UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Beyond Social Mobility: A Student-Centered Analysis of the Aspirations of Rural Latinx Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

by

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The Dissertation of Mariko Yoshisato Cavey is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Beyond Social Mobility: A Student-Centered Analysis of the Aspirations of Rural Latinx Students

by

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Aspirations predict students' trajectories, and knowledge of how youth develop and achieve goals is crucial to supporting success. However, rural students may encounter constraining conditions that can curtail their aspirations, and students of color often face institutional barriers that impact their postsecondary pathways. Guided by theories focused on ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and ethical frameworks for studying aspirations (Zipin et al., 2015), as well as novel methods centered on transformation, this study foregrounds students' identities in understanding their future orientations.

Through empowering qualitative case study methods, data were collected over one school year via 50 in-depth interviews with five high school seniors who self-identified as Mexican, low-income, and first-generation college-going students. All participants completed a college preparatory program at a large comprehensive public high school, located in a remote, agricultural, border community in Southern California. This study utilized a motivational interviewing approach, which cultivated dialogue spaces for students to make sense of how salient experiences in their lives affected their future orientations. In analyzing the data, explanation building was used for within-case analysis of interviews conducted with each student, and cross-case analysis explored patterns spanning individual perspectives.

Findings reveal how youths' aspirational beliefs and choices were mediated by academic and personal experiences in their school and community, which included mental health, relationships, college preparatory activities, and growth opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although their college pathways deviated from those encouraged by adults, as only one of the five students chose to attend a four-year university immediately after high school, students remained committed to their visions for holistic, multidimensional futures. In constructing academic, personal, and social scaffolds to support their success, students made intentional choices about their journeys towards crafting their future lives. Findings also show how student-centered interviews fostered reflective and imaginative spaces for participants to explore possible life pathways. This study expands existing theory on aspirations and has important implications for scholars and practitioners striving to support students' postsecondary trajectories.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A Critical Moment for Rural Education

The stakes are high for rural education in the United States, as remote regions rapidly undergo economic, demographic, and cultural transformations rendering them fundamentally different from rural places of the past (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). Called to adapt to technological advances, migration patterns, and environmental crises that threaten reverberating impacts across the country, the nation's future is increasingly dependent upon the aspirations and trajectories of rural youth (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). Yet, despite comprising a sizable population in U.S. schools, rural students remain largely unrecognized in the literature, because education policy decisions are often dominated by more highly visible issues centralized in urban contexts (Johnson et al., 2014). Depending on the parameters used, the number of rural students in the U.S. may exceed ten million, spanning over half of all school districts (Arnold et al., 2005; Irvin et al., 2011). Further, nearly 40% of rural students are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals, which is a standard indicator of a family's low socioeconomic status (Beasley, 2011). Given the substantial number of rural youths concentrated in some of the most chronically impoverished regions of the country, it is crucial to understand and address the needs of rural students who persistently face barriers to achieving positive outcomes (Schmidt et al., 2016).

In the current sociopolitical climate, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and findings of prior research on students' future orientations are now challenged, as worldly conditions may chronically damper a generation's hopes for "good" life trajectories (Zipin et al., 2015). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced novel conditions of upheaval and presented an opportunity to rethink postsecondary possibilities. Perhaps even more so now, it is essential to

deeply understand and support students' own perspectives about their futures. Thus, this study imagines a novel approach to researching aspirations at a time when the future can feel intensely precarious -- particularly for disenfranchised rural youth of color (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). These students are navigating increasingly contested spaces, where timeless educational inequity issues are exacerbated by newly significant challenges today. This critical moment demands reconceptualizing traditional notions of youths' aspirations to center geographically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse communities. In this chapter, I present a brief overview of literature guiding this dissertation, and an outline of the research I conducted with high school youth in a remote, agricultural, border town in Southern California.

Overview of Literature: Rural Students' Aspirations and Outcomes

Considering that rural schools carry a fundamental responsibility to prepare youth for postsecondary pathways, their marginalization has profound implications for rural students and communities, and even threatens the potential to secure a sustainable future for the United States (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). A previous comprehensive analysis of the literature found, "the condition of rural education research is poor" (Arnold et al., 2005, p. 16). Identifying common topics appearing in 222 articles published over 12 years of rural scholarship, studies on aspirations ranked fourth in frequency, following special education, instruction, and school safety and discipline (Arnold et al., 2005). Given this insufficient body of work, further research on students' aspirations in rural contexts is needed (Arnold et al., 2005).

A focus on rural high schools is especially crucial, considering their central role in helping students transition to adulthood (Demi et al., 2010; Irvin et al., 2016; Meece et al., 2013). Despite being well-positioned to facilitate students' trajectories into higher education or occupations, postsecondary preparation remains a challenge. While it is imperative for rural

schools to prioritize college and career readiness, a preoccupation with high school graduation as the primary metric of success can detract from guiding students into a breadth of promising future pathways (Kissam, 2015). Given that students' aspirations often predict their trajectories (Bandura et al., 2001; Behnke et al., 2004; Buriel & Cardoza, 1988; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Rumberger, 1983), research exploring students' future orientations can contribute to supporting positive schooling outcomes, especially given the various educational disadvantages associated with rurality.

Systemic Inequities in Rural Education

Much prior research addresses inequities faced by rural students compared to their urban and suburban peers across multiple measures of opportunity, and broad equity issues are often exacerbated by schooling conditions associated with geographic isolation (Bajema et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2014). These conditions include greater financial constraints, limited school resources, poor support for rigorous academics, fewer Advanced Placement course options, a lack of qualified educators, inadequate postsecondary advisement, and an absence of college-going experiences within the broader community (Gannon & Mattingly, 2015; Johnson et. al., 2014; Tieken, 2016). As a result, disparities in outcomes that draw concern in non-rural schools are often even worse for students in remote settings (Gándara et al., 2001; Strayhorn, 2009). For example, the school dropout rate for rural students in poverty is the highest in the country, at more than twice the national average (Irvin et. al., 2012), and rural students pursue college at the lowest rates compared to peers (Swail & Perna, 2005). Hence, such disparities warrant attention by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers -- especially among those who strive to center issues of educational equity and approach their work from a change-making lens (Green, 2013).

Arguably, a focus on equity is implied in scholarship involving rural youth, who generally face the greatest systemic disadvantages of all school-age populations (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Ali & Saunders, 2009; Bajema et al., 2002). However, deeper consideration of students' identities is crucial, given that youth of color tend to encounter major barriers to educational attainment, and rural regions are poised to absorb a significant percentage of this growing demographic (Johnson et al., 2014). Specifically, the Latinx population is expected to double by the year 2050, with the greatest influx occurring in rural counties (California State Office of Research, 2014). Additionally, rural California is home to a critical mass of undocumented youth who face systemic barriers directly linked to their immigration status, including discrimination, propagation of inaccurate information, misinterpretation of policies, and poor adherence to laws related to their rights as undocumented students (Contreras, 2015). Thus, there is a need for transformative scholarship to support rural Latinx students, who represent the fastest-growing demographic group and face some of the greatest institutional challenges, performing far below peers at all levels of education on average (Gándara, 2010).

Educational Barriers Disadvantaging Latinx Students

Research on the schooling experiences of Latinx youth has primarily centered on socioeconomically disadvantaged urban communities in which the Latinx population is a "minority-majority" (Chang, 2017). Findings of these studies illuminate an educational crisis which has resulted in "underachievement" and "school failure" for Latinx students, often due to institutionalized inequities and systemic barriers that impede access to academic opportunities (Chang, 2017; Gonzalez, 2015). Such issues include racial and socioeconomic segregation in neighborhoods and schools, and linguistic deficit thinking regarding English Language Learners (Chang, 2017). Additionally, biased school policies and practices such as curricular tracking lead

to the disproportionate placement of Latinx students into lower-level courses compared to peers, excluding them from participating in a college preparatory curriculum (Gonzalez, 2015). These issues of access undoubtedly shape students' aspirations, which also guide achievement.

The Role of Aspirations in Rural Places

The study of aspirations is an important area of education research because a future orientation is crucial for students' success (Behnke et al., 2004). Motivation theories define aspirations as cognitive representations of goals, which serve to organize and direct behavior towards achieving a desired outcome (Bandura, 1986). Thus, educational and occupational aspirations represent students' abilities to set goals and work towards them (Bajema et al., 2002). Aspirations also exist in a sociocultural context, and depend upon the capacity to perceive good prospects, and possess agency to make choices and take action (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016).

Research demonstrates that students' aspirations are one of the strongest predictors of educational and occupational attainment, and are indicators of successful transitions into adulthood (Bandura et al., 2001; Behnke et al., 2004; Buriel & Cardoza, 1988; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Meece et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1983). For example, high aspirations have been shown to reduce school dropout rates for all racial groups, controlling for socioeconomic status and parental education level (Behnke et al., 2016). Further, the consistency of rural youths' academic aspirations -- their anticipation and plans of achieving a bachelor's degree -- sustained successful students' motivation more than any other pre-college factor (Swail & Perna, 2002). Nonetheless, the process of developing, sustaining, and achieving aspirations is not solely a reflection of individual motivation. Educational institutions influence students' future orientations as aspirations are shaped by schooling experiences (Meece et al., 2013), such as school climate (Majoribanks, 2004), academic achievement (Bandura et al., 2001), curricular tracking practices

(Mau & Bikos, 2000), and vocational education programs (Gray 2009; Lee & Ekstom, 1987). Scholars also note rural students often attend isolated and underfunded schools with few resources to cultivate "meaningful learning" (Byun et al., 2012).

The aforementioned findings suggest serious implications for educational equity, given that rural high schoolers consistently have limited access to learning opportunities and the lowest college-going rates, with poor rural students facing the greatest disadvantages (Swail & Perna, 2002). Differences in aspirations are also prominent. For example, rural Latinx students are at risk for prematurely curtailing their aspirations for a variety of reasons, including low expectations from educators, lack of postsecondary advising, and racial tensions at school (Gándara et al., 2001). Beyond the school setting, rural students face additional barriers to forming and attaining high college and career aspirations (Gándara et al., 2001). These challenges include lower family income and parental education, geographic isolation, limited community resources, and conflicting cultural values regarding postsecondary pathways (Byun et al., 2012; Farmer et al., 2006; Hardré, 2007; Irvin et al., 2016). Disparities persist despite protective factors, such as a strong sense of belonging, that have been found in some studies of rural schools and communities (Byun et al., 2012; Means et al., 2016). Thus, this literature offers a foundation for understanding *some* rural youths' aspirations. However, this body of research has only just begun to shed light on the rich diversity of remote regions. Gaps in the literature suggest a need for greater representation of rural students from different remote contexts, as well as the need to center youth voice more prominently in studies about their lives.

