” One interviewee, Brook from Birch Community College, mentioned how the transition to online education triggered students’ anxiety and mental health concerns. “We have seen an increase of students with mental health issues.
And I think some of them being in quarantine, especially if they're by themselves. If they're in isolation, that has been very challenging, she said. She said some students were angry, stating, “If I wanted an online class, I would have signed up for it.” This frustration made the already daunting task of transitioning to virtual services even more difficult.

Other student affairs leaders (Brook, Jeff, and Milo) mentioned the need to set up Wi-Fi for broadband-challenged populations in campus parking lots and scouring campus resources for reliable laptops and hotspots for students (Ava, Brook, Iris, and Milo). Others described pre-pandemic steps that made the transition to virtual learning more bearable, albeit still challenging. These steps included Dogwood’s push to go paperless, Juniper’s COVID-19 planning that began in February, and their close monitoring of urban areas’ actions, which provided some guidance for transitioning to mostly remote operations.

Several students at Ash Community College were far from experienced users of Canvas, Ash’s learning management system (LMS). Even though the tool is primarily used as an instructional supplement, Ava’s student affairs staff had to learn some of the basics as well as appropriate routing for student issues with the LMS. Thus, Zoom and Canvas, two of the most widely used tools for content delivery in higher education during the pandemic, were unfamiliar to some student affairs staff members before the arrival of COVID-19.

Most notably affected, however, may have been the connectivity that student affairs units feel to their students. Every interviewee, although they expressed the sentiment differently, acknowledged a sense of loss that pervaded their work during COVID. These student affairs leaders and practitioners are not technology workers toiling in isolation on an app or collaborating on a new product via some project management tool. They are the people, largely unknown to the public, who provide the support that students need beyond the classroom. They help complete the other half of the college experience. While
the arrival of COVID-19 did not break their spirits, it created a new gap between them and their students. Walt from Willow Community College stated, “the challenge of not having the face-to-face communication and connection, that piece is obviously a challenge because you just don't connect the same way.” The absence of face-to-face communication has hurt student engagement or, at the very least, dramatically altered it. The pandemic has made college, which can be intimidating for many first-generation and nontraditional college students, even more intangible for those unfamiliar with higher education. “I think that student engagement is missing, and that connection that you build with your students,” said Leslie from Larch Community College. “We're so known for being so small and so personalized. That friendly atmosphere. Knowing that it doesn't matter what your question is, you can come to one of the advisors and they're going to find you the area that you need to go to if they don't know the answer. You miss so much of that.” Perhaps Walt from Willow Community College conveyed the pandemic’s effect most succinctly when he shared, “And that’s [face-to-face support] an important piece, especially for certain services we provide, the counseling, and the accommodations and those sorts of things. The personal connection is an important part of the success, so it's definitely more challenging.”

The pandemic brought new opportunities to student affairs too. While nearly all the interviewees lamented the loss of connectivity, many shared how the pandemic helped refine practices, boost technology skills and support, and create new ways to connect to the college and its services. Their colleges had to pivot to exclusively online delivery. This spurred some initial anxiety, but many interviewees expressed how much their units adapted in such a short amount of time. Some recognized that they should have changed sooner.

“We were not probably where we should have been before the pandemic hit in terms of things like online services,” acknowledged Iris from Incense Community College. Other senior student affairs
leaders discussed how the state of their technological ability forced them to reconsider past practices and implement changes. Delilah reflected on how her units re-evaluated their practices and implemented changes that have increased certain levels of engagement: “We've taken a hard look at what we have always delivered in person, and [asked] “Is there at least a suitable replacement for online?” Delilah’s unit adopted a new career services platform that allows students to connect with employers online. Iris from Incense Community College mentioned the use of a new customer relationship management platform (CRM) to help manage student services and augment data analytics. Her unit hosted training sessions on the CRM and learning management system and accessing tutoring services. Charlotte from Catalpa Community College described some of her college’s new interventions to help retain students during the pandemic. “We actually have models where students, if they withdraw and the advisor's not comfortable, it goes to the dean to look into that, especially with COVID,” noted Charlotte. “We need to make sure we have not skipped any alternative to help a student be successful that is falling behind or falling out.” Iris from Incense Community Colleges mentioned her unit’s revision of the required first-year student success course. Her unit overhauled the class so the content now has a pandemic context, identifying how the college support works during remote learning and how students can best succeed when in-person resources are limited. These tools and practices, in some form, are likely to remain as more students take advantage of both in-person and online student services.

The pandemic has even increased engagement or allowed student service units to connect to students in different and more meaningful ways. Delilah said, “A lot of times we’ve seen engagement increase because we have moved it to a distance delivery platform.” Prior to COVID’s arrival, Dogwood Community College was increasing its online course offerings and building more infrastructure for its distance learning program. This preparedness was useful when the pandemic forced their courses almost entirely online. At the time of the interview, nearly 85% of their coursework was delivered online. The
biggest challenge to students during the shift, per Delilah, is reliable broadband. So, for those students who can get online reliably, the level of engagement may have increased. However, the interviewees, including Delilah, did not cite any hard data to reinforce their claims of increased engagement during the pandemic. Jeff from Juniper College acknowledged the lack of hard data to bolster his assertions, but he indicated that the pandemic has created “deeper connections” to students. He shared, “because students have these concerns that not only are they worried about their academic progress, but 'How am I going to do this with COVID?’ or 'How can I be assured that when I enroll, I'm going to be kept relatively safe, that the college is taking these options?' So, it opened up a deeper communication with students.”

**Research Question Two Findings**

My second major research question involves SSAOs’ perception of their work. To answer this question, I aligned my interview questions to my first sub-question focused on SSAOs’ perceptions of their work. The sub-question is as follows: How do senior student affairs professionals understand their leadership roles? That is, what is their understanding of what it takes to lead the student affairs effort at rural community colleges? Four interview questions will help me answer this sub-question:

1. Tell me about the journey that led you to your present position in student affairs?
2. What [qualities] does it take to lead the student affairs effort at a rural college?
3. Can you describe the relationship between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs at your institution, and how closely do you collaborate?
4. What’s the most rewarding element of working at a rural community college? What are the greatest challenges?

I began the interviews with a reflective question: Tell me about the journey that led you to your present position in student affairs? This question was intended to trace the interviewees’ career paths and determine how they progressed through student affairs units, the different job classifications they
have held, as well as any additional context informing their status as the senior officers managing student affairs units at rural community colleges. With the three remaining interview questions, I wanted to determine SSAOs’ perceptions of their work leading student affairs units at rural community colleges. Most importantly, I wanted to identify if any elements that make leading student affairs units at rural community colleges unique.

The Journey to Student Affairs Leadership

Many of the people that I interviewed did not follow a traditional path of studying student affairs, landing a student affairs-related job, and rising through the ranks into a leadership position. While some participants entered student affairs immediately after college, others zigzagged between different higher education units like teaching or academic affairs administrative roles. Some of those interviewed even started in the private sector. Their tenures in their present senior-level position ranged from a few months to well over a decade. This section details their respective journeys to senior leadership positions in student affairs.

I classified the interviewees’ career journeys into four major categories that reflect the first step in their career path. The major categories as well as their coded abbreviation include the following groupings:

1. Student Affairs (SA). These participants started their careers working in student affairs.
2. Teaching (T). These participants began their careers in instructional roles.
3. Non-Higher Education Start (N-HE). Participants started their careers at for-profit or nonprofit organizations outside of higher education.
4. Higher Education Other (HEO). Participants started in higher education but in roles outside of student or academic affairs.

While some completed graduate degrees in higher education studies, many revealed they did not formally pursue student affairs as the focus of their degree. Many completed graduate programs that
may have covered elements of student affairs practice, but they did not specify this in response to my introductory question, “Did you study student affairs during college or receive any formal training?” Thus, they relied on the learn-as-you-go approach to developing as a student affairs leader. They are not alone in encountering learning curves in higher education administration. Fronczek’s (2013) study on academic leadership teams at Illinois community colleges cited most professional development as “informal,” relying on peer mentors over formalized training. Schwarzbach (2016) wrote, “It would appear that many institutions assume that academic administrators don’t really need any training as managers” (para. 3). In student affairs, graduate programs have struggled to provide the level of training needed for today’s student affairs practitioner. Student affairs graduate preparation programs often contain curricular deficiencies in pressing areas like budgeting and financial management, strategic planning, research and assessment, legal knowledge and standards, supervision, technological competence, and institutional and campus politics. More graduate programs must place greater emphasis on these skills amid increasing pressures on student affairs professionals and the fiscal strain many colleges feel. The literature reveals a disconnect between what is studied in graduate education programs and the practical training received in those programs compared with what skills may be needed to practice actual student affairs work (Cooper et al., 2016). This lack of management training is unfortunately timed because community colleges are facing unprecedented challenges, including navigating a global pandemic, grappling with steep enrollment declines, and heeding local, state, and national pressure to address low retention and completion rates (Schnell 2020a, 2020b, Slepyan, 2021).

The interviewees cited examples of informal learning they sought to compensate for the formal training in student affairs that some lacked. This informal learning often takes place on the job as student affairs practitioners begin their careers in entry- or mid-level roles. Ava, an SSAO at Ash Community College, began her student affairs career in admissions and recruitment after a stint teaching in
elementary education. When I asked her about this transition, she cited a steep learning curve when she arrived in student affairs and at the community college. Ava stated, “Once I got into the job…the director had left…there was a period of three months where it was pretty much me and a half-time person that were running the entire admissions office. So, I was able to prove that I could do the administrative piece along with the recruiting piece and learn just the whole admissions world.” She studied teaching as an undergraduate, but that training in pedagogy did not prepare her for the challenges she would face as a new student affairs practitioner. Ava continued “I had worked in education all my life but going from in the classroom to an office environment was a big learning curve, and even understanding just all of the pieces that come with enrollment management.” In addition to her recruitment role, she was also serving as an academic advisor to over 400 newly enrolled students.

Some senior officers held teaching positions prior to serving in a leadership capacity within student affairs. Charlotte, a vice president from Iowa, started as an adjunct nursing instructor before being hired as a full-time faculty member and serving in that role for 15 years. She moved to a career and technical education dean position before earning the vice-president post, making her the senior academic affairs officer at Catalpa Community College. During her second year as vice president, she assumed management of the student service units under her. While they may have deans of student affairs serving under them, senior officers new to student affairs inherit many new responsibilities in an area of higher education that may be unfamiliar. This shift can be a leap for someone who never worked in the student affairs unit prior to absorbing its management functions. This sentiment is not a denigration of Charlotte’s leadership skills, career history, or competency. It is an indication that leadership of a college’s most vital units can be led by someone who did not directly study or work within student affairs.
Walt taught at the community college where he is now the senior student affairs officer. His journey closely resembles the faculty-to-administrator route that, based on my observations, is common in community colleges. Walt taught hospitality courses for several years until he realized that he had lost his passion for the subject matter. His interest in the holistic operations of a community college, however, was growing. “I didn't like teaching in an area that I wasn't passionate about, but I was passionate about the college, and I was passionate about everything that we did, so that led me into being interested in an administrative position,” he shared. Walt proceeded to his first administrative position, serving as a regional director for a community college. The regional director position is like a branch campus manager, which is common throughout the community colleges system. In rural areas where college branches can be many miles apart, these satellite locations need to offer comprehensive services as some students simply cannot reach the main campus (Smith, 2016).

After serving as a regional director, Walt landed at his current institution where he started in a dean’s role within student affairs before moving to a vice-president’s post where he serves as the senior officer of student affairs. His desire for working in student affairs includes “working with students directly and helping them throughout the challenges and getting to know the students from that perspective… [I] really got to know, again, all the challenges that our students face, and just how rewarding it is to help them meet those challenges.”

Milo, an SSAO at Maple Community College, taught for several years before applying for his first dean’s position within academic affairs. Other interviewees conveyed similar scenarios where they absorbed or inherited student affairs through organizational realignment.

Others did not begin their career paths in education. Henry, a vice president at a rural community college, started his professional career in law enforcement. He then taught as an adjunct faculty member before transitioning to a full-time faculty member, dean, and vice president. He had a brief stint as
college president in another state. He sees parallels between his experience working in law enforcement and his time teaching and serving students in higher education. The primary link is the people he encounters and the challenges they face. “While I was a police officer and taught criminal justice, and one thing I just saw time and time again, were just how many things go on in people's homes that impact their ability to come to class every day…That student's home life is just so terrible, how do they come to class every day?” He served as a police officer in the same community where he taught criminal justice courses. This dual role helped him see the struggles people experience and how he, and more broadly, rural community colleges can help. Henry added, “Working as a faculty member, and working in the industry that I came from really allowed me to see how much we can make a difference if we truly care, and we truly know these students.”

Brook, a vice president at Birch Community College in rural Missouri, also launched her career in law enforcement, working as an analyst under a three-year grant for a state police agency. When she landed her first higher education position as a registrar at a community college in the rural Midwest, she did not possess any formal training in student affairs. In fact, she had no long-term plans to work in student affairs or higher education. She shared, “There was no intent, all along, growing up, that I was going to work in student affairs. My skill set matches with that, but it's not something I had thought about.” Living in a rural area, however, presents fewer career opportunities. Institutions also receive fewer quality applicants. Brook’s analytical skills and being a college-educated professional in an area where less than 20% of the population holds a bachelor’s degree opened opportunities that may not have seemed a likely fit (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Prior to her current vice-president position, she worked as a college registrar (at her current institution and the stint at another rural community college), as well as director roles in admissions and enrollment management, respectively.
Delilah, a vice president of student and academic affairs, studied interpersonal communications and began her career in public relations at a major nonprofit organization. She transitioned to the private sector, focusing on marketing and public relations in the agriculture industry. Her work with local boards exposed her to the benefits of community colleges, particularly the career and technical education (CTE) programs they offer. She saw several family members earn credentials in CTE programs and find success. She admired how the colleges provided an expedient route to a profitable career. Her background in marketing and connecting with local businesses helped her land an administrative position in workforce development with her current employer, Dogwood Community College. She then held leadership positions in career services and served as the interim registrar. “I did almost everything in student affairs that was legal for me to do except financial aid,” said Delilah. Her unorthodox major and ascendency to the senior position in student affairs even caused some consternation among colleagues. “When I talk about my career trajectory with some of the up-and-coming employees at our college or other colleges, this is where I start to see them get really frustrated with me,” she shared. Delilah lacks a student affairs pedigree, so her colleagues who studied student affairs, landed internships, followed by their non-executive student affairs post, have expressed skepticism about her qualifications as they relate to student affairs.