The Motivating Problem

Given that academic success has long been associated with social mobility (Bourdieu, 1990), it is crucial for researchers to explore barriers to postsecondary opportunities experienced

by rural students in general, and specifically for the growing population of Latinx students in remote communities. Furthermore, the current sociopolitical climate signifies an unprecedented era for rural education, specifically in remote international border regions that have been thrust into the national spotlight. Latinx youth in U.S.-Mexico border zones are caught in the crossfire of heightened surveillance and enduring issues of marginalization. What might youths' hopeful aspirations, realistic prospects, and imaginative futures look like for socioeconomically disadvantaged students of color in these spaces?

These populations have not traditionally been represented in U.S. rural education research, as much literature is undergirded by a presumption of rural homogeneity, and few studies employ critical frameworks to drive transformative change alongside institutionally marginalized groups. Rather than foregrounding students' identities in studying their aspirations, researchers have often taken for granted that rural youth of varied backgrounds share similar outlooks, neglecting to consider their unique contexts (Gándara, 2001). Consequently, the current state of scholarship offers insufficient knowledge about how aspirations are shaped at the intersection of social and geographic location, often underemphasizing the importance of students' individual positionalities, school and community environments, and sociopolitical climate. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated concerns about students' academic achievement and socioemotional well-being have recently drawn greater attention to the importance of understanding how youth imagine their future opportunities and life paths.

Overview of the Study

Addressing these gaps, this study examines how rural high school seniors perceive and make decisions about their postsecondary trajectories, and how complex contextual experiences shape their future pathways. I explore these lines of inquiry by centering the perspectives of

socioeconomically disadvantaged Latinx students, and spotlighting the region of Southern California's remote international border zone as a novel area of study with respect to aspirations. The following overarching questions and sub-questions guided this research.

- Overarching Question: How do students attending a rural school located along the U.S.-Mexico international border envision their college and career opportunities, and make decisions about their postsecondary trajectories?
    - Sub Question 1: How are students' schooling experiences, including the presence (or absence) of college and career role models or mentors, related to their perceptions, aspirations, and decisions about postsecondary pathways?
    - Sub Question 2: How do students' identities, including their sense of place, and home and community contexts, factor into their postsecondary perceptions, aspirations, and decisions?
    - Sub Question 3: How are students' proximity to the border and border-crossing experiences related to their perceptions, aspirations, and decisions about postsecondary opportunities?

Guided by theories focused on ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and ethical models of studying aspirations (Zipin et al., 2015), I investigated these research questions through a humanistic approach to qualitative case study methods, via multiple in-depth interviews with high school seniors. Each of the participating students were enrolled in a credit-bearing college preparatory class at a large comprehensive public school in a small rural town. Five students participated in a total of 50 individual interviews, which occurred at least monthly from October through June of their senior year. As discussed below, this research was designed in partnership with local K-12 education

leaders tasked with supporting access to four-year universities for first-generation college-bound students.

When research aspires towards social justice, all stakeholders can participate as advocates in addressing educational challenges (Saathoff, 2015), and authentic collaboration offers stronger transformative power than unidirectional transfer of knowledge (Penuel et al., 2015). Thus, I communicated about the full scope of this dissertation with participating students as well as the leaders of several college preparatory programs in the region of study. These programs represent the bulk of higher education outreach efforts in the community, and serve as a crucial vehicle for facilitating postsecondary pathways for local K-12 students. Partners helped facilitate this research by connecting me with a school site and teachers to support the study, as well as with student participants. With the advice of university faculty, guidance of local partners, and input from students themselves, this study was supported by a network of experts on issues of underrepresented rural youths' postsecondary opportunities and trajectories. Expertise within this network spanned theory, practice, and lived experience. Lastly, change-making research necessitates critical and ethical theoretical frameworks and methods (Zipin et al., 2015). In this study, I employed an asset-based, student-centered interviewing approach grounded in empowerment. The process is detailed in Chapters 3 and 6, which focus on the methodological design and how this approach may contribute to future research.

Significance

Driven by social justice aims, this dissertation extends knowledge about first-generation Latinx students' aspirations and postsecondary pathways, and how schools facilitate them. The study is situated in a rural, agricultural, border region of Southern California -- a setting representing an understudied, institutionally marginalized, and fast-growing community. While

aspirations are one of the strongest predictors of success, rural youth face the greatest barriers, and remain under-recognized in the literature. Few studies examine future orientations through the lens of students' positionalities, indicating there is a dearth of knowledge about how youth realize aspirations at the intersections of their complex social and geographic contexts. Foregrounding these attributes, this study aims to inform local equity efforts, contribute to theorizing on aspirations, and generate practical implications for the many remote places that reflect some of the most challenging schooling conditions in the country. This research capitalizes on a pivotal moment for rural scholarship in a sociopolitically significant era; employs critical frameworks and ethical methods for studying aspirations; and centers consciousness of participants' diverse voices, experiences, and identities. Ultimately, this work offers a novel approach to advance theory and inform transformative research and practice, attending to the contextual qualities of rural regions and the myriad factors mediating youths' future orientations.

Organization of the Dissertation

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides a literature review of studies about the aspirations of rural high school students in the United States. In addition to offering an analysis of prior scholarship, I also discuss the theoretical frameworks guiding this dissertation research. Chapter 3 details the research methods employed in this study. This includes an explanation of my positionality and the historical context of the study, in addition to descriptions of the participants, school, data collection, and analysis. Chapter 4 presents findings about students' school and community contexts that influenced their future orientations, as well as brief individual profiles of each participant's postsecondary aspirations and pathways. Chapter 5 provides findings from cross-case analysis, investigating the impact of the online schooling

environment during the pandemic, students' relationships with peers and adults, and their experiences engaging in college preparatory activities. Chapter 6 focuses on findings about how participation in the study, specifically the motivational interviewing process, fostered a reflective and imaginative space for students to explore aspirations. Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation with a summary of findings and implications for theory, research, and practice.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

Students' future orientations predict their transitions into postsecondary pathways (Behnke et al., 2016), but youth in remote regions encounter barriers within and beyond school that can curtail their aspirations. Disparities across students' postsecondary pathways are connected to markers of social identities such as racial, gender, and socioeconomic groups (e.g., Gándara et al., 2001; Strayhorn, 2009), and geographic context involving family, community, and school environments (e.g., Behnke et al., 2004; Martinez, 2012). Thus, greater attention to individual positionality and regional context are deemed crucial for understanding the many dimensions of students' future orientations (Arnold et al., 2005; Gándara et al., 2001). Nonetheless, researchers often assume rural communities are monoethnic and homogeneous (Corbett, 2016). The convergence of individual identity, place, and aspirations can profoundly influence students' intentions and outcomes, so neglecting to probe these intersections can have implications for equity. This dissertation investigates how socioeconomically disadvantaged Latinx youth perceive postsecondary opportunities and pursue college and career trajectories, considering their schooling experiences in a rural community along the southwestern international border. To inform this study, I analyzed how rural students' aspirations have been researched in recent decades.

In this chapter, I draw conclusions from 33 peer reviewed sources published from 1999-2019, that focus on rural students' aspirations. I first present a brief summary of the challenges of scholarship in this field, followed by the focus and methods of this literature review. I then offer an in-depth examination of the lenses through which this topic is approached, providing: (1) an investigation of how "rurality" is defined; and (2) an exploration of methods and theoretical

frameworks used. I then explain the theories informing my own conceptual and methodological approaches for this dissertation, including ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and a framework to guide ethical methods for research on aspirations (Zipin et al., 2015). As discussed later, this dissertation also speaks to the need for a more holistic understanding of students' aspirations.

Challenges in Rural Scholarship

In the current political climate, much of the increased interest in rural education by government, policy, research, and advocacy organizations is driven by the argument that the nation's potential for a prosperous future lies in its capacity to prepare rural students for college and career success (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). However, the defining characteristics of rural geography remain obscure in the research, highlighting an important area for elaboration. As detailed in the findings section of this literature review, studies conducted on any particular "rural" issue do not utilize a uniform definition of "rural." Rurality is described using parameters which vary across settings and studies, and the criteria for inclusion are left to researchers' discretion. While this reflects the importance of recognizing heterogeneity among rural communities, the lack of a shared, explicit, and consistent definition can impede scholars' abilities to make sense of comparisons and trends across the field (Arnold et al., 2005). To minimize misunderstandings and misrepresentations in future studies, researchers must clarify which definition was used, and provide additional descriptive details about each setting (Hardré et al., 2008).

Depending on the definition used, the number of students attending rural schools across the nation can range from 1.1 million to 11.6 million (Arnold et al., 2005). However, studies on aspirations are often undergirded by an assumption that these students' future orientations are not

necessarily impacted by complex identity markers such as racial identity, cultural community, school context, and regional diversity (Gándara et al., 2001). Thus, opportunities to understand how aspirations are shaped at the intersection of social location and geographic location remain underexplored. This literature review serves to analyze strategies scholars have used to research rural students' aspirations over the past two decades, offering a foundation to guide the focus of this dissertation. Next, I present the focus of this review and the methodology used.

Literature Review Focus and Methodology

In alignment with the focus of this dissertation, this literature review privileges the young adult perspective. It centers research on rural high school students' self-described aspirations as they prepare for postsecondary transitions. It does not include studies on children's aspirations, nor research on educators' and caregivers' beliefs about students' aspirations. Additionally, while this dissertation is equity-focused and invites youth voice among rural Latinx students specifically, this review aims to encompass the existing body of work that illuminates youth perspectives more broadly, across geographically isolated contexts in the U.S. The review of literature focuses on how scholars conduct research on rural students' aspirations, considering social and geographic location. In my investigation, I examine:

1. How "rural" is defined across studies;
2. How research methods are employed to examine rural students' aspirations and make contributions to our understanding of future orientations;
3. How theoretical frameworks are applied and make contributions to our understanding of rural students' future orientations.

My systematic approach for identifying studies to include in this literature review included searching databases, coding abstracts, snowballing from article citations, and selecting

sources. Strategically, I sought out peer reviewed journal articles published within the last 20 years (1999-2019) in the U.S., hypothesizing that these findings would be most relevant to current understandings of students' aspirations. This decision was validated by other scholars' work recommending a consideration of historical notions about postsecondary pathways and opportunities (Sherman & Sage, 2011; Tieken, 2016). Tieken (2016) brings attention to the general shift towards a greater emphasis on higher education options post-1990's, which was a trend seen across education settings as national debates arose around the missions of postsecondary institutions. Particularly in rural education contexts, this movement towards college-going has aligned with years of local economic decline and job loss, which limited the employment options for high school graduates seeking occupations in traditional regional industries such as agriculture, logging, mining, and manufacturing (Sherman & Sage, 2011; Tieken, 2016). Thus, it is relevant to focus on studies that shed light on students' aspirations during periods of significant social, economic, and cultural change in remote regions.

I began by conducting a comprehensive search of abstracts, identifying peer reviewed sources in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and the Web of Science databases. Recognizing this body of literature might be relatively small, I began with a Boolean search technique with truncation, using the multiple terms "rural AND aspiration*" which yielded 202 sources, including one book containing one chapter for consideration. However, the book chapter focused on rural adults' perspectives on aspirations, which did not meet the criteria for my analysis. Reports were also excluded from this analysis because they are not peer reviewed. Therefore, I coded the abstracts of the remaining articles, identifying which ones met the criteria of: (a) occurring in a rural setting, (b) focusing on participants currently in high school, and (c) inviting student voice from any methodological approach, such as youths' self-

reported data via quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews. As mentioned above, this investigation privileges studies on students' perspectives about their own postsecondary opportunities and pathways. Thus, this literature review does not include research that centered the beliefs of adults, such as educators, parents, or community members, with regard to youths' aspirations.

Articles were excluded if they did not fall within these parameters, resulting in 21 sources which met the criteria. I then employed the snowballing technique of citation searching to identify sources referenced by the authors that I may have missed in my initial search. Citation searching yielded two additional relevant publications, for a total of 23 articles. I also included ten conceptual articles that shape theorizing on rural aspirations, resulting in 33 sources represented in this review. In examining the literature to identify how scholars study rural students' aspirations, I address three sub-questions that reflect different lenses through which this topic is approached. These include an investigation into how rural is defined, an analysis of methodological approaches, an exploration of the intersection of methods and theoretical frameworks. I begin with a summary of findings about aspirations from the studies reviewed, followed by my analysis of the strategies scholars have employed to build those understandings.

Understanding the Landscape: Summary of Findings from Articles Reviewed

The outcomes of both quantitative and qualitative studies reflect some shared knowledge about rural students' aspirations, as well as some contradictions. These findings encompass a breadth of rural community types, which can be defined in different ways depending on the criteria selected by the researchers. Notably, many of these findings align with the outcomes of extensive prior research long done in urban and suburban regions. This is particularly evident when rural studies highlight outcomes by common markers of social location, such as race,

gender, and socioeconomic status (Doyle et al., 2009; Gándara et al., 2001; Means et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2009). Because such categories are linked to broad dynamics of power, oppression, and resilience at a global scale, it may be unsurprising to see some alignment of certain trends by race, gender, and class across rural, urban, and suburban education settings within the United States.

Findings Related to Race, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status

Few researchers have investigated the intersection of race, gender, and class in studies of rural students' aspirations. However, much of the existing scholarship indicates there are differences between populations, as detailed below (Doyle et al., 2009; Gándara et al., 2009; Irvin et al., 2016; Means et al., 2016; Meece et al., 2014; Petrin et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2009). Notably, despite some contradictory findings around gender and race, multiple studies found that lower socioeconomic status is associated with lower aspirations for all rural student populations (Gándara et al., 2009; Irvin et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2009).

Although scholarship addressing gender is limited, research shows that girls in rural settings are more likely to aspire to attend college than boys, more likely to have career aspirations that are accurately aligned with their plans to pursue higher education, and more likely to desire leaving rural communities to relocate for postsecondary opportunities (Doyle et al., 2009; Irvin et al., 2016; Meece et al., 2013; Meece et al., 2014). To this last point, Petrin et al. (2014) found a greater proportion of non-academically inclined female students desired to leave their communities, while the opposite was true for male students. Researchers postulate girls may perceive fewer opportunities in their local regions, and are therefore more motivated to seek postsecondary pathways elsewhere (Doyle et al., 2009; Petrin et al., 2014).

Studies on race are similarly sparse and present some contradictions. For example, longitudinal studies show African American, Native American, and Latinx rural students report the lowest aspirations when compared to white peers (Gándara et al., 2001; Strayhorn, 2009). However, other quantitative and qualitative studies complicate these findings with different outcomes. For example, Irvin et al. (2016) found similar aspirations across racial groups, and Meece et al. (2013) found that African American and Latinx students in rural settings reported higher aspirations than white students. Nonetheless, Irvin et al. (2016) and Meece et al. (2013) acknowledge that any conclusions may be premature, given that: (a) there is a dearth of research on this topic (and thus few studies for comparison, particularly in recent years); and (b) their surveys only captured students' self-reported aspirations at a single moment in time, utilizing a different method than contradictory longitudinal studies (Gándara et al., 2001; Strayhorn, 2009).

Additionally, a small-scale study of Indigenous students in Alaskan villages contributed counter-evidence, finding that low-income Native youth held very high aspirations for pursuing postsecondary schooling and employment (Doyle et al., 2009). However, Doyle et al. (2009) and other scholars found that rural students had high but misaligned aspirations, underestimating the level of education needed to attain their goals (Gándara et al., 2001). For example, Native participants expressed the occupational ambitions of becoming a surgeon or an engineer, but did not have any plans to attend college, and did not fulfill steps to pursue higher education when offered the opportunity to apply (Doyle et al., 2009). Similarly, Gándara et al. (2001) found that low-income Latinx rural students who expressed the highest aspirations often had the lowest grade point averages -- a discrepancy students had not considered until it was pointed out to them by the researchers. Given these disparities, scholars highlight the crucial role of school and

community actors, who can serve as influential resources to guide youth as aspirations form (Doyle et al., 2009; Gándara et al., 2001; Martinez, 2012).

Findings Related to Family, Community, and School Context

Many studies found that beliefs and values of parents and community members matter in shaping students' aspirations (Behnke et al., 2004; Byun et al., 2012; Doyle et al., 2009; Harklau, 2013; Hutchins et al., 2012; Martinez, 2012; Means et al., 2016; Petrin et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2009; Valdez, 2008). For example, if parents emphasize postsecondary education, students are more likely to aspire to attend college (Behnke et al., 2004; Doyle et al., 2009, Strayhorn, 2009), while youth whose parents are unsupportive of postsecondary education are likely to be work-bound (Harklau, 2013; Hutchins et al., 2012). Community connections make a difference as well, given that students who have ties to meaningful neighborhood settings, such as churches, tend to have more clearly identified aspirations (Martinez, 2012). In these studies, the positive effects of home and community support are presented as protective factors, or assets of these rural places (Martinez, 2012; Strayhorn, 2009).

Similarly, schooling experiences impact students' perceptions of postsecondary opportunities, and their corresponding college and career goals (Demi et al., 2010; Irvin et al., 2011; Means et al., 2016; Meece et al., 2014). Although engaging in postsecondary preparation activities predicted higher educational aspirations, studies also indicate rural youth are less likely than nonrural youth to have access to school counselors, or participate in college visits, career exploration, and job shadowing (Gándara et al. 2001; Irvin et al., 2011; Means et al., 2016).

Given the breadth of outcomes across a relatively small number of studies, this literature review explores the varied approaches scholars have undertaken to study rural students'

aspirations. The following sections focus on conceptualizations of "rural," methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks.

The Challenge of Defining "Rural"

The absence of a clear and consistent definition of "rural" within the education field can complicate scholars' abilities to make generalizable claims that might translate across what different researchers consider to be "rural" regions. Further, research remains underdeveloped because rural schools are often stereotyped, despite the diversity of rural populations across the nation (Gándara et al., 2001). While some studies offer rich details about school and community settings, there is still a lack of coherence about what "rural" looks like in the field of education. Thus, inconsistent definitions of "rural" can pose challenges in making sense of the findings reviewed in this chapter and in the literature at large, and can obscure the ways in which research questions, methods, and frameworks might translate across settings. Next, I analyze how authors of the reviewed articles defined "rural," and strategically identified important regions of study.

Defining "Rural" in Quantitative Research

In quantitative studies, the definition of "rural" is typically based on the criteria of any number of national or state organizations, and often includes the standards of the United States Census Bureau (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). The Census locale system classifies all regions of the U.S. with codes based on several factors, including population size and density, land use, and distance from an urban cluster (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Ratcliffe et al., 2016). For geographically isolated places, these Census categories reflect degrees of rurality that include "rural fringe" (less than 5 miles from an urbanized area and less than 2.5 miles from an urban cluster), "rural distant" (more than 5 miles but less than 25 miles from and urbanized area, and more than 2.5 miles but less than 10 miles from an urban cluster), and "rural remote" (more than

25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster) (Arnold et al. 2007). Researchers may also combine Census criteria with general information, such as describing a setting that: (1) has a population of less than 40,000, (2) is outside a metropolitan area, and (3) has a high school enrollment of less than 500 students (Bajema et al., 2002).

However, even the standardized categories of the Census locale system and others are regularly modified as the defining factors undergo change (e.g., shifts in population size) (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). This presents challenges for researchers, because as a result, national sampling of students in rural schools can be based on different criteria at different periods in time, rendering it nearly impossible to make adequate comparisons of findings (Arnold et al., 2005). For example, Irvin et al. (2016) explain that their study includes towns in Census locale categories that were originally considered "rural," but technically no longer fall within this definition, as newer locale codes were introduced during data collection. They go on to say other research groups, such as the Rural School and Community Trust, also include such towns in their "rural" definitions despite the change to the Census categories (Irvin et al., 2016), thereby incorporating an additional organizational influence for validation. Additionally, quantitative studies do not necessarily follow the Census locale system at all, further obscuring this field of research. For example, Hardré et al. (2008) chose to use criteria identified by the United States Office of Management and Budget and the Office of the State Regents. Without detailing definitions from these organizations, they explained their research took place in small isolated communities, with populations below 2,500, and located two hours from a metropolitan area, and one hour from a four-year higher education institution (Hardré et al., 2008).