Faith, a vice president from a rural community college, may have the most unusual transition among the interview participants who have spent their careers in higher education. She was the director of public information for her current college nearly 30 years ago, serving as the senior communications officer. This role allowed her to get to know most areas of the college. Intrigued by student affairs, she applied for an open admissions recruiter position, proceeded to Director of Admissions, followed by Registrar, and then Dean of Students. She finally became vice president after her college implemented a new organizational chart, which promoted a handful of deans to vice president roles.
With smaller enrollments and less property tax dollars, rural community colleges often lack the resources, whether personnel, funding, or programming, found at many metropolitan community colleges (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Additionally, state appropriation cuts and federal Pell Grant reductions have affected rural community colleges at greater rates than urban and suburban community colleges (Koh et al., 2019). While they may not have disclosed the entire financial picture of their respective institutions, the interview alluded to circumstances and decisions that are a result of financial pressure and the cost cutting that comes with it. Henry, a vice president overseeing student and academic affairs at a rural community college, described the merger of major units so common in today’s higher education landscape. These shifts in titles and the additional responsibilities that accompany them can be part of the journey to student affairs leadership. Henry shared, “I was a dean…on the academic side when I was asked to take on a project known as First Year Experience…through that project was born the idea to create one supervisor who oversees both departments…That really was how I got into the role that I'm in now.” Henry described the on-the-job learning that accompanies so many leadership positions in higher education. Amid the numerous challenges rural community colleges face, this informal training and shot-in-the-dark approach is compounded by the multiple roles leaders assume. Henry elaborated on this challenge, “I had to figure out…how do I work between all the different areas and still be able to be in charge of everything, but you can't lead everything.” Henry’s role as senior academic and student affairs officer spreads him thin in areas where he lacks expertise. The position requires leadership but also, paradoxically, the position’s scope and myriad demands can make leading all areas challenging. Thus, he needs to be judicious with his time as demands will persist and resources will likely shrink.

Ava spoke about the shifting roles on her path to the senior student affairs position. She mentioned the following details on the often-arbitrary evolution of her position:
[her current job] actually started as an assistant dean of students position, even though I wasn't reporting to a dean. I was reporting to the president. I don't know why he gave me that title, but he did. And then within a year, [he] changed it to a dean of students. And then this past year, it evolved into a vice president of student affairs. And that's because the admin side hired a dean of academic services to go underneath the VP of academics.

Another senior student affairs officer, Iris, shared a similar story of happenstance employment. She was working at a neighboring college when she received a call from her current employer. Iris stated, “The person in my position had left, taken a new position. The president was an interim president, who had been the academic affairs vice president. So, she was trying to do the president and academic affairs [roles]. And then their CFO had passed away…the board contacted me, who I used to work with, and asked if I'd be interested in working interim.”

While all the senior officers I interviewed have spent a considerable amount of time in the community college sector (only one mentioned a short tenure at a university), their paths to leadership positions within student affairs are different, and they have developed their skills in different ways. Given the interviewees’ evolution from practitioner to leader, I wanted to know what leadership qualities are essential to manage student affairs units at rural community colleges. What role, if any, does rurality play in the leadership of student affairs at community colleges? To find an answer, I asked the interviewees about the necessary qualities to lead student affairs units.

**Rural Leadership Qualities**

As this study focuses on student affairs leadership at rural community colleges, I wanted to inquire about the qualities senior-level officers feel are needed to lead student affairs divisions at their rural institutions. Namely, I wanted to determine if a unique set of qualities are needed for leadership in rural community colleges. Does geography matter when leading student affairs units? Does rurality play
a role in how the leaders approach their jobs? Several of the traits that the senior officers mentioned are applicable to many leadership positions: rural or urban, higher education or otherwise. Nevertheless, some leaders specified the need for ties to the community. For many, these are tightly knit rural communities where a close connection between the college and the community is essential.

Answers varied among the participants, but some commonalities emerged in the responses. Multiple participants mentioned five qualities or minor variations on them. Five SSAOs mentioned “adaptability” or a similar term. Another five cited “empathy” and “caring” as necessary qualities. Each of the other three common qualities was mentioned by two interviewees. These assets include strong communication, an active connection to the community, and the ability to model good behavior.

**Adaptability**

For the four officers that cited it, adaptability was a key quality, often the one that they mentioned first. Given the wide array of duties that fall under administrators in higher education as well as the fluidity of student needs, industry trends, and institutional policies, it seems almost predictable that student affairs leaders would mention adaptability as a vital quality for effective leadership. While adaptability was a popular answer to the interview question on leadership qualities, the officers placed adaptability in different contexts. For instance, Jeff from Juniper College expressed the importance of adaptability when working at a small college with limited resources. “We have smaller staff. We have smaller budgets. So, you're constantly adapting to those realities. If I need to step in and help advise a student because we only have a handful of advisors, if one happens to be out and a student needs to be seen, and everyone else is tied up with somebody, I have to be willing to jump in.” Jeff later emphasized that this adaptability requires that he be familiar with most areas of the college, including those units outside student affairs. “I can’t be a one-trick pony and hope to get by,” he confessed. Another interviewee placed adaptability in the context of managing and collaborating with college personnel.
Leslie from Larch Community College stated, “So, you've got to be able to be pretty flexible as well. I think [there are] a number of different personalities. And so, you've got to be able to work with that dynamic group of people.” Faith from Fir Community College expressed similar sentiments. She added, “Working with all of these groups of employees requires the ability to make adjustments as schedules change, as people change, and as processes change.” Faith cited the need for senior officers to oversee several units within student affairs. Senior officers may not have studied or previously worked in some of these areas, so it behooves leaders to be adaptable.

Ava mentioned adaptability in the context of COVID-19’s effect on higher education: “I think you have to be ready to adapt to change, I mean, especially now with COVID.” Ava also viewed adaptability as a key to responding to community needs. She mentioned, “Our needs right here in this county are different from the county where I live. And so it's making sure that you're able to get out there and really get a gauge of what's going on in your community and talking to people to understand, and then adapt your services and education programs as needed.” Milo from Maple Community College cited flexibility during COVID as a key leadership trait as well. Milo’s response was peppered with phrases like “shift gears” and “be visionary” considering COVID. While the pandemic may have influenced some of these responses, their inclusion is evidence that adaptability, as applied to several different areas of student affairs, is an important leadership quality among senior officers.

**Empathy**

Empathy is central to the work of student affairs and drives many practitioners to the field (Hoy & Nguyen, 2020). In today’s deeply divided political landscape, which has been especially felt on college campuses, empathy is of even greater value to student affairs leaders according to Hephner LeBanc (2019). Five of the eleven participants in my interview study cited the need for empathy as an important quality for student affairs leaders at rural community colleges.
Delilah from Dogwood Community College mentioned empathy as a key attribute for rural community college leaders, emphasizing its criticality for incoming leaders, particularly those who may not be from rural areas. Per Delilah, leaders should have, “…been shaped by growing up in a rural environment, perhaps surrounded by poverty or some of the other barriers that are very common to the rural student, a deep sense of empathy for that condition.” Delilah has seen firsthand how some senior executives have entered the state’s rural community colleges and faltered because they did not have a rural background or at least a sense of empathy for the challenges rural students face. She continued, “I will see sometimes a VP come into our system from Los Angeles, or New York, or a highly urban background and I think sometimes they struggle if they don't come in with those sensibilities around the rural condition.”

Like Delilah, Walt mentioned empathy in the context of how faculty and staff feel about students. In response to this question on necessary leadership qualities for leading student affairs in rural community college, Walt shared, “I think empathy and understanding our students...I always think that's first and foremost because I've worked with administrators, and I've had staff who don't get it. They go down the road of, ‘We've got to teach students a lesson. I'm too busy to care about student problems’”

Walt’s quote reinforces some of Delilah’s observations, namely how student affairs leadership and other personnel should be sensitive to the challenges that community college students face and the diversity in the types of learners that attend community colleges. Care for students is central to Henry from Hawthorn Community College’s response to the question on qualities related to leading student affairs. “You have to be very caring,” he said. “You have to realize you're going to deal with many students and all the students you're dealing with, each one is very important, each one's issues, if they're dealing with an issue today, is maybe the biggest thing going on in their life.”
Although she did not mention empathy directly, Leslie from Larch Community College invoked the term “caring” and placed it in the context of her unit’s employees rather than merely students. She shared, “You have to definitely be caring not only for the students but for your employees. Many of my employees have also outside commitments with families and such and so. You have to balance all of that.”

My interview question on leadership qualities did not directly ask the participants to compare the qualities needed at a rural college versus those needed for an urban institution. Still, some of the responses included a comparison between institutional types of officers’ backgrounds. This comparison emerged among a couple of interviewees who named empathy as a key quality. Iris from Incense Community College stated that she was not aware of any differences in qualities needed to lead rural versus urban student affairs units. She shared, “I don’t know necessarily that it takes any different qualities than it takes for someone working in an urban area...I think you still need the same qualities. I think you need, certainly you need the care and empathy.”

**Communication**

Two officers recognized communication as one of the key attributes to leading student affairs at rural community colleges. Both interviewees, however, placed communication in a different context within student affairs. In a written response, Faith from Fir Community College emphasized communication’s importance in smaller rural colleges like hers. “Even though most rural campuses are smaller and have fewer layers of hierarchy, effective communication is still key to building a culture of trust, respect, and collaboration for our stakeholders,” she shared. As many small towns are often synonymous with gossip (Pride, 2016; Sulzberger, 2011), rural community colleges, small ecosystems unto themselves, are no different. Per Faith’s testimony, “Clear and consistent communication reduces gossip culture” at rural institutions like Fir Community College.
While communication is prevalent among leadership and planning strategies in business organizations (Spinks & Wells, 1995) and even some facets of higher education, its role in student affairs leadership is not as well documented, particularly when it comes to how senior officers supervise their units. Elrod, et al. (2018) found that supervisory methods varied among community college student affairs leaders, with their study’s participants utilizing one-on-one correspondence and team meetings as the most prevalent communication tactics when supervising employees. As the authors state, there is no “cookie cutter approach” to supervision within student affairs at community colleges.

Many of the interviewees did not mention communication because it appears so obvious or implied. Upon further review, I am curious to know how the senior officers communicate with their staff, their presidents, and their students. The communication styles of these leaders and how this proximity to their peers influences communication and decision-making merits further research.

**Modeling Good Behavior**

Two of the leaders I interviewed found it particularly important to set a good example for the other members of their units as well as students. Ava stated, “If we’re talking just solely on being a good leader, I think it's just modeling things, too, modeling behaviors for your staff, modeling it for students, empowering people to do [what] they did not think that they could do and providing the resources so that they can be successful. I mean, that goes for staff and students.” She continued, “It's just allowing people to transform and to do better than what they thought possible.” Faith from Fir Community College emphasized the importance of self-care and making sure subordinates see their supervisors practicing self-care and self-management in the hopes they will emulate this behavior. Faith conveyed how critical it is for student affairs leaders to exhibit good behavior and self-care amidst the numerous challenges that student affairs units face. She stated that “Managing self-care and modeling this behavior
for your direct reports and team are also important in order to maintain their effectiveness during challenging, high-volume, high-stress periods of the academic year.”

The transformational style embedded in Ava and Faith’s responses is reflected in portions of the literature on leading in student affairs. Transformational leadership refers to “leadership behaviors that transform and inspire followers to perform beyond expectations while transcending self-interest for the good of the organization,” (Avolio, et al., 2009). Many positive behaviors from leaders could fall under this umbrella of transformational leadership and it is a leadership style in demand as leaders navigate changes to the higher education landscape (Sutin, 2012). Robinson (2017) found that this transformational emphasis on leadership is more prevalent among baby boom generation student affairs leaders. Based on the number of years of service that she alluded to, Faith likely falls within the boomer age bracket. I cannot ascertain if Ava also falls into the boomer bracket, but her response is in line with the transformational leadership preference found within Robinson’s study.

**Student Affairs and Academic Affairs Relationship**

Since my second research question concerns how rural community college SSAOs perceive their work, I wanted to know how student affairs units work in conjunction with the other major unit on most campuses, academic affairs. The responses ranged from close collaboration on advising to internal struggles over understanding each other’s work.

Literature on the relationship between academic and student affairs across both two- and four-year institutions is plentiful. Researchers and practitioners agree that both entities are critical to student success, but they can work in silos or even disharmony. When the two units collaborate successfully, their partnership is widely celebrated at conferences and other professional development showcases (Hogan et al., 2017; Pederson, 2015). Scholars have analyzed the interworking of the units in academic journals (Gulley, 2016; Kellogg, 1999; Martin & Murphy, 2000; Price, 1999). For decades, their
relationship has been the subject of numerous dissertations (Armstrong, 2014; Carroll, 2019; Gaur, 2009; Janey, 2009; Kennedy, 2004; Lee, 2017; Schinoff, 1975). Given the high volume of writing on the subject, I wanted to hear how senior student affairs characterized this relationship and how it played out at their rural institutions.

Among my 11 interviewees, four participants (Charlotte, Delilah, Henry, and Milo) served as the senior officer for both academic and student affairs. This merger between units is not uncommon in higher education, particularly at the community college level and among smaller universities where resources are scarce (Broadie, 2014; McClellan, 2004; Price, 1999). Having closer insights into both units, all four of these participants characterized the relationships as mostly favorable. Participants focused on mostly positive elements of the relationship. Some others mentioned the challenges of understanding each other’s work and successfully collaborating, while one officer characterized the units as largely uncooperative and constantly failing to understand each other’s work, placing much of the onus on faculty to learn more about student affairs and collaborate more closely.

The primary takeaways from the responses include the importance of advising, the benefits of the colleges’ small size, and the erosion of longstanding silos. All three of these themes were cited by multiple staff. However, the findings indicate that some challenges remain in the institutional partnership between student affairs and academic affairs.

Advising

Throughout community colleges, many institutions have separate roles for faculty and advisors. In some cases, the work is shared as faculty also serve in an advising capacity whether exclusively within their academic program or for the general student population. During the interviews for this study, advising emerged as a key source of collaboration. Four officers cited advising, academic and extracurricular, as a primary area of collaboration between academic and student affairs. Ava from Ash
Community College mentioned how advising has been a vehicle for increased collaboration between academic and student affairs. She indicated that advisors rely more on instructors to report when students are struggling. Despite their physical distance during the pandemic, remote operations have brought the units figuratively closer as both units have increased student outreach. Faith from Fir Community College and Iris from Incense Community College cited advising as areas of collaboration in helping students succeed. Leslie acknowledged that faculty from Larch Community College have taken on advisory roles for student clubs and activities.

During my experience working at community colleges, I have often seen faculty in career and technical education (CTE) programs occupy advisory roles as they are intimately familiar with their own programs as well as the CTE industries where their students hope to land jobs after completing their degrees and certificates. The student affairs officers I interviewed did not directly address the prevalence of faculty in advisory roles within CTE programs. At many community colleges, this is where faculty take on a full or quasi-advisory role, enabling them to perform work more commonly associated with student affairs.

**Small College Benefits**

As mentioned earlier, small communities can benefit the colleges they house. Based on the responses collected during the interviews, the benefits of a small college can also help increase collaboration between students and academic affairs. Henry from Hawthorn Community College and Milo from Maple Community College indicated that small colleges, particularly in small rural communities, are conducive to collaboration. Milo mentioned, “That also helps when you have the smaller rural institutions, because everybody knows everybody extremely well. So, you never walk past a stranger who's also an employee. You know everybody who works at the college.” Milo indicated that this proximity and intimacy help foster collaboration between the two units. Collaboration is
unavoidable. Henry added, “Being a rural community college, we all get to know each other pretty well.” He cited examples of faculty and student affairs personnel getting to know the same students, including their challenges. This awareness among both parties makes it easier to serve the students as advisors can keep faculty abreast of the students’ issues and faculty can do the same.

**Silos, Success, and Other Challenges**

Four of the interviewees described the relationship between student and academic affairs as improving, with some of the previous silos eroding to make room for increased collaboration. The current state they described is a marked shift from previous years of more isolated work among the units. When asked to describe the current relationship, Charlotte from Catalpa Community College shared that she hears “very different conversations. Rarely do I hear, ‘Well, academics isn’t [pulling its weight]. The reason we don’t have students is that.’ We don’t hear that anymore.” She alluded to leaner processes and some general reorganization being responsible for the increased collaboration and smoother operations between the units. Walt from Willow Community College indicated a similar shift. “Right now, we have a really good collaborative relationship, and it's really nice because I've also been through periods of time when it really hasn't been.”

Traditionally, retention has been another key area where academic and student affairs have collaborated (Wilson, 1998). As community colleges shifted from an access focus to a retention focus, college presidents and boards called on leaders within student and academic affairs to have an all-hands-on-deck approach. Delilah from Dogwood Community College also referenced the importance of retention efforts in fostering collaboration between academic and student affairs. Delilah shared, “The better we can understand that side of the house [academic affairs] and support it, I think we can help move that retention needle.”
Iris from Incense Community College painted a much different picture of collaboration at her institution. The silos remain firmly intact as she indicated “There's definitely a faculty/staff divide, and there's a lot of blaming.” She described knowledge gaps among faculty when asked to assist with advising during registration drives. Internal conflicts had crowded out the room needed for collaboration. Whereas other interviewees depicted a largely collaborative atmosphere between the two units, Iris mentioned that sorting out these differences is one of her key challenges. She is relatively new to the institution, so she has inherited this tension.

The challenges that Iris described could be a matter of communication, or they could reflect some of the longstanding divisions between academic and student affairs. Jeff from Juniper College noted this historical tension between the two entities. “Every institution I've been in, you're always going to have that rub between academics and student affairs. I think the biggest challenge, obviously, is communication, making sure you're on the same page,” he observed. Despite her negative assessment of the relationship between academic and student affairs, Iris from Incense Community College also conveyed how, when functioning properly, all college units can contribute to student success. “It takes all of us to get those people across that stage at the end of the year,” she declared. “It takes student workers, and it takes the custodians, and it takes faculty, and it takes tutors, and it takes advisors, and it takes the president, and it takes the board of trustees. It takes us all.”

The wide range of responses reflects the fluid state of collaboration between student and academic affairs at rural community colleges as well as higher education in general. As enrollment challenges take precedence at many community colleges throughout the country (Aratani, 2021; Weissman, 2021), these units will need to find ways to work in harmony to help their institutions grow and students succeed. This is especially true at rural community colleges. While the responses illustrate the virtues of intimate settings, size also poses challenges. Jeff from Juniper Community College
characterized the need for increased collaboration in rural community colleges. We're too small to work against one another…Ultimately, we're here not for ourselves, but for the students and for the community.”

**Rewards and Challenges of Working in Student Affairs at a Rural Community College**

Hernandez (2018) found that academic affairs professionals have higher job satisfaction and motivation than student affairs professionals. In a study on job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover among student affairs professionals, Mullen, et al. (2018) discovered that on average student affairs professionals reported high satisfaction with their job. While 20% of the participants were from rural colleges, the results indicated that job satisfaction did not have a statistically significant difference based on school type and location. Grant’s (2006) study indicated mid-level student affairs professionals at four-year institutions reported high levels of job satisfaction, regardless of location. Little research, however, exists on job satisfaction with student affairs professionals at rural community colleges. Most of the studies have been exclusive to faculty (Isaac & Boyer, 2007; Murray & Cunningham, 2004). Given this confluence of findings, and this being a qualitative study, I wanted to hear from the senior officers on the rewards and challenges they have experienced while working at rural community colleges. Among the rewards, officers cited helping students overcome adversity and making a difference in the community. As for challenges, the interviewees’ responses can be organized into three primary areas: student, institutional, and community challenges. Together, the rewards and challenges indicate that rural SSAOs are committed to helping students overcome personal hardships. They are also devoted to giving back to their communities. The work of SSAOs takes place at small institutions that present rewards and challenges unto themselves. Nevertheless, the leaders still find satisfaction in their work, especially when they see students graduate and complete their goals.
Rewards

The interviewees’ responses on the rewards portion of the question can fit into two categories: helping students overcome adversity and contribute to the community. Senior officers shared examples of how higher education and society challenge rural community college students. The leaders conveyed pride and satisfaction in helping all students, but particularly the ones who, despite the challenges, persevere. “We see students that have every odd against them,” said Leslie from Larch Community College. “They have so many things that are going to hit them and knock them down. But, by gosh, they get back up and they keep trucking through that pathway until they get to the end.” Graduation day is special for most of us who work in higher education, but it is especially gratifying when students known for encountering obstacles overcome them and walk across the stage to receive their diploma. “I think there are people every year at graduation, that you just sit there, and I see them walk by, and you smile,” reflected Brook from Birch Community College. “Because you know what we did, and how they persevered, and made it through to get their degree.”

Many things take place for students between enrollment and graduation. College is a transformative process, especially for first-generation students. The senior officers bore witness to much of that transformation, and, in many cases, contributed to it. Completion is the culmination of this work and seeing their students complete their intended educational objective brings many of the officers joy. Delilah from Dogwood Community College, recounted how the scene at graduation is the most satisfying reward of her work in student affairs:

I will meet students in the early phase of their time with us and I will see someone who maybe lacks confidence or vision or the belief that they can actually do college work. And then, lo and behold, nine months or a year, or two years later, I see them walk across the stage at graduation. And I hear a child yell out, “Way to go, Mom,” or “Way to go, Dad.” And it's right then where I
just feel the waterworks coming on and that sense of just pride for that student and knowing what it took for them to get there, with all of the obstacles in their life that is the most rewarding.

The ability to help students overcome the anxiety that college stirs up with first-time students resonated with other interviewees too. Brook from Birch Community mentioned how students who are anxious when starting college can transform, gaining confidence in the abilities to move through college successfully. “They're scared to death,” she said. “As soon as you get them on that campus and see that we are going to help and support them in achieving their goals, and that we are there to help and provide those resources.”

As earlier portions of the interview discussed the importance of the colleges’ connectivity to the communities to serve, some senior officers mentioned the satisfaction in giving back to the community. For a few interviewees, giving back to the community was the most substantial reward in their work. When working at a rural community college, “you see, firsthand, the impact you have on the community,” reflected Ava from Ash Community College. Henry from Hawthorn Community College acknowledged the special feeling of not only seeing the students succeed but also staying in the community after graduating. Henry appreciated how gratifying it can be to see the students have a positive effect on their communities. He felt pride in “seeing the impact and transformation in front of your eyes. Many students stay in the community, so you see their impact on the community and their industry directly.” Walt from Willow Community College also derived satisfaction from his work’s ability to benefit his community. He found it rewarding “being personally committed to the community and involved with the community and feeling like you're making a difference, a positive difference in individuals’ lives and that makes a difference in the community.”

The small community can be good for the officers’ wellbeing too, according to Charlotte from Catalpa Community College. “The collegiality of the community embraces you wholeheartedly,” she
reflected warmly. Charlotte’s response also contained her appreciation for living in a small rural community. She mentioned, “our rural areas are very beautiful. They’re very untouched. Life is easier in a rural area, in a smaller community.” She was quick to note that the desire to live in a rural area must be authentic. When you are a prominent leader at the local rural community college, you will be recognized in the community. She mentioned the importance of visibility within the community. When you consider all these elements, a rural community college career can be immensely rewarding. Even if life in a rural area can be easier than the density of urban life, the work at rural community colleges can still be quite challenging.

**Challenges**

Given the array of different challenges the interviewees identified, I grouped the challenges into three categories: student population challenges, institutional challenges, and rural challenges. Some of these challenges are unique to rural community colleges while others are found throughout nearly all community colleges. Some are manageable, even alterable, while others are beyond the scope of the colleges to resolve.

**Student Population Challenges**

At a community college, student needs are often student challenges. In 2016, 27% of all dependent students at community colleges lived below the poverty line (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). Faith from Fir Community College cited students’ financial needs as one of the primary challenges of working at a rural community college. Walt from Willow Community College cited poverty as a “huge issue” for Willow’s students. This perpetual need among students has forced the college to create programs for emergency loans. Although not as a part of the response to this interview question, other officers mentioned the frequent financial challenges that emerge among their student populations. Jeff from Juniper College noted the frequency of students losing jobs, many of them high-turnover service
industry jobs, and persistent car troubles, made even more difficult when the students must travel considerable distances to the college campus.

Some of the students’ challenges are socioeconomic and not exclusively tied to poverty but an outgrowth of poverty. Faith mentioned, “In some cases, socially, they're [rural students] not as prepared also as advanced as some maybe urban students are.” In other words, the students have seen less of the world and their social interactions may be more limited. In many cases, their families may be less familiar with higher education, a problem for nearly all first-generation students. Leslie from Larch Community College mentioned, “You're working with first generation students, so they have no support at home. Sometimes the parents just can't support because they don't know.” Walt and Henry also cited the struggles that first-generation students face, including the absence of parental understanding and support as well as the ability to afford college or afford other parts of their lives. Leslie characterized many of the low-income and first-generation students at Larch Community College: “I think it's that first generation, that low income, that person that has a lot of commitments outside of being able to dedicate time to just school,” she mentioned. “Many of them have full-time jobs. So, they're working full-time. They're going to school full-time. They're taking care of family full-time, and it's stressful for them.”

These competing priorities have emerged as more nontraditional students enroll at Larch. Leslie noted, “I mean gone are the days when, especially those right out of high school come here and this is their job, and this is all they do. I mean, many of them are working a lot of hours to help support, whether it's paying for college or paying the household expenses.”

Walt cited mental health issues as another issue facing his students at Willow Community College. Walt said, “Mental health is definitely up there. We have a lot of students with accommodations, so being able to provide those and being able to support those students is definitely a big need at our college.” Walt’s inclusion of mental health as one of the top challenges at his college
aligns with data in recent literature on mental health needs and services in higher education. In NASPA’s 2019 Vice President for Student Affairs Census, 28% of participants rated students’ mental health as the most pressing issue facing their colleges. Walt’s assessment arrives at a time when the need for mental health services is high, but many colleges lack the resources to adequately address, or even the ability to address, students’ mental health challenges (as cited in Anderson, 2019). According to the American College Counseling Association, 82% of all community colleges provide counseling services (Edwards, 2015). While that number may seem high, the total leaves a substantial number of students without access to on-campus mental health services. Many of the colleges that have curbed or eliminated their on-campus services refer students to offsite counseling in the area (Anderson, 2019). In rural America, it will be harder for those community college students to find mental health services nearby, as nonmetropolitan areas have far fewer service locations than metro areas (Andrilla et al., 2018). Rural areas contain far fewer specialists than urban areas, making it difficult for rural residents to receive specialized care (Morales et al., 2020). For rural community colleges, this shortage of mental health services reflects two other challenge types identified in my interviews—institutional challenges and rural challenges.

**Institutional Challenges**

Some of the interviewees cited challenges related to their institutional type and location. Five of the interviewees shared a variety of challenges that can be grouped under the institutional challenges category. For instance, Ava from Ash Community College mentioned the numerous responsibilities under her position, colloquially known as “wearing many hats.” She indicated nine major areas within student affairs that report to her. This high-volume workload requires Ava to be well-versed enough in several different areas outside her expertise. She said, “The greatest challenge then is becoming enough of an expert in each area to 'talk the talk' when needed, surrounding yourself with people you trust to
keep up with changing regulations or demands in each area, and leading your team to success.” The bevy of management duties under Ava and others at small colleges like hers can be the result of resource scarcity as college leaders must prioritize essential services amidst declining enrollment numbers or fluctuations in state and local appropriations. Walt from Willow Community College said, “There's just that constant tension of not having enough resources to meet the needs of our students.” Delilah shared this frustration with inadequate resources. She lamented what the loss could mean for her students at Dogwood Community College as she expressed concern over “not being able to reach students in the moment that they need them, and then we never see that student again.” As completion rates remain a nearly perpetual problem at all community colleges, students’ intermittent enrollment in college can be particularly daunting for student affairs units.

Charlotte from Catalpa Community College acknowledged the inequitable resources among Catalpa’s satellite campuses. “The challenges outweigh many times the strengths, because challenges are the numbers in the services,” she said. As Catalpa’s district covers many square miles, the distance between students and campus can be great. Unfortunately, it is infeasible for Catalpa to outfit each campus with the same number of resources and programs. “How do you justify bringing a center to a rural community when they have 12 kids in their high school class? Our people in the rural area would not move and go South, and the people in South wouldn't go North.” Thus, those students in the district’s smallest, most isolated communities fail to receive equitable resources. Here, rurality emerges as a setback for the colleges, their students, and communities. While rural community colleges cannot be expected to deliver a full slate of programming and activities at each campus, other rural deficiencies like inadequate or non-existent public transportation compound the situation further. Given the distance between many students and the main campus, rural community college students could benefit from
increased online course offerings. However, as the interviewees mentioned, many rural areas lack reliable high-speed Internet.

Faith from Fir Community College’s answer centered on student life challenges. She mentioned the lack of a football team as a major challenge, given the sport’s popularity. Without a team, per Faith’s testimony, students lack a collective initiative to drive school spirit and become more invested in student life. The absence of a football team can be devastating to small towns, which have seen recent declines in sports programs due to costs, enrollment shortages, and aging populations in rural areas (Lewis, 2019).

Rural Challenges

Some of the challenges that the senior officers mentioned are linked to the colleges’ geography. These challenges exist because the colleges are rural community colleges. Two college leaders I interviewed acknowledged challenges connected to the colleges’ rural characteristics. In their view, the college’s location created some of these challenges.