Given the varied definitions of "rural" seen within quantitative literature alone, these scholars aptly note the importance of acknowledging the heterogeneity of rural communities, and

they do describe some regional characteristics in detail (Byun et al., 2012; Hardré et al., 2008). However, the level of specificity provided in quantitative studies does not typically exceed statistical information on socioeconomic status, racial demographics, median level of education attained, and population stability (outmigration). Thus, qualitative work can usefully complement understandings of what "rurality" looks like across different regions of study.

Defining "Rural" in Qualitative Research

In qualitative studies, rural communities are not exclusively described by calculable quantities that are more-or-less enduring, like distance from an urban center (Gándara et al., 2001). Rather, the argument for a "rural" qualification is often driven by acknowledgement of the defining -- yet, sometimes changing -- characteristics of unique places, with attention to historical context. Historical context encompasses a breadth of political, social, economic, and environmental conditions that impact individual students and the community at large. In the literature reviewed, such issues include changes to education policy, shifts in immigration patterns, and consequences of environmental problems like the negative effects of climate change (Cabrera et al., 2012; Doyle et al., 2009; Harklau, 2013; Valdez, 2008). Such characteristics justify the identification of specific regions as critical cases worthy of study.

Nonetheless, the qualifiers for "rural" status are highly variable. While rich details are provided, the term "rural" is not necessarily defined clearly enough to develop a cohesive understanding of what "rural" means across qualitative literature. The following descriptions illustrate the diversity of rural communities represented in qualitative studies. For example, Gándara et al. (2001) center the Mexican immigrant population, suggesting the rural region mirrors "another country," although it is just "a 30-min drive" from an urban community.

> Rural High School is approximately a 30-min drive from Urban High School, but it might just as well be in another country. [...] Almost all Latino students are of

> Mexican origin, and most come from families who work in the fields and in related agricultural labor; many are immigrants. (p. 80)

Doyle et al. (2009) focus on the degree of geographic isolation and economic opportunities, emphasizing that the region is "accessible only by boat or airplane" and that traditional occupational industries are dwindling.

> Alaska's rural communities are extremely isolated with 80 % off the road system, accessible only by boat or airplane. […] Traditional subsistence hunting and fishing remain important economic activities and sources of status […] The effects of climate change are acute in the Arctic, eroding hunting opportunities. (p. 25)

Finally, Cabrera et al. (2012) focus on the geographic and educational contexts of the region, where schooling outcomes for the "majority-Latina/o" population are "substantially lower" compared to those of the state at large.

> [South Texas' Rio Grande Valley] is a low-income, majority-Latina/o, border, rural community where high school graduation and college-going rates are substantially lower than in the rest of the state [...] rural and border communities are frequently stigmatized locales where educational success is defined as leaving. (p. 233)

The qualities that characterize these rural places also reflect current issues unique to each setting, such as the scope of regional economic opportunities (e.g., agriculture, hunting and fishing, leaving to pursue education). This is indicative of a broader trend, in which qualitative studies co-locate the rural identity of the community with other markers of regional importance.

When framing a rural community context, highlighting issues of local significance allows researchers to grapple with regional conditions that impact youths' opportunity structures. Via qualitative methods like case studies and ethnographies, researchers explore these circumstances in relation to how students develop aspirations. In comparison, quantitative studies do not often contextualize rural settings in this way, beyond reporting key statistics such as the percentage of people living in rural poverty. Thus, qualitative methodology offers a valuable analytic lens that

co-locates calculable characteristics of rurality with incalculable conditions that complicate how students' lived experiences unfold across diverse geographically isolated communities.

Analysis of Methods

As described above, the body of work on rural high school students' aspirations is complex. Studies have produced some shared knowledge and some points of contradiction, which both add value to the literature and inspire interest in further research. Imagining future directions for the field, it is useful to tease out perspectives that have guided the scholarship thus far, beginning with an analysis of methods. In this section, I explore the strengths and limitations of quantitative and qualitative methods employed in researching aspirations.

Quantitative Studies

Quantitative researchers have the ability to analyze large datasets, with some studies on aspirations exceeding thousands of respondents from rural regions throughout the country (Byun et al., 2012; Hutchins et al., 2012; Irvin et al., 2011; Irvin et al., 2016; Meece et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2009). By drawing from nationally representative samples, quantitative analyses can collectively shape a broader understanding of students' postsecondary goals across a wide variety of rural settings. To accomplish this, researchers typically employ survey methods that capture students' self-reported aspirations at a single point in time. While informative and valuable, this approach also presents some limitations, such as typically not centering student voice throughout the design and process of the research. Additional challenges within this body of quantitative scholarship include the absence of longitudinal research, current datasets, and critical analyses with respect to the diversity of rural populations.

Scholars note the need for longitudinal research to assess how students' aspirations change over time and to identify whether students ultimately achieve their college and career

goals post-high school graduation (Byun et al., 2012; Irvin et al., 2011; Irvin et al., 2016). Although a small number of qualitative and mixed methods studies have utilized this approach (Gándara et al., 2001; Harkalu, 2013), the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) was the only quantitative project to do so. The data for this study were collected from a cohort of over 12,000 students via a sequence of surveys in 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000. Like the NELS, much of the large-scale survey data were collected before the 2008 financial crisis (Irvin, et al., 2011) -- a historic economic disaster that led to the Great Recession. However, very little is known about the impact on students' aspirations, because nationally representative quantitative data precede this event. Thus, while historical data help shape longitudinal perspectives as in Strayhorn's (2009) study, this issue highlights the importance of analyzing current data to build a contemporary understanding of students' perceptions of their opportunities -- particularly in light of recent events that may have a magnified impact on rural communities across the country.

The social and economic inequalities reproduced and exacerbated by major disasters such as the Great Recession also serve as a reminder of longstanding disparities in opportunities and outcomes, which typically break out along the lines of race, gender, and class. Specifically, racially minoritized groups are uniquely disadvantaged by these mechanisms of stratification (Thiede & Monnat, 2016). Across academic and professional settings, Black and Latinx populations experience diminished returns on education, higher rates of unemployment, and greater discrimination (Thiede & Monnat, 2016). Further, compared to urban counterparts, racially minoritized communities in rural places often face these barriers while experiencing "fewer social supports and different pragmatic challenges and cultural expectations" (Schmalzbauer, 2011, p. 442). Considering these sweeping disparities, and the growing number of people of color settling in rural areas (Johnson et al., 2014; Tieken & San Antonio, 2016), it is

important to draw attention to these subgroups of the broader population when investigating students' aspirations. However, while some studies focus on subgroups based on gender or socioeconomic status (Byun et al., 2012; Meece et al., 2014), few quantitative researchers critically examine racial identity in their analyses. Furthermore, analyses of survey data -- even when devoting particular attention to racial groups -- do not deeply explore within-group heterogeneity. For example, comparative studies contribute knowledge that Black and Latinx students in rural settings express "lower" aspirations than their urban counterparts, without further probing these differences (Gándara et al., 2001; Strayhorn, 2009). Thus, attention to both between-group and within-group differences remain important areas of study.

Quantitative research also does not capture the heterogeneity of rural communities themselves, which all possess unique and regionally meaningful characteristics that shape how students perceive viable postsecondary options. While many scholars aptly acknowledge rurality should not be represented monolithically (Ali & Saunders, 2009; Demi et al., 2010; Hardré et al., 2008; Hutchins et al., 2012; Irvin et al., 2011; Petrin et al., 2014), this remains a challenge for the field. Few studies consider regional context, and even fewer employ methods providing rich descriptions about how students navigate and make decisions about the worlds of school and work in rural communities (Hutchins et al., 2012). Therefore, greater consideration of rural heterogeneity in quantitative studies can add nuance to understandings of the unique conditions, experiences, and needs that may otherwise be accepted as broad patterns across regions. For instance, contrary to research suggesting out-migration of youth from rural communities has been driven by a lack of job opportunities, some locales are experiencing the opposite effect as their populations boom (Irvin et al., 2011). Thus, research exploring the relationship between

geography and aspirations may be enhanced by considering contextual factors, such as economic trends and migration patterns that impact rural regions differently (Irvin et al., 2011).

Qualitative Studies

While large-scale studies illuminate broad patterns about students' self-reported aspirations, qualitative methods probe gaps in this literature by explicating how individuals make sense of the possible future pathways available to them, develop aspirations, and make decisions about their postsecondary options. To accomplish this, qualitative researchers often conduct ethnographies and case studies that yield in-depth understandings of students' day-to-day experiences, opportunity structures, and choice-making within their unique environmental and formal schooling contexts (Behnke et al., 2004; Cabrera et al., 2012; Doyle et al., 2009; Harklau, 2013; Martinez, 2012; Valdez, 2008). Additionally, such studies can take into account the many factors that might influence individual students (such as racial identity or local cultural norms), and more often involve additional participants such as parents, educators, and community members who can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how students' aspirations are formed (Behnke et al., 2004; Cabrera et al., 2012; Martinez, 2012). Nonetheless, scholars still note the general lack of representation of family members and institutional actors in rural education literature, across both qualitative and quantitative studies (Behnke et al., 2004; Cabrera et al., 2012; Doyle et al., 2009; Valdez, 2008).

Qualitative research often speaks to theory by complicating long-held assumptions about educational aspirations and outcomes that are often applied across populations, but may actually be context-specific. For instance, Harklau (2013) found that the commonly accepted association between young women aspiring to pursue higher education and achieving liberation from traditional gender roles did not hold true for an academically gifted Latina student in a rural

setting, where immediate entry to a wage-earning position (even as an "unskilled" laborer) offered greater status and independence in the community. Similarly, Valdez (2008) studied the pathways of 12 high-achieving Latinx immigrant students through regular meetings, interviews and informal conversations, and weekly journaling. The outcome of the study challenged stereotypes of Latinx immigrant students as academically unmotivated, and countered deficit assumptions that their families devalue education. Instead, Valdez (2008) shed light on these driven students' daily lives, explicating how they applied their knowledge and skills to navigate an education system in which the dominant values ran counter to their cultural beliefs. These studies illustrate how qualitative methodology can be used to interrogate power dynamics and issues of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) in ways that are often not achieved through quantitative research. However, as described below, deep exploration of students' aspirations as related to race, ethnicity, and gender remain understudied in the field of rural education (Doyle et al., 2009; Gándara et al., 2009; Irvin et al., 2016; Means et al., 2016; Meece et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2009).