Birch Community College is close to a large Midwestern city. However, it is still classified as rural per the Carnegie system. Despite its fringe status, the college has elements that make it feel rural. The district, which consists of one county, is comprised of a cluster of small towns and villages. Although it is the largest of the colleges that I profiled, Brook, who oversees student affairs and enrollment services, acknowledged the drawbacks to the college’s location and some of the cultural characteristics of the community. “There was a student who's part of our LGBTQ Club, and she has indicated that she doesn't feel like there was support and resources in [Birch’s] County to support her,” recalled Brook. “If she went to a larger place, that there would be. She's a transgender student…being in a rural community, sometimes individuals don't feel that they fit in as well.” Minority students conveyed similar circumstances during a recent college listening session, according to Brook. Census data indicates that
the county is over 95% white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Much of the anxiety and tension can be traced back to strained relationships in the larger community, Brook claimed. As a senior officer in student affairs, Brook found the isolation some students feel particularly nerve-wracking. She lamented that the college cannot change the community. Brook and her student affairs staff can provide internal diversity training and support sessions easily, but they have less influence among external stakeholders. The College cannot control the community’s actions and beliefs. “Being a leader in Student Affairs, it bothers me that students don't feel like they're welcome here,” Brook lamented. Her worries are justified. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) students in rural America reported higher degrees of bullying and harassment according to research from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (Palmer, et al., 2012). During her responses to another interview question, Delilah mentioned the LGBT club on her campus. In rural areas, the community college can serve as a refuge for LGBT students who may not feel as welcome beyond the walls of the college.

Other senior officers conveyed different rural-specific challenges. Walt cited the lack of resources in the local community, including the scarcity of mental health providers. He also mentioned the dearth of public transportation options as a major obstacle to students getting on campus and staying in their classes. Walt was the only leader to acknowledge substance abuse issues in the community. One state represented among the participants reports high rates of alcohol use and dependence, and treatment can be much more difficult to secure in rural areas (Kremer, 2019).

Throughout their testimonies, the interviewees described rural areas in paradoxical terms. The areas are beautiful yet bleak. They are communal yet unwelcoming. They struggle with providing services that are more plentiful in metropolitan areas. Nevertheless, these challenges (and contradictions) propel the SSAOs to plow forward with helping students be successful. After working in student affairs for several years, altruism and empathy seem second nature to the SSAOs. They
discussed their students as heartfelt, endearing, and, in many cases, struggling. The SSAOs were prepared for some of these challenges, yet others took them by surprise. The next section details how their past helped them be successful as student affairs leaders and which areas still pose difficulty.

**Preparation and Surprises**

SSAOs’ work is full of myriad responsibilities. The officers I interviewed led some, if not all, of the following units: enrollment, financial aid, admissions, registration, recruitment, diversity, retention, and branch campus management. Four of the officers were also the senior academic officers, a role with heavy oversight in instruction, curriculum, career and technical education, and assessment. This is a wide array of responsibilities, and many of the participants in this study were not trained in these areas. As mentioned in their testimony earlier in this chapter as well as the literature (Cooper et al., 2016; Fronczek, 2013; Schwarzbach, 2016), their graduate programs did not prepare them for managerial roles. Considering this absence of training and study, I wanted to learn if previous experience prepared them for their leadership roles as the SSAOs at their rural institutions. As a follow-up question, I asked about the areas where they lacked preparation. The responses varied with few participants citing similar answers. Only two preparatory items were cited by multiple interviewees. The senior officers acknowledged that familiarity with the institution served as an asset; previous careers in other fields helped the officers build and hone skills useful in their leadership posts within student affairs. While these responses illuminate how previous experiences can influence student affairs leaders’ time as senior officers, the lack of shared responses, in addition to the small number of interviewees, make this conclusion less than generalizable. Nonetheless, the qualities that multiple interviewees mentioned shed light on what can serve senior officers well in their leadership roles within student affairs.

Previous experience working in student affairs was, unsurprisingly, an asset to the SSAOs I interviewed. This earlier work allowed student affairs leaders the opportunity to learn from mentors,
gain knowledge on the interworking of student affairs, and collaborate with other offices throughout the colleges. By the time Brook landed her vice-president role, she felt that she had “an understanding of the institution as a whole.” She gained this understanding through serving as a registrar for several years before ascending to management positions in admissions and enrollment services. This prior work in student affairs units enabled Brook to “evaluate it [the work of her student affairs unit] from a different perspective of somebody coming in [from the outside].” In Brook’s eyes, her movement through the ranks of student affairs, with much of that experience at the same institution, made her a more effective leader. Jeff from Juniper College also acknowledged his previous experience in a student services director role as integral to his effectiveness as the senior student affairs officer at his current institution. “I was performing much of the same function,” he said. “So, I had to be flexible in that role, and that only prepared me for the flexibility that's required in this role.” Jeff cited his innate curiosity as an influence on his performance: “You have to have that curiosity and just be willing to try something new.” Charlotte has served in teaching and administrative positions at Catalpa Community College for decades. When she was hired as the Vice President, “I didn't feel I had a learning curve,” she confessed.” She indicated that during her hiring, the college president emphasized skills over concentration in a specific unit, such as student affairs over academic affairs. As she oversees both student and academic affairs, Charlotte asserts, “I'm not just academic. I'm whatever serves the student.” These officers’ testimonies on the virtues of internal hiring and promoting internal candidates are reinforced within the literature on hiring practices. In a study on internal promotion versus external hiring, Bidwell (2011) found better outcomes for organizations that promoted from within rather than hiring externally. While some colleges may seek a set of “fresh eyes” for certain roles, research points to internal candidates as the most effective option.
As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this study’s SSAOs revealed varying paths to their current position. While many began their careers in higher education, not all started in student affairs. Four of the interviewees started their careers in non-education fields like law enforcement, marketing and communications, and hospitality. Three of those four participants found these experiences outside of higher education helpful in their current roles as SSAOs. Delilah acknowledged the problem-solving and analytical skills she gained working in marketing and communications at a nonprofit organization as integral to her success as senior student affairs officer at Dogwood Community College. “Most of the jobs that I’ve had have presented me with a lot of opportunities to think on my feet, to understand a situation and be able to make a fairly quick decision based on the information I have in front of me.” This previous experience gave her the ability to “parse through a whole bunch of information in a really short period of time.” She explained how critical her active listening skills, developed in those previous roles outside of higher education, have proven essential in her current role. “My active listening skills. That’s absolutely critical because we’re so bombarded with inputs right now. I think active listening is going to be just a real challenge for people going forward.” Walt from Willow Community College’s first career was in hospitality, which he studied as an undergraduate. Walt claimed that this early experience in the hospitality industry helped him adopt a customer-service approach to helping people. This quality carried over to his work in higher education, first as a faculty member and then in student affairs. This customer service-first approach enabled Walt to be more empathetic to students’ struggles and explore new ways to help them. Henry from Hawthorn Community College served as a police officer before beginning his higher education profession. This experience made him privy to many of the struggles his community members faced. He saw firsthand how what happens inside the students’ homes often affects how they perform in the classroom. Based on the trauma that he saw many students experience, he wondered how they even made it to class some days. This previous work in law
enforcement as well as time as an adjunct instructor made Henry more empathetic and curious about how he can better help students succeed.

Other responses on what experiences prepared them for the senior officer role varied among individual interviewees. Leslie from Larch Community College cited her experience working under an effective Dean of Student Services as critical to her approach and success as a senior student affairs officer. “There were times that the dean would work directly with me on looking at policies, procedures, processes, and we were able to develop new strategies based on what our expectations and what our needs were at that time,” she reflected. This mentorship provided a holistic view of student affairs that she has been able to carry over to her own leadership tenure. Milo from Maple Community College, who worked in academic affairs prior to migrating to student affairs, mentioned the frequent collaboration between both college units as integral to his leadership skills in student affairs. This collaboration required stakeholders to contemplate how decisions could affect all aspects of the college, according to Milo.

One testimony refutes points raised in the literature and responses from other interviewees. Jeff from Juniper College cited his graduate education as integral to his current work in student affairs. He shared, “My master's program and really focusing on student affairs, I got a very wide glimpse of the entire student affairs umbrella. So that gave me a familiarity and a knowledge base to at least know what's going on when I stepped into the role.” While Jeff acknowledged previous experience working as a mid-level manager in student services as important, his mention of his graduate studies is unique in this study. His response counters much of the information found in the literature, which repeatedly mentioned that graduate programs fail to adequately prepare students for leadership roles, particularly managerial posts, within higher education (Cooper, et al., 2016; Fronczek, 2013; Schwarzbach, 2016).
Other senior officers started in the classroom. Testimony on the efficacy of previous teaching experience varied among the participants in this study. On one hand, as Ava from Ash Community College stated, instructional experience made them familiar with curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy. These skills allowed her to better understand the academic side of the college before joining student affairs. Her teaching experience, however, did not prepare her for the budgeting and finance duties that come with being an administrator. She learned more about how state appropriations work while serving as an administrator in student affairs. The literature reinforces the notion that a transition from faculty to administrator is often difficult (Deal, 2014; Mallinger, 2013; White, 2012). Relationships with faculty colleagues change for new administrators who now undertake a supervisory role. The move from faculty to administration requires the development of skills that may be unfamiliar or underutilized among faculty members. These skills include budget management, fundraising, marketing, community relations, strategic planning, and collegewide implementation of new technology (Griffith, 2006). An administrative role provides a more holistic view of the college, allowing former faculty members the opportunity to increase their knowledge and skills related to areas beyond pedagogy and their academic disciplines. It can enhance a former faculty member’s worldview of higher education and management. Palm (2006) noted that “Academic administration provides an opportunity to gain greater knowledge about the operation of the college or the university, which contributes to the sense of control one has over the environment: one is less likely to suspect conspiracies when viewing activity from the top of the hill than from the middle of a crowd” (p. 61).

Previous experience cannot prepare leaders for all aspects of their roles in student affairs. The senior academic affairs officers that I interviewed shared some of these elements. These experiences varied even greater than those that the officers felt prepared them for leadership posts in student affairs. The responses ranged from learning how to resolve conflicts to managing budgets to understanding and
crafting college policy to working on a deeper level with a wider variety of college stakeholders, many of whom hold different worldviews on higher education. The responses reflect the variety of duties of student affairs senior officers as well as the amount of on-the-job learning that takes place in these leadership roles.

One commonality among the responses to the question “What were you not prepared for [in your student affairs senior officer role]?” was the newfound responsibility of being an enforcer of policy, including student conduct. Brook from Birch Community College expressed anxiety over disciplining students and conducting Title IX investigations. Leslie from Larch Community College shared similar concerns when she stated that she went from being “an advocate” for students to being more objective when handling discipline matters or related instances of student misbehavior. “And so that was probably the most difficult thing for me to get used to…that part of being the enforcer…when that hasn't always been part of your background,” she noted. Other interviewees conveyed similar anxiety over personnel management responsibilities that they did not have in previous roles as faculty members or mid-level student affairs practitioners. Faith from Fir Community College expressed how personnel matters consume a tremendous amount of her time. “Much of my time is spent dealing with some type of a personnel matter, either with employees or students,” she shared. This work can involve discipline and conflict resolution, but it can also come in the form of effective management, including mentorship and encouraging subordinates to evolve and be their best selves. “Caring about people, resolving conflict, celebrating success, advocating for causes, providing professional development, dealing with student discipline issues, evaluating performance, listening, problem solving, helping others navigate their respective employee and/or student issues are ongoing,” Faith observed. Iris described this personnel management aspect of her job more colloquially. “I was not prepared for how much firefighting I would
do,” she said. Putting out these daily “fires,” or the perpetual troubleshooting, constitutes a significant portion of her work.

The scope of work in student affairs leadership caught Henry from Hawthorn Community College off guard. When he was exclusively a faculty member, he did not have to manage or be aware of “moving parts.” Now many more items are on his proverbial radar. Adding these items involved some learning on his part. As an instructor, he knew his discipline. However, he was not aware of how the wider college curriculum ties to student degree completion, nor did he realize the complexities of curricular requirements. “Getting into student affairs, I learned a whole lot about some of the technicalities of classes too,” he noted. “Like, whoa, you can't just have a student jump into biology if they haven't had this course and this course yet.”

For others, like Delilah from Dogwood Community College, student affairs leadership brought a greater number of different and previously unfamiliar ideas. The experience made her realize that people are complex, and their experiences inform their worldview, how they work, and the causes they advocate. She has had to “Take what you're hearing, which is likely colored by a lot of personal experiences and translate the circumstances into a very objective matter.” She cited examples of “pet projects” that may have been interesting to their advocate but would benefit few others or consume resources that could be better utilized elsewhere. This realization provoked Delilah to be more judicious with her decision making. “I have a finite set of resources that I have to make the best decision possible, or recommendation possible, given those finite sets of resources,” she shared. Thus, she learned that every idea is not worth pursuing, even if the intentions are noble.

The senior officers I interviewed expressed a multitude of views related to their previous experience. At times, their prior roles proved invaluable, allowing them to be better informed and more empathetic when they stepped into management roles. In other areas, they encountered new challenges
and foreign situations, forcing them to develop new skills, gain further knowledge, and see their institutions on a more holistic level. This blend of previous experience and on-the-job learning allowed them to better navigate the small ecosystems that are student affairs units. At their small rural colleges, these skills and realizations are just a few of the components that help student affairs leaders lead. In Chapter 5, I discuss the conclusions of the study, implications for policy and practice, and the call for further research on student affairs at these colleges that are vital to their communities and possess unique qualities that make them hold a special place in America’s higher education landscape.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this qualitative study, I examined how rural community colleges serve their students and how SSAOs perceive their work within student affairs at rural community colleges. I selected these research areas based on a variety of factors that have shaped rural America, community colleges, and student affairs. First, rural colleges are widely represented among American higher education, particularly within the country’s community colleges, or public two-year institutions that primarily grant associate degrees and certificates (Carnegie Classifications Update, 2018). Second, despite these institutions’ ubiquity, scholars, journalists, policymakers, philanthropists, and higher education thought leaders have devoted far less attention to rural community colleges than the money, resources, and attention paid to metropolitan community colleges and four-year institutions. Thus, a literature gap exists on rural community colleges at a time when they deserve more attention given the nation’s geographic and socioeconomic challenges and divisions. Third, student affairs, the unit responsible for the co-curricular, extracurricular, and several other non-instructional operations at most colleges and universities, plays a vital role in higher education and an increasing role at community colleges that enroll many first-generation students with unique characteristics, needs, and challenges. Literature is lacking on how student affairs functions and who leads these units at rural community colleges.

Rural colleges’ place in the higher education landscape reflects the complexities and inequities surrounding rural America. A mixture of cultural and socioeconomic factors has pushed rural America further from the urban centers of culture, finance, technology, and, most pertinent to this study, education. This distance, I believe, affects Americans’ views of rural places, and it is why I apply the theory of urbanormativity to this study. Urbanormativity, a term used among sociologists studying rural places, suggests that society favors urbanism, relegating rural places to secondary status. While urbanormativity served as the theory that motivated my study, my findings can be viewed through an
additional conceptual lens—rurality. As I mentioned in Chapter One, rurality is a concept that reflects
the general attitudes, beliefs, and norms that shape rural culture. Rurality is complicated and scholars
have not embraced a shared definition. Nevertheless, there are socio-cultural qualities that many rural
areas in the U.S. share. Rural places are intimate communities, and the connection between the local
community college and the community it serves is critical and different from the relationship between
metropolitan areas and their colleges. Nevertheless, the degree of rurality found within the participants’
responses varied. For some items, like transportation, Internet access, and perceptions around college,
rurality is applicable to the findings. Some aspects of these challenges are distinctly rural while other
elements could be found among metropolitan students. Thus, the degree of rurality in participants’
responses was sometimes difficult to discern.

When examined through the lens of urbanormativity and rurality, I hope readers can more clearly
see how rural community colleges fit into conversations on American higher education and the
justification for the additional support they need to achieve success. I employed two primary research
questions. First, how do rural community colleges serve their students? Second, how do SSAOs at rural
community colleges perceive their work? I added sub-questions to reinforce these two primary research
questions:

1. How do rural community colleges serve their students?
   a) How do the SSAOs at rural community colleges perceive the mission of their
      institutions?
   b) How do the SSAOs perceive that student affairs work helps their institutions fulfill their
      missions?
2. How do SSAOs at rural community colleges perceive their work?
a) How do senior student affairs professionals understand their leadership roles? That is, what is their understanding of what it takes to lead the student affairs effort at rural community colleges?

b) How do the SSAOs perceive that their experiences prior to assuming their current roles helped prepare them for leading student affairs work at rural community colleges? How do they perceive that their experiences did not prepare them?

To answer these questions, I interviewed 11 SSAOs from five Midwestern states. All 11 senior executives work at colleges that the Carnegie classification system designates as two-year public colleges located in rural areas (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). First, I located the two-year public colleges within the Carnegie Classification System’s 2018 dataset. Due to some discrepancies within Carnegie’s classifications, as I discussed in previous chapters, I then utilized data from the Federal Office Rural Health Policy’s (FORHP) county listings. The onset of COVID-19 made in-person interviews infeasible, so I reached out to additional officers within other Midwestern states beyond the original three (Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin) as I was no longer restricted by distance to meet face-to-face with the participants in the study. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, I made multiple attempts to contact SSAOs at 30 institutions throughout fall 2020 and early 2021. While awaiting confirmation from prospective interviewees, I decided to limit the number of interviewees so I could continue work on transcribing, coding, and writing my findings. I removed potential interviewees after three failed attempts to reach them via email and telephone.

I conducted the interviews over my Illinois State University-authorized Zoom account from September 2020 to February 2021. I utilized the transcription service Rev to transcribe the interviews. I then uploaded the interviews to Quirkos, a qualitative data analysis tool, which allowed me to perform open coding and organize codes into themes related to my interview and research questions. I used this
coded information to outline Chapter 4, so my writing follows a sequence of explicating findings related to my research questions and sub-questions as well as the interview questions that align with them. In Chapter 5, I synthesize the findings, discuss policy implications, and advocate for further research on student affairs at rural community colleges.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first section, using the data collected, I answer the study’s research questions. In the second section, I convey the major themes within the findings and the policy implications found within those themes. Finally, I discuss the study’s limitations and the need for further research on student affairs and rural community colleges.

**Answering the Research Questions**

My first primary research question is “How do rural community colleges serve their students?” Based on the findings within this study, rural community college leaders serve their students through a blend of germane supportive services and rural empathy. Working together, these elements create an experience that, while similar to metropolitan community colleges, is uniquely rural for both students and SSAOs. The students’ needs, the colleges’ operations, and how the colleges carry out their missions distinguish rural community colleges from their urban and suburban contemporaries. I will focus first on how rural community colleges administer supportive services to serve their students and the role rurality plays in how the colleges carry out these services.

**Supportive Services**

Throughout my interviews with SSAOs, they reiterated the holistic support they offer students. This support addresses the nonacademic elements of college life and illustrates how student affairs units help students navigate the unfamiliar and often intimidating terrain of higher education. While the support services that the SSAOs mentioned are not exclusive to rural colleges, the SSAOs and their
institutions carry out their services in a rural context. Rurality shapes how they plan and deliver their services. Rurality also determines students' needs and how the students receive the services.

Multiple SSAOs cited the extraordinary supportive services that their respective institutions offer. These supportive functions transcend the typical services found within most student affairs units. Milo from Maple Community College mentioned providing money for students so they could repair a flat tire and drive to campus. He also cited adding a position, partially funded by the local United Way, to address food insecurity throughout Maple’s rural student population. His staff members transport students to local charitable facilities so they can access resources to meet basic needs. Nearly every college representative in this study cited food insecurity as a pressing need for their student populations. The colleges have responded, although not to the degree they would like, with on-campus food banks and putting students in touch with community assistance. Nearly every interviewee acknowledged the difficulty in securing reliable high-speed Internet in their districts. This lack of dependable Wi-Fi has had a tremendous effect on student access, creating an equity issue the colleges have tried to address through services like access to Wi-Fi in college parking lots during COVID, particularly the early stages of the COVID pandemic in spring 2020, as well as laptop and hotspot distribution.

The senior officers I interviewed are managing student-life challenges that many community colleges encounter, but the rurality informing these challenges bears closer examination. Rural students often travel long distances to get to the physical college (Smith, 2016). They struggle with reliable Wi-Fi when the classroom moves to an online setting. The lack of dependable Wi-Fi is often indicative of poverty in urban areas, as metro populations report cost as the most inhibiting factor to Internet subscriptions (Horrigan, 2019). In rural areas, the absence of Wi-Fi concerns prohibitive geography in addition to poverty. For college students, items like transportation and the Internet qualify as basic needs in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Basic Needs (Maslow, 1943). The students need to access the campus or the
Internet to be enrolled, let alone engaged. Another need, however, emerged within the findings: students have increasing mental health needs. With fewer services, heightened toxic masculinity, and stigmas around mental health, Rural America is at a disadvantage in addressing mental health issues (Andrilla et al., 2018; McMahan, 2011; Rost et al., 1993). The colleges I profiled have increased their mental health services or connected students to local providers, but the interviewees’ sentiments indicated that these efforts are still inadequate. Community colleges are one of the few spots where many students can discuss their mental health and receive treatment in a safe environment. Supportive services also include extracurricular programming tailored to local culture and interests. Interviewees mentioned uniquely rural offerings like archery clubs, hunting clubs, and other outdoor sports student groups and competitive activities. The supportive services that the rural student affairs units offer are culturally relevant and rooted in the rural experience, which reflects why the SSAOs must possess a degree of rural empathy in how they approach student affairs work.

**Rural Empathy**

Higher education is a foreign experience to many beginning two-year college students. The language of community college missions is inclusive and welcoming, but the realities the students encounter upon enrollment can be daunting. They are often navigating an unfamiliar system full of alien terms and practices. “We have so many students that need that support. They don't have the support from home; their first-generation parents don't understand. We help them facilitate that process and get through that process,” said Ava from Ash Community College. Ava’s response reflects two of Karp’s (2011) support mechanisms—developing college know-how and making college life feasible. The SSAOs that I interviewed understand that higher education is unchartered territory for many of their students. Their answers emphasize the importance of rural empathy when serving students in a rural
setting, selecting strong candidates for student affairs leadership, and understanding the local community’s effect on the college and its students.

The SSAOs emphasized the community’s relevance to the college mission. The rural community, its qualities and characteristics as well as its challenges and vulnerabilities, influence how these leaders and their colleges serve rural students. Rurality permeated their responses to questions related to mission, community, and personnel. Thus, student affairs leaders, presidents, and faculty can benefit from rural empathy. Delilah stated that she sees candidates from rural areas, or those expressing rural empathy, as better positioned to succeed and gain student, institutional, and community trust.

I included two sub-questions to support my primary research questions. Supplementing the first research question, I followed with the sub-question, “How do the senior student affairs officers at rural community colleges perceive the mission of their institutions?” The SSAOs in my study interpret their colleges’ missions as community-focused creeds. They carry out this work with an emphasis on how their efforts benefit the student who, in turn, will benefit the community. The senior officers saw student affairs as a direct line to the community, offering examples that displayed the effect of their work on students’ well-being and their communities’ socioeconomic health.

David F. Ayers is a widely published scholar whose work focuses on unpacking community college mission statements. Ayers (2017) identified three primary functions for the community college mission statement. Per Ayers, the mission statement is first a “public relations” (p. 10) vehicle: it helps the college convey its purpose to the community and other stakeholders. Second, the mission statement possessed a “management strategy” (p. 10) function, serving as an organizational tool to create employee buy-in. In this function, Ayers asserts that community college mission statements are like corporate mission statements. Finally, Ayers acknowledged that mission statements have a “sense-making” (p. 10) function, interpreting the college’s role in a changing landscape. Ayers stated,
“community college leaders struggle not only to apprehend cultural, political, and economic trends but also to define the implications for local campuses. The mission statement, then, can be thought of as a textual manifestation of sensemaking” (pp. 13–14.). Reflective of its varied student body, community college mission statements have integrated more language on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Twenty years ago, Ayers (2002) found the term diversity appeared in most community college mission statements. In a separate article, Ayers (2005) found that community college mission statements have a neoliberal bent, serving to widen the social inequities that many colleges purport to remedy. Ayers claims this outcome runs counter to the democratic foundation, with its emphasis on equity and social justice, which many community college leaders profess. Ayers and other scholars like Levin (2001) claimed that capitalism has permeated community college mission statements, with community colleges stressing the economic utility of college credentials. Ayers (2010) found that urban community college mission statements tend to emphasize globalism within their mission statements, perhaps reflecting their more diverse makeup or as a reflection of their sizable enrollments. Ayers’s work on mission statements indicates that colleges, for better or worse, have evolved to fit workforce trends, societal movements, and collective values. I wanted to see how Ayers’s scholarship aligned with the responses of the SSAOs I interviewed.

The interviewees did not cite the capitalistic motivations that Ayers and Levin found within community college mission statements. Rather than detrimental to the college mission, students’ pursuit of greater economic mobility was seen as virtuous and a boon for the individual and the community. While Ayers may or may not agree with the participants’ take, every interviewee that answered questions about the institutional mission and student affairs’ role in the mission largely viewed the mission in positive terms. The SSAOs viewed the mission as a vessel to serve the community, which supports the college through taxes, partnerships, and services. Their answers did not indicate how larger
global forces shape the community colleges’ mission. Instead, their responses reflect a local emphasis on the surrounding community.

The findings indicate how essential rural community colleges are to the small communities they serve. Many community college mission statements emphasize some connection to the community. The institutions are called “community colleges” for obvious reasons. While many internal stakeholders at metropolitan colleges would cite the importance of the college to the community or district it serves, I would counter that the closure of a community college would have a far more devastating effect in a rural rather than urban or suburban area. In metropolitan locations, other organizations and entities serve the community. Cities house numerous nonprofit organizations devoted to individual and community health. While access issues may persist in urban areas, the services to address education and mental health exist on a scale dramatically larger than what students find in rural areas. Thus, the loss of these services in rural areas can be more deeply felt. Size and geography matter when examining the role community colleges and student affairs play in their communities. In the themes and policy implications section, I further explicate how rural community college stakeholders can draw greater attention to their institutions, so lawmakers, agencies, and other entities can direct more resources to them.

My second supplemental question, or sub-question, in support of research question one, concerned SSAOs’ perceptions of student affairs work’s effect on institutions fulfilling their missions. I asked the following question, “How do the senior student affairs officers perceive that student affairs work helps their institutions fulfill their missions?” According to the SSAOs I interviewed, the work of student affairs supports the mission of community colleges. The colleges’ student-focused approach to learning and the customer service-like approach within student affairs work helps the colleges carry out their broad mission of postsecondary education for all. Student affairs and community colleges have striven to expand access to higher education and make college more available to first-generation,
nontraditional, and academically challenged students. Rural community college student affairs units and their leaders help their institutions carry out the colleges’ missions through meeting student needs, serving as the initial point of contact for new students and, therefore, making college less intimidating. Placing student affairs work in a geographic context further illuminates how student affairs addresses many students’ place-based needs.

For rural SSAOs, their work within student affairs helps students meet life needs. The interviews reveal that most of the most pressing needs for students are personal needs, and rurality shapes many of these needs. Whether it is the lack of broadband, the inability to secure reliable childcare, transportation, and mental health services, the threat of food insecurity, or the challenges of first-generation status, many rural students encounter several obstacles outside the classroom. Nearly every student need the officers mentioned is rooted in socioeconomic disadvantage and rurality.

The SSAOs’ answers indicate that student affairs plays a vital role in helping colleges fulfill their mission, through providing holistic support for students, making college less intimidating and more tangible, and serving as the initial point of contact for students. Ava from Ash Community College’s response indicates that student affairs presents the other half of college learning. “When you look at people's mission statements, you often see that providing quality education,” Ava shared. “And it's the idea that, you teach in student affairs as well. Students learn from us, and we provide those wraparound services. We provide them skills that they need to be successful outside...of the classroom.”

Collectively, the colleges provide students accessibility and support, helping their institutions fulfill their open access, student-focused missions. With their desire to reach all students and erode barriers to higher education, community colleges have an inherently student-centered mission. They are the most democratic of America's postsecondary institutions. O’Banion (1997) elaborated on this egalitarian approach to education in his description of the learning college concept, which assigns six
key principles to learning-centered and student-focused colleges. Though Delilah’s mention of student affairs transforming lives sounds abstract initially, the effect of student services can be as impactful as the knowledge and critical thinking skills fostered in academic affairs. O’Banion (1997) declared that the learning college triggers a dramatic change in students, which sounds a lot like the transforming lives that occurs in student affairs.