Intersection of Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

At the intersection of methods and theoretical frameworks, particular research directions, conclusions, and contributions are made possible. As a function of the methods and theories researchers choose to employ, certain perspectives are privileged while others remain underexplored. Sixty-five percent of the studies reviewed utilized a conceptual framework. Across quantitative and qualitative work, much of the literature is grounded in theories that posit aspirations are shaped by the interaction of internal personal factors and external environmental factors (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Ali & Saunders, 2009; Demi et al., 2010; Harklau, 2013; Irvin et al., 2011; Irvin et al., 2016; Meece et al., 2013; Meece, et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2009). These

frameworks include Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; 2000), Achievement Motivation Theory (McClelland, 1961), Social Constructionist Theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978), Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1973; 1984; 1991), and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

At their core, all such perspectives position an individual's perception of their identity characteristics, such as race, gender, and academic self-concept, in relationship with exterior contextual influences, such as family dynamics, community resources, and formal schooling experiences. These different frameworks are broadly applied to explain how students develop aspirations and make decisions about their trajectories, through interactions with both the people and the institutions that shape students' realities. However, the theories differ in their areas of emphasis, which lay the groundwork for the types of research questions posed, the analytical approaches employed, and the positioning of findings in relation to the broader literature.

Alignment of Methods and Cognitive Frameworks

Multiple cognitive frameworks bridge the fields of psychology and education, including Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994; 2000), and Achievement Motivation Theory (McClelland, 1961). Such theoretical orientations center an individual's self-efficacy beliefs as cognitive drivers of goal-setting behaviors, while considering contextual variables like factors that either support or impede aspirational thoughts and actions. The theories mentioned above were only applied in quantitative studies, which all utilized survey instruments to measure or predict the impact of specific personal and environmental characteristics on aspirations (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Ali & Saunders, 2009; Bajema et al., 2002). For example, Ali and McWhirter (2006) explored the relationship between

postsecondary aspirations and predictor variables, for students of low and high socioeconomic status across high schools in rural Appalachia. The cognitive variables consisted of students' beliefs about vocational and educational self-efficacy, college and career outcome expectations, and perceived educational barriers, while the contextual factors involved perceptions of school characteristics and support from adults and peers. Findings showed self-efficacy and outcome expectations were the strongest predictors of aspirations, with students of low socioeconomic status being less likely to seek college pathways and more likely to pursue vocational training or full-time employment (Ali & McWhirter, 2006).

Like other scholars (Ali & Saunders, 2009; Bajema et al., 2002), Ali and McWhirter (2006) framed their findings as a contribution to knowledge about students' motivation and college and career choice behaviors. Thus, by grounding the research in a cognitive theoretical framework, the outcomes of these studies privilege a focus on individual development in adolescence over the role of educational systems or family and community contexts. Though not explicitly stated in the articles reviewed, these studies seem to reflect a positivist paradigm (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2013) through researchers' attempts to measure the directional effects of students' perceptions of themselves and their environments on aspirations. Instead, the structural frameworks described below suggest an interpretivist view (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2013), with a greater focus on the social, economic, political, and historical forces that impact students' real and perceived opportunities.

Alignment of Methods and Structural Frameworks

Compared to the cognitive theories outlined above, Social Constructivist Theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978), Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1973; 1984; 1991), and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000;

Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) position individual agency and contextual conditions in perpetual dialogue with one another, and emphasize that these dynamics shift based on a person's social location in different environments. These frameworks were paired with both quantitative methods (Demi et al., 2010; Irvin et al., 2016; Irvin et al., 2011; Meece et al., 2014; Meece et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2009) and qualitative methods (Cabrera et al., 2012; Martinez, 2012; Means et al., 2016; Valdez, 2008).

In quantitative analyses (Demi et al., 2010; Irvin et al., 2016; Irvin et al., 2011; Meece et al., 2014; Meece et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2009), Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) was applied with assumptions that community effects (e.g., urbanicity), school factors (e.g., achievement), and identity traits (e.g., gender) interact and influence students' aspirations (Strayhorn, 2009). These individual and environmental factors represent elements of five nested systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) that reflect an individual's geographic ecology and entail varied norms and characteristics. Notably, although these studies employed survey methods like those guided by cognitive theoretical frameworks, the researchers shifted the focus from individual motivation and decision-making, to the enabling or constraining conditions within students' school, family, and community environments. Strayhorn (2009) offers a compelling example of this approach, in studying rural African American male students' aspirations in comparison to peers in urban and suburban settings. Findings revealed that socioeconomic status and neighborhood setting were predictors of aspirations, with students in suburban settings expressing higher aspirations than urban peers, and rural students having the lowest aspirations of all groups (Strayhorn, 2009). Strayhorn (2009) leveraged these outcomes to highlight systemic inequalities, explaining, "leveled aspirations of low-achieving, low-SES

Black males in rural settings are arguably fashioned by structural constraints such as high rates of joblessness, depressed economic conditions, and educational disparities" (p. 724). Ultimately, the implications of this work supported advocacy efforts for school-level changes to alleviate the obstacles that African American students must navigate throughout the education pipeline (Strayhorn, 2009). Thus, this example illustrates how the interaction of structure and agency is centrally represented in equity-focused work, from research questions to findings to implications.

While all three conceptual approaches mentioned above draw attention to systems that significantly impact students' aspirations and trajectories, Strayhorn's (2009) work was an outlier among quantitative studies. In contrast, qualitative researchers more commonly provided a critical analysis of structural dynamics. For example, Valdez (2008) applied Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory to interpret how immigrant students enacted aspirational choices and actions, while interacting with the constraining rules, resources, and consequences organized by social and educational institutions. It was found that immigrant students aspired to attend community college as a means of pursuing their goals without violating familial and cultural expectations to remain employed and near home. Similar to Strayhorn (2009), Valdez (2008) leveraged the study's findings to promote a strengths-based representation of students. The implications of this work counter common misperceptions of immigrants of color as devaluing education, or lacking agency in a system that directs them to low-wage jobs (Valdez, 2008). While Valdez (2008) extended the structural framework to present a strengths-based analysis, just two qualitative studies (Cabrera et al., 2012; Martinez, 2012) used critical theories explicitly grounded in anti-deficit perspectives. By applying Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model (Martinez, 2012) and Freire's (2000) concept of liberatory praxis (Cabrera et al., 2012),

these researchers illuminated stories of students surviving and resisting oppression in the face of unsupportive education systems. By acknowledging these oppressive conditions, scholars intentionally sought to not only highlight the influence of contextual factors, but specifically do so through an asset-based lens (Cabrera et al., 2012; Martinez, 2012; Valdez, 2008).

Implications for Equity

Importantly, researchers' decisions to couple specific methods and theories have implications for educational equity. The pairing of quantitative methodology and cognitive theoretical frameworks in particular can result in analyses that do not deeply explore widespread structural inequalities. For instance, in applying Achievement Motivation Theory (McClelland, 1961) to their exploration of students' academic and occupational aspirations, Bajema et al. (2002) found 96% of participants intended to pursue postsecondary schooling. Promisingly, they stated, "Most of the students had set educational and occupational goals and perceived that support was available to help them realize their aspirations" (Bajema et al., 2002, p. 68). However, these reported aspirations were diversified in ways that may have warranted further exploration from an equity lens. While over half of students planned to attend a four-year university, the remainder expressed intentions to pursue community college or trade school, and nearly ten percent were undecided on an educational pathway (Bajema et al., 2002). While the researchers framed this breadth as a positive indicator of rural students' awareness about various postsecondary opportunities, they did not present an analysis of disaggregated data that could shed light on potential differences in aspirations by identity categories. For example, although 99% of the participants shared a white racial identity, the sample represented students of different genders and socioeconomic statuses, who may be disproportionately directed towards certain pathways via discriminatory practices like tracking (Oakes, 1985). Thus, although an

equity lens is arguably implied in studies involving rural students -- who are disadvantaged compared to urban and suburban peers by many measures (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Ali & Saunders, 2009; Bajema et al., 2002) -- those that center a cognitive theoretical framework may leave systemic disparities underexplored due to an emphasis on individual beliefs and actions.

Furthermore, even studies that offer a structural analysis do not necessarily do so from a critical approach. As previously stated, only some scholars (e.g., Strayhorn, 2009; Valdez, 2008) leveraged structural theories for transformative aims. In contrast, the application of concepts such as community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and liberatory praxis (Freire, 2000) offer robust models of studying aspirations through inherently equity-focused and asset-based frameworks (Cabrera et al., 2012; Martinez, 2012). Notably, some researchers did not use a theoretical framework, but nonetheless provided a critical analysis. For instance, Doyle et al. (2009) presented a comprehensive argument for the importance of focusing rural education research on areas affected by environmental justice issues that disproportionately impact Indigenous communities, such as climate change, access to clean water, and high energy costs. While they do not explicitly reference critical theories, their school change-orientation is clear in their policy positions and recommendations for future research. Such examples illustrate that a theoretical framework is not required for researchers to position their work from an equity lens.

Implications for Geographic Ecology

Researchers' choices of methods and frameworks also have implications for how systems, like schools, are positioned regionally. In some studies, the school is represented as central to the community, and is thus oriented as a core focus of the research questions (Doyle et al., 2009; Gándara et al., 2001; Means et al., 2016). For instance, in a comparison study of an urban school and a rural school, Gándara et al. (2001) note the rural campus is the center of an

agricultural community. In tapping into the intersection of geographic location, ethnic identity, and development of aspirations, the researchers surveyed, interviewed, and closely observed white and Latinx students in each setting, investigating how students of different racial identities form postsecondary aspirations in the context of the same urban or rural school environment (Gándara et al., 2001). Although positive parental influences were also identified, their conclusions illuminated troubling findings about the schools, including racial tensions, lower expectations for students of color compared to white peers, and limited academic counseling resources (Gándara et al., 2001). Pursuing similar research aims, but with a focus on African American rural students, Means et al. (2016) found rural students have robust family and community support for their postsecondary aspirations, but lack educators' guidance about how to develop concrete plans for pursuing higher education. Thus, through qualitative methods, comparative studies of students' experiences within their schools can direct attention to institutional disparities that impact individual aspirations. Qualitative comparative studies can shed light on particular school contexts by drawing on students' perceptions as well as providing detailed descriptions of the racial and socioeconomic demographics, types of opportunity structures in place, allocation of resources, and even the physical condition of the buildings and learning spaces. Importantly, these factors all shape students' beliefs and possibilities (Gándara et al., 2001; Means et al., 2016).