Holistic support, however, still has its challenges. This became evident when I inquired about creating student life on campus at rural community colleges. Establishing student life at any community college is difficult. Without residence halls and students who can commit to staying on campus after class, community colleges are at an inherent disadvantage. The SSAOs testified to this point and provided some additional insights on how creating student life at a rural community college may even be more challenging. The interviewees shared students’ inhibitive situations, including the competing responsibilities of work and family, the taxing commutes to campus, the wide age range of students who may have different interests and values, as well as the difficulties the college has with offering comparable programs and services at branch campuses, where some students must attend due to the proximity to their home or workplace. These student life shortcomings can have an adverse effect on students, who lose out on the non-academic support and extracurricular activities many others will receive from their institution of higher education. The effect of student activities on community college student retention is mixed (Hawkins, 2015); however, other research indicates that the activities, roles, and relationships of first-generation college students can have a significant effect on student success (Demetriou et al., 2017). Student clubs and organizations are fertile ground for cultivating these relationships and providing peer-to-peer interaction that can foster increased engagement. Further research is needed on how student activities and campus engagement affect student success at rural community colleges.
My second primary research question focused on the executive leaders’ perception of their work. I included two supporting questions to complement this focus on SSAOs’ perceptions of their work. The supporting questions concerned the executive leaders’ understanding of their leadership roles in the context of rurality as well as how their previous experiences, working in student affairs or otherwise, helped prepare them for their current executive roles. I also wanted to ascertain where their experiences failed to prepare them, or which elements of the job presented newfound challenges. Their responses to these questions illustrated a clearer picture of how the SSAOs perceive their work, the qualities needed to be successful in their roles, their units’ relationship to their institutions’ academic operations, and the satisfaction and challenges they find in student affairs work at a rural community college. The findings indicate that most SSAOs arrived at their leadership positions via previous work in academic and student affairs. For most of the SSAOs, their career paths to the senior officer position followed a typical trajectory of working in student affairs as an administrator, moving from academic affairs or subsuming student affairs within an academic leadership position or serving as a faculty member. The findings also point to the lack of administrative or executive training within student affairs studies, other related graduate programs in higher education, or discipline-specific subjects. Most participants cited a lack of formal training in student affairs.

Taking these findings into account, the SSAOs perceive their work as community-focused, collaborative, and empathetic to the rural condition. They view the community as one of the most integral pieces of their work in student affairs and the larger college mission. As their colleges are small, they rely on networks of local stakeholders, including partners within academic affairs, to help deliver high quality and high-touch care to students. The SSAOs expressed a profound understanding of the obstacles that many rural students face and the qualities needed to lead in a rural environment.
The SSAOs also viewed their work largely in the context of one-on-one support. Brook from Birch Community College recalled the joy she experienced when underprepared, challenging students walked across the graduation stage because of her unit’s hands on approach to student support. Leslie from Larch Community College proudly cited how her advisors worked with the students intimately, fostering close connections through frequent appointments and answering any questions the students may have about higher education, an entity that is foreign to many of them before they enroll at the local community college. What was not mentioned was how these high touch, intimate efforts fit into an overarching strategy. There was little to no mention of data. There were no ties to larger campus efforts around graduation and retention. There was little mention of how student affairs fits into a larger institutional framework to produce better student outcomes. My observations are not intended to disparage the important and admirable work that these SSAOs and their subordinates perform. In many ways, their work reflects the connectivity found among the neighbors within their small rural communities. It is important to note, however, that student affairs work was rarely mentioned as part of a focused plan that tied to other elements of the college. The colleges are accredited, so I am certain these plans, and the assessment methods intended to measure their success, can be found within college resources. Student affairs, however, at least based on the findings within this study, operated largely outside of an overarching strategy for organized success. The SSAOs acknowledged cases of student success, but these accomplishments were conveyed in anecdotes about individual student achievement. According to the SSAOs, the work of their student affairs units contributed to the success of these students who overcame the odds. Rather than discuss the peer-reviewed research and innovative practices from Bailey et al. (2015) or how their work coincided with their colleges’ strategic plans, the SSAOs’ responses reflected their commitment to helping students through individual outreach and intervention. In some cases, the SSAOs shared how they provided resources to meet students’ basic
needs like food and transportation. The SSAOs’ testimony reflected a commitment to supporting students' immediate needs, such as financial and emotional support, rather than a devotion to comprehensive solutions meant to address systemic problems like low persistence and completion rates.

I employed two sub-research questions to further explicate how SSAOs perceive their work. First, I wanted to ascertain how SSAOs’ lead student affairs units at rural community colleges. Thus, I asked, “How do SSAOs understand their leadership roles and what it takes to lead student affairs at a rural community college?” Second, I wanted to know more about the steps they took to arrive at their current leadership positions. Therefore, I asked, “How do the senior student affairs officers perceive that their experiences prior to assuming their current roles helped prepare them for leading student affairs work at rural community colleges? How do they perceive that their experiences did not prepare them?”

The senior officers cited adaptability as the key attribute for success in student affairs. Adaptability is needed to manage perpetually shrinking budgets, groups of employees with different roles, responsibilities, and personalities, quick pivots to remote learning as well as managing the unpredictability that COVID has brought to higher education. Literature on student affairs leadership at community colleges reinforced this emphasis on adaptability. A large swath of literature focused on community college presidents. Pierce and Pederson (1997) found that the three most important personal traits among community college presidents were adaptability, role flexibility, and sound judgment. While I did not interview college presidents, the responses from the SSAOs in my study included these three traits. Additionally, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) leadership competencies, which presents 11 focus areas distributed among different levels of community college leaders, stress “adaptability” as the term appears throughout the competency related to multigenerational engagement, as community colleges serve such a wide spectrum of students with myriad backgrounds, needs, and perceptions (AACC Competencies, 2018). As community colleges face declining
enrollments, perpetual retention and completion challenges, shifting cultural norms, and other issues that spark generational divides between students, faculty, and staff, the adaptability cited by the SSAOs will be needed more than ever. At rural colleges, these issues could take on even more immediacy as many nonmetropolitan areas will face population declines, increased economic uncertainty, and heightened animosity toward metropolitan trends, further perpetuating the culture wars between generations, socioeconomic classes, and education levels.

Their backgrounds in higher education may be like those SSAOs at urban institutions, but their student affairs work takes place in a markedly rural context with geographically influenced qualities. Many student service providers serve poor first-generation students who struggle with college readiness. The rural senior officers, however, serve students with challenges ranging from lack of reliable Internet, lengthy commutes in areas of nonexistent public transportation, and rural attitudes that often discourage higher education or express skepticism over its value (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). The SSAOs acknowledged the challenges of working with first-generation students whose parents lack a basic understanding of higher education and cannot help them navigate foreign and intimidating terrain. Nevertheless, the SSAOs perceived their work as an antidote to many of these conditions as they held the view that their work can make college more attainable for first-generation rural students, quelling their anxiety at the onset of their postsecondary experience. Admissions specialists in student affairs are likely the first point of contact for many community college students.

Most of the SSAOs I interviewed started their careers in higher education; however, they did not always have a direct path to student affairs leadership nor a background that directly aligned with the functions of student affairs. For many, their journey began in graduate programs focused on higher education. For others, they entered the higher education workforce with a bachelor’s degree and then pursued a graduate program. A select few began in the private sector. Based on the findings, their
backgrounds were helpful in some respects, but most felt as though their graduate studies did not prepare them for major elements of their SSAO positions, namely in the areas of personnel and budget management. Some SSAOs began their higher education careers in the classroom. This experience proved fruitful in understanding the work of faculty, leading academic affairs in leadership positions where academic affairs is housed alongside student affairs, and cultivating productive relationships with faculty members to collaborate on shared goals and initiatives between academic and student affairs, mostly in the form of mutual advising responsibilities and keeping each other informed to prevent silos.

**Themes and Implications**

The theory of urbanormativity influences perceptions around rural life and rural America’s place in larger conversations around culture, economics, and education. Urbanormativity has also played a role in rural community colleges’ position in national dialogues around community colleges, as discussed in this study’s third chapter. Urbanormativity explains how rural community colleges arrived at their current moment and is why I decided to study them and student affairs: They are crowded out in the conversation around American community colleges and deserve further attention due to their omnipresence in their communities, their potential to improve rural life, and their ability to connect rural America to the larger world, increasing its influence and subverting its stigma. Urbanormativity, however, was not consistently evident in the SSAOs responses to how they carry out their work.

From the findings, I have distilled eight key themes. I have organized the themes into two categories: community themes and leadership and practice themes. Collectively, the themes shape the work of student affairs at a rural community college and color the experience of SSAOs working at these vital nonmetropolitan institutions. These themes reflect the idiosyncratic elements of rural life and rural postsecondary education. Holistically, the themes illustrate the challenges of student affairs work at rural community colleges but also the potential for evolution and growth. Each of these themes has
policy implications that can help rural community colleges and their SSAOs confront challenges, increase relevance, and serve more students in new and better ways.

Community Themes

This study’s results indicate that community is key to rural community colleges and the work of rural SSAOs. Rurality colors the work of the student affairs units and the SSAOs leading them. If community colleges need to emphasize the local environment, the findings convey that rural community colleges need to be hyper local. This hyper local focus is the first theme, community as key to rural student affairs and rural community colleges.

Community is Key

Community colleges are local institutions. At rural community colleges, the emphasis on community is even greater. Most SSAOs viewed their community as a key piece of the college mission. Ava from Ash Community College conveyed the community’s essentiality when she declared that her college has an “obligation” to serve its community and the college serves as “the backbone” of the community, providing academic credentials to a community lacking college degree recipients. Even though regional state universities and private colleges dot America’s higher education landscape, their funding streams are not as closely tied to the community. Community colleges, however, are funded by local property tax dollars in addition to state funding, tuition, and fees (Phelan, 2014). In sparsely populated rural areas, fewer property tax dollars are collected (Katsinas & Hardy, 2012). Additionally, rural communities have diminishing populations (Cromartie, 2017) and increasing hostility to higher education, with some animosity even directed at local community colleges (Pettit, 2021). These elements create a difficult environment for rural community colleges to thrive. That said, rural community colleges will need to rely on community stakeholder input to increase their relevance and goodwill within the community. What is a higher education institution to the community if many of the
community members do not want higher education? This is a question that rural community colleges need to answer. Student affairs can play a significant role in the response to these challenges. As the primary means of non-academic support at most institutions, student affairs has the opportunity to shine a spotlight on service to the community. This service takes many forms, including advising students so they do not divert from their study plans, addressing students’ food insecurity, partnering with local community-based organizations to increase their presence in community dialogues, and quelling skepticism among locals about the value of higher education. Rural student affairs units will need to apply a hyper local approach to service delivery. In the areas of admissions, this hyper local approach must include introducing the college to the community’s youth and their parents. With lower degree attainment among rural populations (Campbell, 2019), the colleges have an opportunity to enroll parents in adult education and credit coursework. Meanwhile, the colleges can offer continuing education, or non-credit, coursework to K12 students. While my participants mentioned the importance of dual credit and dual enrollment among local high school students, few cited the outreach to students in K8 age brackets. If rural community colleges wish to improve their perception and funding opportunities among local populations, they must engage with rural families early and often. Further investment in broadband infrastructure, desperately needed in parts of rural America, could create additional opportunities to deliver online coursework to working parents in rural communities.

**Geography Matters**

The findings in this study illustrate how rural community colleges and the work of their SSAOs were comparable to metropolitan institutions. It also highlights their differences, indicating how urbanormativity and rurality influence status, perception, and practice. Thus, geography matters when discussing community colleges and the work of SSAOs. Within this section, I convey the similarities
and differences between urban and rural institutions and how rural-focused policy and investment can help rural community colleges and the communities they serve blossom.

SSAOs cited several characteristics also found at urban and suburban institutions. Students at metropolitan and nonmetropolitan institutions have some similar traits. They often arrive underprepared for college-level work (Jaggars & Stacey, 2014). They have difficulty navigating higher education and college life, often because of their first-generation status or a lack of family members familiar with higher education’s norms and practices. Many community college students, regardless of their geographic location, struggle to balance academic demands with employment and family responsibilities. Community college students report higher levels of food insecurity and poverty than university students (Dembicki, 2019; Radwin et al., 2018). Nevertheless, when viewed through a geographic lens, the differences between rural and urban community college students can be striking.

Rural students will face transportation challenges less common among urban students. Many travel great distances to reach campus. Several SSAOs cited the challenges in delivering optimal resources and a comparable experience at satellite campuses, where the colleges attempt to reach students in the further corners of the districts. Rural institutions’ geographic locations limit their access to reliable Internet, a major obstacle to accessing higher education in the COVID era and connecting to the larger global economy. All but one SSAO acknowledged reliable Internet as an issue for their service area. I discuss the policy implications surrounding the lack of reliable Internet later in this chapter.

The depth of community relationships is greater among rural community colleges and the communities they serve. In most rural communities, community colleges are the sole means of affordable and accessible postsecondary education. This position in the community is especially crucial in rural areas with fewer college-educated persons. The lack of options puts the colleges in a greater
position to attract local students. Rural communities, however, have far fewer support options for their students. The SSAOs acknowledged this dearth of options and how it hinders their institutions and the students they serve. Rural America has fewer options for mental health services at a time when those services are in greater need. The colleges have attempted to fill that gap, but their limited resources and lack of qualified personnel make mental health services out of reach for some students. In addition, the stigma surrounding mental health in rural areas could inhibit students from seeking out the services, if they can even find them nearby. A combination of mental health stigma and lack of service providers creates a mental health service desert in rural America. With suicide rates in rural areas outpacing urban areas, the need for treatment options is more pressing than ever (Ivey-Stephenson et al., 2017).

Metropolitan community colleges are often larger in student enrollment and district population than rural colleges. This means more staff and the capacity to tackle more projects and distribute work more evenly. Many SSAOs cited their institutions’ size as advantageous and disadvantageous. Simply, rural community colleges have fewer internal actors. The lack of resources and key personnel found at larger institutions forces SSAOs to wear many hats, but it also enables them to develop close relationships and more easily locate support across the college. These smaller internal stakeholder circles could affect how SSAOs lead their units at rural institutions and communicate their vision. Further follow-up research is merited on the communication styles of student affairs leaders at rural community colleges. Additional research could illuminate strategies and approaches that might benefit leadership in student affairs in smaller rural institutions that must rely on a close cadre of stakeholders to complete the important work of student affairs.

**Demographic Challenges and Opportunities**

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are terms now woven into the philosophical and operational elements of many postsecondary institutions. Shaped by current events, enrollment trends,
and scholarship, colleges emphasize DEI at a much greater rate than previous decades. Much of this focus exists in the form of rhetoric and other abstractions rather than actual spending on DEI (Landis et al., 2019). At rural institutions, DEI takes on even greater challenges. Faith from Fir Community College described her college’s district as “predominantly a White community with really very few ethnic minorities...It’s traditionally a white rural older population.” That description is apt for nearly all the communities these rural community colleges serve. All subjects I interviewed were White and the bulk of their communities are White as well. Charlotte from Catalpa pointed out the aging population of her college’s service area and the challenges that it presents. “We are going to have a huge cliff drop in five years,” she lamented. “Twenty percent of our high school enrollment will be gone; they’ll have graduated out. Baby boomers will be gone.” These testimonies reflect rural community colleges, and more broadly, rural communities’ demographic challenges, which can be summed up in two words “aging” and “white.”