Other studies position the school as just one of many influences shaping rural students' experiences and aspirations (Harklau, 2013; Valdez, 2008). In this research, schools are oriented as one of multiple factors influencing a student's ecosystem, which also includes economic, social, and cultural contexts. These forces reflect and reproduce broader forms of socialization and power dynamics that extend far beyond school walls. Interestingly, although researchers

found that perceived barriers within students' family and community contexts constrained students' pathways into four-year institutions -- such as gender norms (Harklau, 2013) and financial limitations (Valdez, 2008) -- they nonetheless advocated for school-based reforms in response to sociocultural issues. For example, Harklau (2013) recommends schools provide K-12 parent education programs to build awareness of college life and support students' transition into higher education. Valdez (2008) suggests more robust financial aid education and supports for students, such as financial literacy courses and expanded work-study options. Therefore, despite acknowledging that family and community influences can have the greatest impact in shaping (and by some accounts, constraining) postsecondary choices, these studies make clear the responsibility of schools to initiate strategies to help students realize their aspirations.

Alternatively, some studies intentionally look beyond the scope of educational institutions. As noted previously, Martinez (2012) excluded the formal schooling context from the research question altogether. Given known characteristics of historically low graduation rates, inequitable funding, systemic barriers, and insufficient resources, the schools' consistent failure to support students' aspirations justified their exclusion from the geographic ecology. Instead, sources of college-going knowledge and inspiration centered on actors unaffiliated with schools, such as a trusted pastor and a local physician. In this way, Martinez (2012) provided a critical analysis of the ways in which various forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) foster students' postsecondary aspirations in the absence of supportive educators and school opportunities. Thus, Martinez' (2012) application of an asset-based theoretical framework necessitated positioning the community, which was rich in resistant and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005), as the context of focus.

These studies exemplify the breadth of configurations that bring together methods, theories, and schools' positioning in the geographic ecology to privilege different perspectives in research on students' aspirations. These examples shape understandings of how rural education is explored from varied lenses and with varied aims, which all contribute value to scholarship.

Summary of Literature and Implications for Future Research

As described in this review, the study of rural students' aspirations is complex, and rural youth remain underrepresented in education literature at large (Corbette, 2016; Johnson et. al., 2014). To help build towards future scholarship, this review offered an analysis of how researchers have studied rural students' aspirations by exploring definitions of rurality, methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks. The outcomes of this analysis suggest that while these studies contribute valuable foundational knowledge to the field, there remains room for exploration. Qualitative and quantitative methods offer complementary strengths, but the currently limited scope of study creates opportunities for further learning about diverse rural students and school communities. As a whole, the field struggles to coalesce around shared conceptualizations of rurality, while there also remains a need to deeply explore the heterogeneity of rural regions. In building towards a more comprehensive understanding of aspirations from a social justice lens, scholars must also consider how methods and theoretical frameworks might intersect in transformative ways. To support equitable student outcomes, a critical lens will be especially valuable as rural communities contend with growing socioeconomic inequalities and an influx of students of color. Thus, the implications of this literature review offer considerations for transformative future research, with attention to the shifting geographic, social, economic, and cultural landscape of rural places. I highlight three primary issues to consider. These include optimizing critical time points for rural education

research, employing new methods and frameworks for studying aspirations, and developing greater consciousness of positionality and rural identity.

Conducting Research in Historic Moments

Among quantitative studies, the time passed between data collection and publication poses a challenge in scholarship on rural students' aspirations. For example, Strayhorn (2009) reported on data from a national study beginning in 1988, two decades prior to publication. While this work certainly offers meaningful contributions, new analyses of contemporary data are important for the progression of the field. Much of the quantitative data collection preceded the Great Recession, a lengthy and severe economic crisis that was significant in recent history (Hodges et al., 2018; Thide & Monnant, 2016;). As a result of the crisis, the public education system was impacted by severe budget cuts (Hodges et al., 2018), postsecondary apprenticeship programs faced greater attrition (Bilginsoy, 2018), and higher unemployment rates were associated with increased community college enrollment (Carriere, 2016). Importantly, students' perceptions of opportunity may be affected by such significant shifts in the social, economic, and political climate in the decade following the 2008 financial crisis, and into the current era. Thus, the need for more recent data is particularly relevant to future quantitative studies on youth aspirations. Further, qualitative studies may contribute to understandings of how rural students experience the impact and repercussions of historic moments, and the related effects on postsecondary planning. The COVID-19 pandemic offers one such example. Such studies are crucial as the field progresses, given that the current state of literature is deemed insufficient to guide adequate reform decisions (Arnold et al., 2005).

Intersection of Methods and Frameworks: New Strategies for Studying Aspirations

While the current literature engages several methods and frameworks, future studies could contribute different analyses through new approaches that reorient our perspectives of how aspirations come to be. Critical theories offer foundational conceptual frameworks for rural scholars who approach their work with an equity mindset. Such philosophies represent essential lenses for framing questions about aspirations, particularly in light of the growing populations of rural students of color, often driven by immigration trends and migration patterns. As noted previously, few studies on rural students' aspirations focus on race or gender from a critical lens, and none of the articles reviewed represent LGBTQ+ students. Given the dearth of studies utilizing these frameworks, perspectives such as Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory, and Queer Theory could offer transformative approaches to studying students' beliefs about their opportunities and trajectories, considering their social and geographic positioning in rural places. Additionally, transformative methodological approaches may contribute to novel studies on aspirations. As discussed later, grounding the research in empowering, student-centered approaches like motivational interviewing may offer one path forward.

Defining "Rural": Positionality and Rural Identity

The analysis of definitions in this review suggests the category of "rural" is continually in flux, particularly for regions undergoing demographic change. However, despite recognizing the heterogeneity of rural communities, scholars have yet to acknowledge that the environmental context of their studies may change over time. Importantly, this does not mean such regions will no longer retain characteristics of rurality. However, in much of the literature, these defining characteristics seem to be based on outsiders' interpretations, as they are exclusively described by the researchers rather than community members. While the quantitative Census locale system may not have the capacity to translate what it means to live in a geographically isolated setting,

the qualitative criteria determined by researchers may also be insufficient. Rural scholarship may be enhanced through a systematic exploration of how participants living in remote regions describe their homes, schools, and communities, and their experiences with rural identity. Without considering the positionality of researchers and participants, scholars may miss important perspectives by imposing labels on groups of people who have important insights about how rurality can be accurately represented. Thus, shifting researchers' orientation to this work could help transform how concepts of positionality, representation, partnerships, and student voice unfold in future scholarship on youths' aspirations. While broadening rural definitions to include additional voices may further complicate existing challenges of this field, such an approach may also facilitate crucial opportunities for meaningful dialogue that may otherwise be overlooked.

This dissertation responds to these areas of need by putting forth a study that attends to a pivotal historic moment and an understudied type of rural region, which is facing sweeping educational challenges grounded in both the immediate and enduring effects of the current national climate and local rural complexities. Additionally, this dissertation centers the positionalities of study participants whose perspectives contribute to an authentic representation of the diversity and complexities of rural identity. Lastly, given the population of study participants, a mix of theories and methods are used to promote transformation within rural education research and practice.

Theoretical Frameworks for Dissertation Research

This literature review served to establish an understanding of how aspirations have been studied previously, and to inform the theoretical orientation and methodological design of this dissertation. Given that this dissertation investigates the dynamic between students' unique social

and geographic contexts and their aspirations -- particularly in schools and communities fraught with inequities -- I next explain how developmental, sociological, and critical theories together offer useful perspectives to guide this study. Equity-focused research necessitates interrogating and understanding institutional oppression without neglecting or diminishing individual and community empowerment. Thus, these frameworks help facilitate an analysis of structures and systems in relationship to individual perceptions and experiences.

Developmental Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

As a grounding concept for the study of human development, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) positions the individual at the center of several nested, complex, and dynamic environments, which impact experiences. These environmental influences occur at five levels of expansion, defined as the "microsystem" (intimate relationships), "mesosystem" (groups and institutions), "exosystem" (neighborhood), "macrosystem" (political and economic systems), and "chronosystem" (shifting space of change and constancy) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Scholars argue educational inequities are classic systems problems based on interactions between individuals and their environments, and that an ecological model is foundational to the advancement of this field of research (Demi et al., 2010; Arnold et al., 2013). Indeed, ecological systems theory has been applied to claim aspirations are shaped by multiple environments and individual characteristics (Strayhorn, 2009). While I apply ecological systems theory to interrogate the enabling and constraining conditions within students' school, family, and community environments, the framework is limited in explicating how power and socialization operate within and across microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems (Houston, 2015). Thus, while Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model elevates the local context -- which is crucial for this dissertation, given the unique geographic region and

population of study -- Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus offers a complementary framework for conceptualizing the interplay between structure and individual agency, considering the mediating influences that youth experience across environments.

Sociological Framework: Habitus

Foregrounding both structure and agency, the concept of habitus holds explanatory power for understanding how an individual's cognition and behavior are conditioned by the intersecting dimensions of their own identity (i.e., race, class, gender, etc.) and the corresponding unequal structures of the broader society (i.e., racism, classism, sexism, etc.) (Bourdieu, 1990). Societal power dynamics are internalized through habitus, a set of dispositions, developed through life experiences, that shape how each individual perceives and navigates the world based on the opportunities and resources (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital) available to them (Bourdieu, 1990). By acting in accordance with socialization experiences and influences, structures, and dominant cultural capital that mediate their beliefs and actions, individuals can also contribute to the reproduction of those conditions, or resist them (Bourdieu, 1990). Therefore, while the subconscious imprint of habitus is enduring, it can also be continually redefined as individuals encounter new experiences and social norms, and enact a degree of agency to pursue different courses of action (Bourdieu, 1990). Via the habitus frame, this dissertation aims to make visible the connections between racialized, classed, and gendered identities, educational and occupational contexts, and oppressive social structures that (re)produce imaginable futures for rural, socioeconomically disadvantaged, Latinx students.

Although the habitus lens was not used in the studies on rural adolescents' postsecondary aspirations represented in this literature review, scholars have applied it in related research areas, such as attitudes about higher education. For example, Scandone (2018) drew upon habitus to

explain how the degree-earning aspirations of low-income, immigrant, women of color in college were rooted in three primary attitudes: (a) their families' outlooks on academic achievement and the high value of education; (b) their commitment to gaining social mobility through achieving university degrees; and (c) their drive to challenge the disadvantages of not being members of the white male middle class (the dominant social group), such as confronting racism, sexism, and classism, by increasing minority representation in academia and their career paths. Notably, Scandone (2018) frames habitus and aspirations from a strengths-based and culturally grounded lens centering the perspectives of communities of color, which is atypical of this field.

Traditionally, Bourdieusian analyses have been critiqued as too rigidly structuralist and focused on a narrow set of white middle-class values and dominant cultural capital, and thus, absent of diverse cultural understandings (Appadurai, 2004; Archer & Francis, 2007; Yosso, 2005; Zipin et al., 2015). Further, critics expose how aspirations among disenfranchised student populations are pathologized from a deficit lens that views their future orientations as lacking and requiring intervention. Given that this dissertation invites perspectives of youth of color from marginalized communities and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, I consider the foundational contributions of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Bourdieu (1990) in conjunction with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model. Yosso (2005) critiques and extends Bourdieu's (1990) frame by pushing researchers to understand cultural contexts from a strengths-based perspective and draw upon local expertise. This approach also honors the role of community agency in guiding postsecondary aspirations and pathways, which has traditionally received less attention than the role of students' individual resiliency and persistence (Jayakumar, Vue, & Allen, 2013).

Critical Framework: Community Cultural Wealth

Community cultural wealth provides a framework to counter the dearth of asset-based models to guide research on educational equity issues for students of color (Yosso, 2005). Educators have historically approached their work from a deficit lens that characterizes young people of color as "at risk," culturally deprived, or lacking the assets necessary to succeed (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Kanagala et al., 2016; Valdez & Lugg, 2010; Yosso, 2005). From this perspective, cultural capital is understood through Bourdieu's (1979) theory of social reproduction, which explains how privileged individuals of high status protect and advance their power in ways that are valued, legitimized, and rewarded by the formal educational system (Jayakumar et al., 2013).

The community cultural wealth model highlights six different forms of capital, grounded in students' strengths that often go unrecognized by educators: aspirational capital (maintaining high hopes and goals despite barriers); linguistic capital (communication in more than one language and connections to cultural history); familial capital (extended kinship networks that foster collective consciousness); social capital (peers and social contacts who support success); navigational capital (maneuvering within hostile institutions); and resistance capital (knowledge and skills from engaging in social justice) (Yosso, 2005). Using aspirational capital as one example, research shows rural Latinx youth are increasingly aiming to pursue higher education, despite facing limited access to qualified school counselors, having fewer opportunities to complete rigorous coursework and engage in college preparatory activities, and being less likely to ultimately achieve a postsecondary degree (Freeman, 2016; Irvin et. al., 2012; Meece et al., 2010; Schmidt et al., 2014;). Studies oriented towards these modes of empowerment may counter pervasive narratives that characterize Latinx students as culturally deficient and academically unmotivated (Burciaga & Erbstein, 2012), and prompt meaningful institutional support systems.

While Yosso's (2005) model has been successfully utilized in urban contexts to facilitate a college-going culture among Black youth (Jayakumar et al., 2013) and prepare teachers to work with Latinx students more effectively (Saathoff, 2015), research using this approach in rural schools has not been widely published. However, in their efforts to understand how college students from both urban and rural communities navigate their pathways into higher education, Luna and Martinez (2013) found that Latinx students use community cultural wealth to survive the neglect of educational institutions that have historically failed them. Given that equity issues are exacerbated by the unique conditions of geographically isolated communities (Bajema et al., 2002; Johnson et. al., 2014), and that researchers have cautioned against the harmful effects of deficit perspectives (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Kanagala et al., 2016; Valdez & Lugg, 2010; Yosso, 2005), Yosso's (2005) framework offers a transformative strategy for studying the aspirations of rural Latinx youth. Community cultural wealth also provides a foundation for conceptualizing ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) from a critical lens, and promotes social justice by honoring students' assets. Nonetheless, this framework is arguably stymied by an overreliance on individual agency, potentially placing undue responsibility on communities to resist and persist, rather than inherently promoting a change-making orientation.

Ethically Studying Aspirations: Methodological Implications of Theories

Given their contributions and critiques, the above frameworks are helpful but not sufficient for studying the future orientations of marginalized students in this pivotal moment. Considering the foundational core tension between structure and agency, Zipin et al. (2015) push a novel framework and method for research that interrogates institutional oppression while empowering youth to imagine strategies to forge their own pathways. To this end, Zipin et al. (2015) problematize the ethics of studying aspirations today, in what they call a "darkly troubled

historical era -- likely to be prolonged -- in which young people in power-marginalized contexts face uncertain and downwardly mobile prospects for livelihoods" (p. 241).

This perspective is particularly salient in communities like rural Southern California. While immense strength and hope abound, a difficult reality cannot be discounted. As described in the following chapter, this region embodies the intersection of geographic isolation, extreme intergenerational poverty, increasingly hostile international border politics, and a "minority-majority" community of Latinx students and families long disenfranchised. Given such conditions, Zipin et al. (2015) posit the current research on aspirations is overly simplistic, failing to examine how feelings and senses about opportunity are actually formed within students' environments. Consequently, education "reforms" often push youth to develop "better" aspirations, without critically analyzing the systems of oppression and symbolic violence making such goals nearly impossible to achieve for disenfranchised students within existing conditions. Researchers can actually reproduce the structural harms of capitalism, institutional racism, and other forms of systemic oppression by asking power-marginalized youth to express their dreams without considering the self-deprecating beliefs students may eventually internalize to explain why they were ultimately unable to achieve their goals. Within this dynamic, students may become critical of perceived personal "failures," rather than of a system designed to fail them (Zipin et al., 2015).

Zipin et al. (2015) extend Bourdieu's concepts of "doxic" aspirations (dominant beliefs about "success") and "habituated" aspirations (self-limiting, "realistic" ambitions), to theorize that there is an "emergent" dimension of aspirations (tapping aspirational capital and funds of knowledge), which exists in a "re-imaginative" space. Methodologically, they task "ethical" researchers with capacitating youth to think in emergent ways, by conceptualizing potential

futures beyond the constraining forces of the school, community, and broader sociopolitical contexts that suppress students' imaginations. Given that this framework has been well-theorized but methodologically underdeveloped, I approach interview dialogues as transformative spaces, where youth can grapple with feelings of optimism about their futures *and* recognize the forms of oppression they encounter in a fundamentally unjust society. I perceive this challenge as a variation of promoting "critical consciousness" via liberatory praxis (Freire, 1972). However, neither Zipin et al. (2015) nor Freire (1972) propose strategies to actually achieve these visions for research and education. Therefore, I grapple with such methodological innovations in this study on aspirations, while considering the developmental needs of the youth participants.

From a developmental lens, San Antonio (2016) acknowledges that in the United States, the life stage of emerging adulthood often begins quite abruptly upon high school graduation, and educators are often unequipped to support students as they transition into postsecondary life. This remains consistent with youths' experiences from a variety of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and regional settings (Arnett, 2000, 2007, 2015), though this developmental process remains understudied in rural contexts (San Antonio, 2016). Thus, as detailed next in Chapter 3, I use the ecological, sociological, and critical theories outlined above in combination with student-centered qualitative methods to engage in "ethical" scholarship on students' aspirations.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

This dissertation investigates how rural, socioeconomically disadvantaged, Latinx students perceive their college and career opportunities, develop and sustain aspirations, and make decisions about postsecondary pathways, with attention to their unique social and geographic positioning. To explore these lines of inquiry, I conducted a multiple case study of high school seniors, drawing upon qualitative data gathered via monthly interviews throughout one academic year. Participants included five first-generation students enrolled in a college preparatory program at a Southern California public high school, which was located in a remote agricultural valley along the United States-Mexico border. The study addresses the following research questions:

- Overarching Question: How do students attending a rural school located along the U.S.-Mexico international border envision their college and career opportunities, and make decisions about their postsecondary trajectories?
    - Sub Question 1: How are students' schooling experiences, including the presence (or absence) of college and career role models or mentors, related to their perceptions, aspirations, and decisions about postsecondary pathways?
    - Sub Question 2: How do students' identities, including their sense of place, and home and community contexts, factor into their postsecondary perceptions, aspirations, and decisions?
    - Sub Question 3: How are students' proximity to the border, and border-crossing experiences, related to their perceptions, aspirations, and decisions about postsecondary opportunities?

In the following sections, I offer a positionality statement and describe the historical context of the study, and then detail the case study methods utilized in this dissertation.

Positionality

A positionality statement is warranted for this study, as critical scholars recognize that consciousness of their own cultural context, and of those participating in research, are essential to the process of coming to "know" what is "known" (Abajian, 2016; Milner, 2007). I carry the identities and biases of a U.S.-born, multiracial Asian and white woman, who speaks fluent English as a first language and elementary conversational Spanish. I also bring a breadth of formal education and practitioner knowledge from over a decade of supporting institutionally marginalized and underrepresented students as a K-12 school counselor, undergraduate college advisor, and university-school-community partnership liaison. As a qualitative researcher, my counseling experience has proven particularly beneficial in complex and sensitive contexts, such as interviews addressing issues of identity and oppression. Additionally, much of my work has involved establishing, improving, and reflecting upon relationships between representatives of higher education institutions and K-12 schools. My prior research, consultation, and service with public schools in many of Southern California's rural regions also inform my perspectives on the unique sociopolitical climate, strengths, challenges, and ethical considerations often present in geographically isolated education settings. However, unlike other rural places I encountered in past work, the population in the region of focus in this study is predominantly Latinx, and includes immigrants, migrant workers, and undocumented youth. Given the even higher risk for exploitation of these groups, I am especially cautious to ensure I do not abuse my power and privilege as a researcher. Through partnerships with local educators and student participants, I aim to facilitate collaborative, ethical, and empowering research to drive meaningful change

(Green, 2013). As addressed next, in this study, I strived to develop supportive and reciprocal relationships throughout the processes of gaining entree and designing the study, as well as collecting and analyzing data.