The lack of diversity among the interview subjects and the communities where they work informs some of the responses to my interview question “[Due to the college’s rural location] Has it been difficult to attract candidates to vacancies in your student affairs unit?” This challenge manifests in ways that limit the colleges’ ability to attract new and diverse talent, which, in turn, affects the communities’ growth economically and culturally. This lack of diversity impacts the communities in several ways. Fewer educated people move to communities if they do not see at least some of the cultural amenities found in metropolitan areas. These amenities include not only commerce, capital, and culture, but also people. If a community does not draw new people, it does not grow. This sentiment is always true in the literal sense: The community does not collect additional property taxes to help the community colleges evolve, and there will be fewer people to vote on measures that could benefit the college, like a bond referendum. This could also be true in ways more difficult to measure, like the lack
of new ideas, new institutions, and the ability to keep pace with broader economic, social, and cultural trends.

Colleges can only do so much to attract more diverse talent to the rural communities they serve. Some indicators show, however, that rural populations are diversifying. Census data indicate that America’s rural Hispanic population increased by one million people from 2010 to 2020 (as cited in George et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the rural Midwest, where this study’s institutions are located, is diversifying at a faster rate than other parts of the nation, per Census data analysis from McCormick and Overberg (2021). The number of persons identifying as multiracial is also increasing, now comprising the fourth largest non-White population across rural America. These changes could bode well for the colleges as new residents populate the areas and the next generation of non-White rural residents seeks affordable higher education at the local community college.

In many small towns, bucolic scenery and close-knit relationships often set against the backdrop of economic stagnation and cultural stasis. This dichotomy will make it hard for some communities to sell small-town life and the colleges will feel the effects. This necessary quality of rural empathy presents a challenge too: it can prohibit a diverse pool of candidates for leadership positions at rural community colleges. While the colleges need candidates that have a connection to rural communities, they are often left with homogenous, and sometimes underqualified, local candidates for positions within student affairs. In the policy themes and implications section of this chapter, I discuss how rural community colleges and student affairs leaders can promote diversity amidst the backdrop of rurality and the limiting factors in rural areas.

Small towns are often synonymous with population decline. Some demographic shifts, however, are occurring across pockets of rural America. Using Census data, Lichter and Johnson (2020) found that Hispanic population growth in hundreds of nonmetropolitan counties has slowed the overall
population decline and offset the losses from non-Hispanic population decline. As the COVID-19 pandemic has caused migration to rural areas (Whitaker, 2021), rural communities and rural community colleges may see an increase in the diversity of residents and job seekers. Over time, this shift could alter the demographics of rural community colleges, serving as a tremendous benefit to curricular and co-curricular programming and hiring practices and trends.

Geography matters when examining DEI in higher education. For many of the institutions, their colleges are not diverse because their communities are not diverse. The findings provoke an additional question that warrants further research, “Should rural community college staffing mirror the demographics of the community?” The answer to this question is more obvious in metropolitan areas with greater diversity. It will take a confluence of cultural and socioeconomic factors to increase diversity in the districts rural community colleges serve. However, hopefully it does not take another pandemic to bolster diversity in rural settings.

The colleges can only do so much to bolster diversity when it is not indicative of many of their communities. What they can do is prepare students for a changing world. This aspiration, however, presents another conundrum: if educated people leave rural communities, opportunities will leave with them. However, with changes taking place in many rural communities and the benefits of rural life becoming more apparent during the pandemic, rural communities and the community colleges they support have an opportunity to recruit new residents and eventually new students.

**The Crucial Secondary Education Pipeline**

When discussing key partnerships between their colleges and the communities they serve, the SSAOs noted their strong connections to area postsecondary institutions. Connecting with area high schools has become a key management function for many SSAOs as their colleges rely on these secondary students for current enrollment boosts as well as establishing a future pipeline to the colleges.
Early college programs, often in the form of dual credit and dual enrollment, have served as a steady enrollment stream amidst declines in overall headcount amongst more traditional-aged students, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ashford, 2020b; Smith, 2017). These high school partners are a vital source of community outreach, serving in an advisory capacity to the rural community colleges.

The increase in dual-credit enrollment has major policy implications for rural community colleges. First, the uptick in dual credit and dual enrollment can help offset larger enrollment declines. While this scenario can also play out at urban colleges, it will be even more critical for rural institutions as they are more likely to see their district populations decline as many rural areas’ populations trend downward (Cromartie, 2017; Swenson, 2019). Coupled with COVID-19’s devastating effect on overall community college enrollment (Anderson & Douglas-Gabriel, 2021), the erosion of rural populations, including the approaching mortality of the baby boom generation, puts rural community colleges in a precarious position. Thus, high school partnerships are of increasing importance and will likely dictate the future of rural community colleges, particularly in rural areas where population growth has declined, and birth and migration rates are not keeping pace with outward migration and mortality rates.

Partnerships can also create a more seamless path between secondary and postsecondary institutions. As the SSAOs indicated, their student affairs units are collaborating with local K12 systems at earlier stages in students’ lives with the hopes of establishing early connections that convert to future community college enrollment.

**First Generation: Rural Context**

SSAOs mentioned their colleges’ students’ unfamiliarity with higher education. Many rural students’ parents did not possess college degrees or even enroll in any higher education institution. While there has been an upswing in rural degree holders over the last 20 years, only 21% of rural
residents have a bachelor’s degree, according to the USDA. For urban residents, the figures are higher, with nearly 35% of the population possessing a bachelor’s degree (as cited in Ferrigan, 2021). While many urban community college students are also first generation, it is important to view first-generation status through a rural lens. Fewer college recruiters visit rural areas (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Carr and Kefalas (2009) found general apathy around higher education in rural Midwestern communities and local attitudes that may even discourage college or cause skepticism toward a college degree’s value. In many cases, higher education, its norms, rituals, and customs, are foreign to parents who do not hold college degrees. These concerns exist alongside the growing hostility among conservatives, the dominant political ideology in rural America, towards higher education (Sharp Partisan Views, 2017). These elements create a geographically influenced psychological barrier to attending college. While community perspectives on community colleges as compared to four-year institutions are not widely known, recent disputes among rural community colleges and ideologically driven trustees indicate that community colleges will need to combat derisive attitudes surrounding higher education (Pettit, 2021).

**Internet Equity**

Throughout my interviews with SSAOs, the executive leaders cited the pressing need for more reliable Internet in rural areas. While the issue has plagued rural communities for decades, the onset of COVID-19 exacerbated the situation, making it more difficult for students to access the now essential delivery mode for education. Cut off from learning management systems and video conferencing platforms like Google Meet and Zoom, the SSAOs witnessed students struggle during remote learning. While the colleges attempted to fill the gap through parking lot Internet zones, portable Wi-Fi hotspots, and loaner laptops, the colleges alone cannot make up for years of disinvestment technology for rural America. The private technology sector has largely skipped over rural America, opting for the connectivity and cultural advantages of metropolitan locations. Public funding for increasing rural
Internet reliability is only beginning to emerge on a mass scale (Block, 2021). Urban poverty can create major gaps in Internet access and place many low-income residents at a major disadvantage for educational and employment opportunities (Horrigan, 2019; Lieberman, 2020). However, the volume of government and philanthropic resources within urban areas places those in need of reliable Wi-Fi at an advantage over rural residents, particularly the rural poor. The rural Internet disadvantage is geographic whereas urban disadvantages are more informed by poverty, inequality, and other socioeconomic and cultural factors.

Internet access has become a tool necessary for survival in the twenty-first century. Next to basic needs like food, clean water, and shelter, it is essential to be successful and connected to the larger world. Lieberman (2020) labeled it a civil rights issue, and policymakers would be wise to take heed of this classification. Recent federal legislation has moved the needle on this issue, infusing needed public investment in expanding rural broadband services (Block, 2021). Community colleges, as the primary affordable and accessible postsecondary institutions in rural areas, could play a major role in the implementation of enhanced Internet in their districts. The ability to offer short-term courses and certificates would enable the colleges to capitalize on the expansion of rural broadband. This increased connectivity would help students, potentially increase community college enrollment and attract more private investment in rural areas as the barrier of unreliable and geographically limited Internet will have been lifted.

**Leadership Themes**

Two primary themes surrounding the leadership of student affairs at rural community colleges emerged within this study. First, the findings indicate that SSAOs need to be flexible and have rural origins or an understanding of rural students. These two qualities were the most frequently mentioned attributes surrounding being a successful student affairs leader at a rural community college.
**Flexibility**

The need to be flexible when leading student affairs at a rural community college is rooted in the sizable number of duties that fall within SSAOs’ purview. Many of these leaders work at colleges with fewer students, staff members, and community resources than larger metropolitan institutions. The adage of “wearing many hats” is applicable to rural SSAOs. The interviewees described instances where they filled in for advisors and front-line staff, when they drove students to pick up food, or when they loaned students gas money so they could make a long drive to campus. While the leaders may be generous with their time, the limited resources and staff at rural community colleges necessitates a flexibility that is geographically influenced and a result of the urbanormativity that colors much of the conversation around higher education, culture, politics, and, as evident in this study, even community colleges.

Legislators and higher education thought leaders need to witness how much these SSAOs do for their colleges and communities. More awareness around the essentiality of student affairs’ role in carrying out the open-access community college mission is vital to channeling more support to these units. Lawmakers and funding organizations need a deeper understanding of how a community college education is more than just an academic endeavor: It is a multi-faceted process that requires more resources and reversal of the downward trend in state funding of higher education for community colleges, particularly in rural areas where property tax gains are less lucrative and tuition dollars constitute an increasingly large portion of revenue.

In the interviews with rural Midwestern SSAOs, I learned that little formal training is given for the role. Many cited the lack of preparation among graduate school programs, mostly in higher education studies, and a need to learn much of the job while on the job. They felt unprepared for the financial and staffing responsibilities now within their scope of duties. Some never worked in student
affairs prior to earning the role as the senior officer. While it can be difficult for rural institutions to be selective in hiring, further preparation within graduate programs could help deliver candidates better prepared for the complexities SSAOs encounter. In his study on community college deans and academic teams, Fronczek (2013) uncovered how academic deans lead amidst a lack of formal training. This work could benefit student affairs leaders who also suffer from a lack of formal training and the need to occupy several different roles within student affairs.

**Rural Understanding**

Interviewees stressed the importance of understanding how rurality contributes to their colleges’ character, offerings, and student population. While it may not be necessary for SSAOs to be lifelong residents of the rural district or even hail from a rural area, an understanding of rurality and local color are likely to help SSAOs acclimate and understand a rural community college. Colleges would be wise to include interview questions on local color, as well as rural economies, rural challenges, and rural opportunities when selecting new leaders for their institutions.

In the case of how student affairs leaders approach their work, urbanormativity and rurality inform many of the circumstances surrounding rural community colleges and rural populations. Rurality’s effect on how SSAOs perform their work, however, was more difficult to identify in the findings. There was little indication from the SSAOs they went about their work differently because they worked at rural colleges. During my first few interviews, I asked the SSAOs, “How does student affairs work at rural community colleges like yours differ from student affairs work at urban or suburban institutions?” A few interviewees seemed puzzled by the question. Iris from Incense Community College replied, “I think that's hard for me to say, because I've never worked at an urban community college.” I quickly pivoted to another question and eliminated the question on the perceived differences between urban and rural student affairs from my interview question bank. While this reply could be
indicative of Iris’s lack of knowledge of student affairs practices at metropolitan institutions, she was more than likely commenting on the types of colleges she knows—rural institutions like Incense Community College. Like most of the other interviewees, Iris has spent her entire career in the rural community college world. She carried out her work with little conscious recognition of how the rural environment shaped her leadership of student affairs. Iris and other SSAOs I interviewed were keenly aware of the attitudes, beliefs, and practices within the rural communities that support their colleges. They recognized the challenges and rewards in their work at rural community colleges and how student affairs supports institutional missions. While their answers to the interview questions revealed the participants’ perceptions of their communities and how their units worked with community stakeholders, their perceptions of the qualities it took to lead a rural community college were not distinctly rural. The participants did not indicate that they, at least consciously, performed their work differently because of rurality. In hindsight, I would have asked the participants to comment on findings and observations from rural community college scholarship, including literature on leadership at rural community colleges (Cejda, 2012; Eddy, 2007b; Kools, 2010). The participants’ response to the ideas found directly within the literature could have produced further insights on how student affairs leaders perceive their own work in a geographic context and compare their experiences to the findings within the literature on rural community college leadership.

**Limitations**

As this is a qualitative interview study, I do not proclaim generalizability within the findings. The SSAOs are from a swath of Midwestern community colleges, but their insights may differ from the perspectives of other SSAOs at rural community colleges throughout other portions of the Midwest or other rural areas with different socioeconomic and cultural conditions across the United States. The small number of interviewees is an unfortunate limitation, as the COVID-19 pandemic and low response
rate from applicable SSAOs likely hindered the ability to increase participation and the level of engagement that I could experience if I were able to visit the SSAOs' physical campuses. This limitation affected the number of artifacts that I could collect as well as the amount of reflection I could provide on the look and feel of these campuses, offices, and communities.

**Further Research**

Further research is needed on rural community colleges, their student affairs units, and the students they serve. Relative to the growing body of literature on community colleges and the national attention on the work of metropolitan institutions, little is known about rural community colleges despite their prevalent place in the American higher education ecosystem. As the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened awareness of inequities within education, I am hopeful that researchers will pay more heed to how these inequities play out along geographic lines. I am optimistic that more research can help close equity gaps in rural funding and lead to greater partnerships between rural community colleges and educational philanthropic organizations and research entities.

More quantitative data is needed on rural community college SSAOs. No dataset includes cumulative information on the number of SSAOs working within rural community colleges, their years of experience, the size of their units, and the geographic considerations that affect their work, including the communities they serve. The latter data point is the easiest to determine based on Carnegie classification data as well as classifications derived from the Federal Office Rural Health Policy’s (FORHP) county listings. Although these exhaustive processes were not feasible for the scope of this study, they merit further consideration. The lack of these data made it difficult to obtain a comprehensive snapshot of SSAOs working across rural community colleges.

Graduate programs and professional development opportunities could also play a significant role in shaping future student affairs leaders at rural community colleges. As higher education emphasizes
issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in leadership (Barnett, 2020), few examples highlight how geography shapes the identity of college leaders. Many students enrolled in higher education graduate programs will eventually earn leadership positions at colleges and universities. They will likely receive a substantial amount of literature on racial, ethnic, and gender identity as it relates to nearly all facets of stakeholders within higher education. I assume they will receive fewer insights on identity politics as they relate to geography. As geography shapes future leaders and informs the work of community colleges, graduate programs could benefit future scholars through greater emphasis on place-based identity, in addition to the other forms of identity politics. Ching and Creed (1996) acknowledged that many scholars fail to see rural and urban as important to identity politics. If graduate programs and scholars added geographic identity as another important strand of the conversation on identity politics in higher education and leadership, future rural community college leaders, particularly those in student affairs who will manage cocurricular functions at their institutions, could lead their units more effectively and with a greater understanding of leadership in a rural setting.

While studies have focused on rural community college students, much of the scholarship is centered on their lives as students while enrolled in two-year institutions. Little is known about what these students do when they graduate. This data is often collected via piecemeal surveys distributed by the colleges or, I can assume, word-of-mouth channels ubiquitous in many small towns and rural areas. The literature needs evidence of outcomes beyond graduation and retention of rural community college students. It needs data on the effect they have on their communities, where they go, what type of careers they enter after completing their degrees, and what factors prevent them from enrolling and succeeding in a rural setting. This research could help portray a more holistic picture of rural students, their institutions’ effect on them, and the colleges’ benefit to the local economy and culture.
Conclusion

Throughout this study, I encountered many stories written on American education in rural areas (Altschuler & Schechter, 2018; Belkin, 2017; Krupnick, 2018; Marcus & Krupnick, 2017; Pappano, 2017). Most of these articles were found in mainstream media publications like The Atlantic, The Hill, National Public Radio, The New York Times, and The Wall Street Journal. The articles shared a common thread that may not have been evident to many readers: the writers skipped over community colleges. Every piece invoked the notion of “going off to college,” meaning leaving the small town for a distant university. The articles, whether intentional or otherwise, implied that for the profiled students to succeed, they needed to, at the very least, leave their communities for metropolitan settings and university towns that do not resemble their home communities. Some of this advice may be valid. These students could benefit from seeing more of the world and experiencing the cultural variety and economic opportunity found in urban areas. I could not help but wonder how this exodus will continue to affect rural communities. Even Carr and Kefalas’s (2009) book, Hollowing Out the Middle, which served as one source of inspiration for this study, mostly frames rural higher education as a choice between leaving the community and thriving or staying and languishing.

Community colleges present an alternative to this dichotomy. With the work of student affairs, a unit that is even more essential for students who struggle with the cultural, academic, and economic aspects of higher education, rural community colleges can be transformational institutions. For many students, they already have been immensely impactful. With further study, national attention, and investment, rural SSAOs can affect change, turning a counterproductive narrative on rural communities and community colleges into a national success story.
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### Table A1

**Research Question 1, Sub-question 1a, and Accompanying Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Research Question</th>
<th>Research Sub-question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do rural community colleges serve their students?</td>
<td>How do the senior student affairs officers at rural community colleges perceive the mission of their institutions?</td>
<td>How would you characterize the college’s relationship with its community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How does your local community, including its qualities and its needs, inform your student services offerings? How do they communicate it to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How would you characterize or describe the community the college serves?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Does the rural location/small community work to the college’s advantage? If so, how?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Due to the college’s rural location] Has it been difficult to attract candidates to vacancies in your student affairs unit?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Research Question</td>
<td>Research Sub-question</td>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do rural community colleges serve their students?</td>
<td>How do the senior student affairs officers perceive that student affairs work helps their institutions fulfill their missions?</td>
<td>How does the work of student affairs help the college fulfill its mission?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It can often be difficult to create student life at the two-year commuter colleges. How does your Student Affairs unit help foster student life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What are the greatest needs for your students and rural community college students in general? They could be personal or academic needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What challenges has the COVID pandemic presented to student affairs at your college, and how would you say the college has responded?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table A3

*Research Question 2, Sub-question 2a, and Accompanying Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Research Question</th>
<th>Research Sub-question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do senior student affairs officers at rural community colleges perceive their work?</td>
<td>How do senior student affairs professionals understand their leadership roles? That is, what is their understanding of what it takes to lead the student affairs effort at rural community colleges?</td>
<td>Tell me about the journey that led you to your present position in student affairs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What [qualities] does it take to lead the student affairs effort at a rural college?</td>
<td>Can you describe the relationship between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs at your institution, and how closely do you collaborate?</td>
<td>What’s the most rewarding element of working at a RCC? What are the greatest challenges?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table A4

*Research Question 2, Sub-question 2b, and Accompanying Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Research Question</th>
<th>Research Sub-question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do senior student affairs officers at rural community colleges perceive their work?</td>
<td>How do the senior student affairs officers perceive that their experiences prior to assuming their current roles helped prepare them for leading student affairs work at rural community colleges? How do they perceive that their experiences did not prepare them?</td>
<td>Tell me about the journey that led you to your present position in student affairs? Thinking back on your experiences prior to assuming your current position, how did those experiences prepare you for your current role as senior student affairs officer at this institution? What were you not prepared for?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Table B1

Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Years as SSAO</th>
<th>Unit Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Ash</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brook</td>
<td>Birch</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Catalpa</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delilah</td>
<td>Dogwood</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Fir</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>Incense</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>&lt; 1</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>Juniper</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>Larch</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milo</td>
<td>Maple</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walt</td>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Gabe Estill, a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations (EAF) at Illinois State University, with Dr. Phyllis McCluskey-Titus, Professor within the EAF Department serving as Principal Investigator.

As community colleges are mandated by states to serve specific geographical regions, these institutions are intrinsically linked to their local communities. Consequently, the work of each community college must be understood in the context of the community it serves. The study will look at student services and student services leadership through the lens of the local setting—in this case, rurality. The purpose of this study is to better understand how rural community colleges serve their students and how senior student affairs officers at rural community colleges perceive their work.

**Why are you being asked?**
You have been asked to participate because you are recognized, by title or institutional hierarchy, as the senior student affairs leader at your institution. The study is seeking the perspective of senior student affairs officers at rural community colleges throughout Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, and Wisconsin.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

**What would you do?**
If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked a series of interview questions about your experience leading your student affairs unit at a rural community college as well as understanding student affairs work in a rural community college setting. The interview questions will be derived from the study’s two primary research questions:

1. How do rural community colleges serve their students?
   a. How do the senior student affairs officers at rural community colleges perceive the mission of their institutions?
   b. How do the senior student affairs officers perceive that student affairs work helps their institutions fulfill their missions?

2. How do senior student affairs officers at rural community colleges perceive their work?
   a. How do senior student affairs professionals understand their leadership roles? That is, what is their understanding of what it takes to lead the student affairs effort at rural community colleges?
   b. How do the senior student affairs officers perceive that their experiences prior to assuming their current roles helped prepare them for leading student affairs work at rural community colleges? How do they perceive that their experiences did not prepare them?
In total, your involvement in this study will last approximately two interview sessions, scheduled for roughly 60-90 minutes each. These interview sessions will take place over the course of two calendar months. Given the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, the interviews will take place via a video conferencing service. The researcher will schedule all sessions based on your availability.

**Are any risks expected?**
We do not anticipate any risks beyond those that would occur in everyday life.

**Will your information be protected?**
We will use all reasonable efforts to keep any provided personal information confidential. When the researcher is reporting interview responses, you will not be identified by your real name and your institution will be given a pseudonym. The data collected in this study will be secured on a university-approved cloud storage service as well as an encrypted USB drive that belongs exclusively to the lead researcher. Information that may identify you or potentially lead to reidentification will not be released to individuals that are not on the research team. The research will be disseminated within the dissertation text and related notes that will be in the sole possession of the researcher. However, when required by law or university policy, identifying information (including your signed consent form) may be seen or copied by authorized individuals.

**Could your responses be used for other research?**
Your information will not be used or distributed for future use, even if identifiers are removed.

**Who will benefit from this study?**
While you may not directly benefit from this study, your responses will help inform best research practices related to student affairs within rural community colleges. The study may be able to provide insights that senior student officers recognize in their own work or can incorporate into decision-making at their own institutions. The study may also benefit a variety of rural community college stakeholders, including advisors, administrators, and elected boards, as they can improve daily operations and organization to better fit student affairs units’ contributions to institutional mission as well direct better resources to student affairs units.

**Whom do you contact if you have any questions?**
If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, contact researcher Gabe Estill at gestill@ilstu.edu or (773) 972-1915, or Principal Investigator Dr. Phyllis McCluskey-Titus at pamcclu2@ilstu.edu or (309) 438-8683.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics & Compliance Office at (309) 438-5527 or IRB@ilstu.edu.

**Documentation of Consent**
Sign below if you are 18 or older and willing to participate in this study.

Signature __________________________________ Date ______________________
Your signature below indicates that you agree to be recorded.

Signature ___________________________  Date ______________________

You can print this form for your records.
APPENDIX D: EMAIL INVITATION TEMPLATE

Gabe Estill
5345 W Wilson Ave.
Chicago, IL 60630
gestill@ilstu.edu
(773) 972-1915

August 14, 2020

Greetings, ____________________.

My name is Gabe Estill, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations at Illinois State University. My dissertation research focuses on student affairs at rural community colleges. To collect data for the study, I am interviewing senior student affairs leaders at rural community colleges throughout Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and would like to request your participation in the study.

You have been asked to participate because you are recognized, by title or institutional hierarchy, as the senior student affairs leader at your institution.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked a series of interview questions about your experience leading your student affairs unit at a rural community college as well as understanding student affairs work in a rural community college setting. While it would be ideal to conduct the interviews in person, the COVID-19 pandemic will make that difficult. Therefore, I am conducting the interviews via Zoom, a video conferencing service that has been approved by Illinois State University.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

Please note that you will be contacted for a follow up interview based on your responses from the study’s first interview. Both sets of interviews will last approximately 60 minutes.

I have attached a consent form that includes further information on the study and other important details. After you have reviewed the form, and if you agree to participate, I kindly ask that you sign and date the form and email it back to me at gestill@ilstu.edu. Once you return the form indicating that you agree to the interview, I will send a follow up email to schedule the interview at a mutually agreeable time.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (773) 972-1915 or gestill@ilstu.edu.
Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

\[\text{Signature}\]

Gabe Estill
Rev Information Security & Privacy Program Overview

The following document provides an overview of Rev’s Information Security & Privacy program. We advise reviewing this document in its entirety.

Rev.com’s advanced platform is a multi-tenant, multi-user, on-demand service providing unbeatable quality, speed, and value to clients and freelancers alike.

Rev.com may be securely accessed 24x7 through any internet-connected computer with a standard browser, an application program interface (API), or mobile applications.

Objectives

Security is a critical part of our business. With our security & privacy program, we strive to achieve the following goals:

1. Ensure that customer data is encrypted and inaccessible to other customers and the public.
2. Ensure that customer data is accessible to staff only to the extent necessary to perform the required work.
3. Prevent loss or corruption of customer data.
4. Maintain a redundant infrastructure with 99.9% uptime.
5. Provide timely notification in the unlikely event of downtime, data corruption or loss.
6. Provide continuous training for our staff on proper operation of our systems and best practices for security and privacy.

Our security policies and procedures are reviewed on an ongoing basis by the Rev security team, which is also responsible for their enforcement. All our staff have signed confidentiality agreements.
Information Security

Rev.com uses appropriate technical, organizational and administrative measures to protect any information in its records from loss, misuse, unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration and destruction. Rev.com uses National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) guidelines as a foundation for its security program including information security policies and incident response.

Privacy

Please see the Rev Privacy Policy (https://www.rev.com/about/privacy) for details on how Rev.com treats personal information and complies with privacy regulations.

Personally Identifiable Information

Rev follows best practices handling Personally Identifiable Information (PII) with guidance from the published General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Rev never stores credit card information. Rev maintains a PCI certification for payment processing. Rev works with PayPal to ensure that all payments are secure and encrypted.

Employees

Employees are restricted to handling data required to perform their job. Our staff is trained on proper use of our systems and best practices for security & privacy. All employees have completed background checks and have signed confidentiality agreements.

Transcriptionists & Captioners

Revvers (our transcriptionists, captioners, etc.) are vetted through a rigorous screening process and receive training. All Revvers have signed NDAs and strict confidentiality agreements.

While actively working on a file, Revvers are required to use our secure and proprietary tools, only accessible through a web-based portal.

Revvers cannot download audio, video or transcript files as a general rule (configuration can be modified regarding audio/video download if the customer requests it). They are required to have a valid username and password.

Technical controls exist to block Revvers from accessing Rev.com while using VPN technology. If their account is deactivated, they are locked out of all platform customer resources including forums. All Revver account modifications and customer data access are logged.

Third Party Marketers

We do not share or sell information we collect to third party marketers.

Secure Infrastructure

All Rev.com services are hosted by Amazon Web Services (AWS). AWS maintains strict physical access policies that utilize sophisticated access control mechanisms.

Environmental controls such as uninterruptible power and non-destructive fire suppression are integrated elements of all data centers.
Secure Infrastructure (cont.)

Rev.com’s infrastructure spans multiple AWS availability zones for high availability and utilizes Amazon S3 for storage of data. AWS provides Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) services.

Storage & Transmission

All customer files are encrypted both at rest and in transit. Communications between you and Rev servers are encrypted via industry best-practice protocols TLS 1.2 and AES-256. TLS is also supported for encryption of emails.

Backup & Recovery

Rev backs up data constantly to prevent any loss or corruption. All Rev & customer data is hosted at Tier IV or III, SSAE-16, PCI DSS, or ISO 27001 compliant facilities in the United States.

Data Control & Deletion

Customers can purge video, audio, and/or document data from Rev systems at any point via the User Interface (UI) and can set up automated deletion policies via a support ticket.

Software Development Lifecycle

As a cloud service company, Rev.com releases software frequently so that clients may benefit from on-going development of new service and security capabilities. Rev.com follows a defined Software Development Lifecycle (SDLC) that includes the application of security-by-design principles. Rev operates using an agile development methodology under which software development teams and management are tasked with ensuring that the SDLC process and design principles are followed.

Secure Service Operations

Access to production infrastructure is managed in keeping with Role Based Access Controls (RBAC) and "Least Privilege". Access is limited to the Rev.com operations team. Sensitive product service data stored in service databases never leaves the production system.

Firewall rules are maintained so that production systems can only be accessed for maintenance from defined Rev.com locations using secured access mechanisms. Systems are maintained in a hardened state with defined baselines for all host and network equipment. All changes to systems are tracked and managed according to well-established change management policies and procedures. The patch level of third-party software on systems is regularly updated to eliminate potential vulnerabilities.

Availability & Access

We maintain a redundant infrastructure with 99.99% uptime. All customer data is accessible to staff only to the extent necessary to perform the required work. And just like our customer support, our Security Team is on call 24/7 to respond to security alerts and events.

Breach Detection and Response

Rev.com utilizes network Intrusion Detection Systems (IDS) and network integrity management tools to continuously monitor the state of the system. Availability is continuously monitored using external monitoring tools. Application and infrastructure logs are aggregated and archived centrally, facilitating both analysis for suspicious access patterns and future forensic analysis. Regular external vulnerability scanning is also performed.

In the event of a breach, Rev.com has the ability to isolate components of the system for containment and maintain ongoing operations. Rev.com’s Incident response team is at the ready to notify customers of security impacting events according to contractual agreements.