Gaining Entree

Despite bringing a professional background in school partnership work and expertise that informs my collaborative approach with students and educators, I gained entree into the school involved in this study through a different process than I have with prior research sites, due to my unique relationship with this community. I am privileged to have a personal connection to the region through my partner, extended family, and local friends and colleagues who call this setting "home." My extended family's experiences living and learning in the community over three decades inspired my personal interest in investigating some of the educational strengths, challenges, and needs of this region. Thus, prior to beginning this study, my personal contacts had already facilitated entree in ways that may not align with the traditional role and experience of a visiting researcher. This level of familiarity benefited me in developing a sense of comfort and belonging. Further, to support even greater embeddedness in the community, I moved to the county in October 2020. At the time, home quarantining mandates were in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so I was not able to engage in in-person activities at the school or elsewhere. Nonetheless, living in the region made a difference in my experience as a researcher, particularly as the study became more ethnographic in nature.

While these relationships and experiences supported gaining entree, I am also conscious of how the privilege of "unearned" forms of access, and perhaps, perceived authority through personal connections, could potentially impact the research processes of collecting data, developing conclusions, and sharing findings. These forms of investment in the study are also a

potential source of bias, in that I had already formed a critical perspective of the education system prior to entering the community from the lens of a researcher. My perspectives have been shaped by prior knowledge of a challenging personal family history in the county's schools, and my familiarity with literature documenting the institutional barriers facing rural students of color more broadly. Additionally, as a newly arrived resident to the region, my experiences in the community were instructive, though distinct from the daily realities of longtime community members, and those who do not share my identities, privileges, and positionality. Given that such experiences can inform biases, which are often inherent to community-engaged qualitative research approaches, frequent member checks were an essential component of my methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As addressed later, member checks via regular consultations with participants served to illuminate biases, validate and complicate findings, and support a greater degree of validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Finally, the process of gaining entree for this study was made easier due to the historical context of the research, as discussed next.

Historical Context Framing the Study

This dissertation follows a short-term exploratory qualitative research project I conducted in the region of study in 2018. Because my overarching goal as an educator and scholar is to employ research to address inequities in access to formal schooling resources, the previous study focused on key gatekeepers to postsecondary opportunities, such as school counselors, outreach program advisors, and representatives of higher education partnerships. Through participant observations of college outreach workers, and interviews with school- and district-level leaders, I aimed to understand how college access efforts take place in the local schools, which all serve a majority population of first-generation students of color from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Findings from this previous project highlighted some positive aspects of regional

college access work, such as deliberate efforts to collaborate within and across outreach programs, and the practice of celebrating all successes that promote higher education opportunities. However, some educators leading college outreach and access work expressed dissatisfaction with the low four-year college-going rates and transfer rates for the region's high schools and local community college. Educators also pointed to a perceived disconnect between their goals of facilitating application, admission, and attendance at four-year universities, and student outcomes. These insights gleaned from my previous exploratory inquiry helped shape my identification of this region as an important venue for a case study (Ruddin, 2006; Yin, 2018).

Rationale for Case Study Methodology

Case study research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which frames reality as subjective, socially constructed, and dependent upon individual perspectives (Searle, 1995; Yin, 2018;). As a qualitative method, case study allows researchers to gain insight into phenomena through participants' descriptions of their experiences, beliefs, and actions (Lather, 1992; Yin, 2018). Case study is an ideal method to use when the boundaries are unclear between the phenomenon and context, and the researcher seeks to explore questions about how and why a phenomenon occurs, while considering relevant conditions in a naturalistic setting (Yin, 2018). Because cases are complex and can become too broad if approached without parameters, it is crucial to define boundaries that will determine the breadth and depth of the study (Yin, 2018).

Case study is an appropriate method for this dissertation because it allows for an in-depth exploratory and explanatory analysis of students' experiences in the context of rural schooling in this Southern California agricultural setting and border region. Although I focus on five individual students as cases, the bounds of this study encompass their school and broader

community because the educational, sociopolitical, and community contexts influencing the entire region are central to the exploration of students' aspirations.

Generalizability

Although the topic of generalizability has been long debated, the belief that a researcher cannot generalize from a case study is a misconception in the field (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Ruddin, 2006; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). In response to this critique, some researchers mistakenly attempt to find a "representative case," which would involve a random sample that could hold up to statistical generalization (Ruddin, 2006; Yin, 2018). Instead, the goal of case study research should be to strategically select a "critical case," which allows the researcher to collect the "supreme sum of information on a given phenomenon" (Ruddin, 2006, p. 803). Ruddin (2006) describes case study reasoning as, "a strong form of hypothetico-deductive theorizing, not as a weak form of statistical inference" (p. 800). This means cases are selected because they are particularly well-suited to illuminate a phenomenon or provide explanations that may contribute to theoretical insights (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Thus, I selected a group of students in this region of focus to serve as cases with the goal of generalizing findings to theory, which Yin (2018) calls "analytic generalization." These student cases are not intended to generalize to the experiences of all students, but instead support theory-building (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) -- in this case, theoretical insights about how to think holistically about youths' aspirations and postsecondary pathways. Findings have implications for building broader understandings about how and why particular outcomes have occurred. Overall, this work aims to shed light on valuable theoretical concepts that might extend beyond the specific scope of this study and benefit the education community collectively.

Case Study Design

Case study offers a variety of designs, and the selection of a specific type is driven by the overall purpose of the study. As explained below, I conducted a multiple case study with five first-generation college-bound students enrolled in a credit-bearing college preparatory course at their high school. The results from this case study may support theoretical replication, thereby generalizing to theory and suggesting extensions of, or contrasts to, existing arguments.

Regional Community

Several conditions shape my identification of this setting as an important region of focus, offering opportunities to generalize to theory (Ruddin, 2006). A prominent geographical feature of this community is its proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border, positioning it as a region under unparalleled surveillance in a time when border security is highly politicized. For instance, when entering or exiting the county from any direction, vehicles must pass in through recently erected Border Patrol checkpoints. While such racialized sociopolitical conditions spotlight the region as a contested space, persistent socioeconomic challenges, such as intergenerational poverty, are also prominent.

Data from the U.S. Census (2019) indicate the population in this rural county looks different and faces exacerbated inequities compared to its nearest urban county and the state of California at large. The local population is 85% Hispanic/Latinx, compared to 34.1% and 39.4% respectively. Only 15.2% of adults have a bachelor's degree, compared to 38.8% in the closest large city and 33.9% across the state. This community also faces socioeconomic challenges, with a poverty rate of 22%, which is double that of the nearest large county and the state of California.

It is also important to consider relationships between this educational community and universities. As one of two geographically proximate public four-year institutions, a nearby

University of California campus has a decades-long history of facilitating research studies and outreach programs related to college eligibility, admission, and readiness for institutionally marginalized and underrepresented students in nearby urban and suburban districts. However, despite falling under the university's outreach purview, educational resources available to more distant rural students are limited, and the majority of college access work is facilitated by local educators rather than university representatives (M. Pollock, personal communication, February 8, 2018). Thus, qualitative case study is an ideal investigative method to explore why these conditions position the region as a unique setting of importance, and how these contextual factors may shape understandings of rural education issues more broadly.

School Site

With this regional community context in mind, and through consultation with local education program collaborators, I partnered with one large comprehensive public high school for the study. According to the annual School Accountability Report Card (California Department of Education, 2020), the student population is 93% "Hispanic or Latino[x]" and 74% "socioeconomically disadvantaged." The site also has a "Title 1" designation, meaning it receives supplemental federal funding designated to provide additional support programming for schools enrolling high concentrations of students in poverty. Student enrollment exceeds 2,100 with over 500 students per grade level, which is atypical of rural schools. However, the school retains some core traits of rurality, such as serving a geographically isolated agricultural community, and participating in the "California Rural Ed Network," which is a statewide strategic planning group focused on rural school priorities.

Various characteristics qualify this site as an important location of inquiry, as identified in discussions with local partners. Overall, the high enrollment at this school suggests the student

population mirrors those of urban settings in numbers, which is uncharacteristic of most census-designated rural regions. The population is also generally ethno-racially and socioeconomically homogenous, similar to many large public schools located in segregated urban and suburban communities. Additionally, the school's positioning in the local geography, such as its proximity to the international border, invites meaningful considerations about how such factors might shape students' experiences. Because local partners and I view this site as an important setting of focus, we believe findings of the study may help inform future directions for the school, and may also point to shared educational experiences, strengths, challenges, and needs in the region. Thus, case study offers a valuable approach to examine whether existing theories on postsecondary aspirations, planning, and decision-making adequately represent or hold true for students in "urban-esque," rural, international border contexts, such as this Southern California community.

Data Collection

Educator partners and student participants were involved as collaborators throughout the data collection process. Thus, these research partners were consulted about key methodological decisions, such as my recruitment plan and interview approach, which are discussed below. Additionally, while case study methodology requires deeply intentional research planning and rigorous processes of data collection and analysis, it also requires flexibility and adaptiveness due to unforeseeable changes that may arise. In this dissertation, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced methodological challenges that prompted adjustments to my original data collection plan, as described below.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Methodology

Case study research requires investigators to remain flexible and adapt their methodology as unexpected events occur (Yin, 2003). Importantly, such methodological adjustments are most

effective and rigorous when researchers have a deep understanding of the original purpose and theory driving the case study, to determine when a deviation is "acceptable or even desirable," and successfully "balance adaptiveness with *rigor* -- but not rigidity" (Yin, 2003, p. 61). In this dissertation study, the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges that required such a shift in data collection, although the research questions remained unchanged. Throughout summer 2020, as the revised study took shape, I was in email and phone contact with a district representative, the school principal, and education partners biweekly from June through September 2020.

Case Selection

The month of October 2020 represented a pivotal time for research progress. The school began a new distance learning schedule, using Google Classroom to hold courses online during the pandemic. Due to challenges communicating remotely with busy and overwhelmed educators, the principal proposed recruiting youth participants via a nationally recognized college preparatory program that first-generation college-bound students were enrolled in at the school. This program offers credit-bearing college and career readiness classes during the school day, with the goal of increasing access to higher education by providing academic scaffolds, postsecondary resources, and skill-building opportunities.

To facilitate communication, the principal emailed the lead college preparatory class teacher to inform her about my dissertation research, and my education partners followed up to express their support of the study and their interest in collaborating. Education partners then coordinated a Zoom meeting in which I presented the study to the lead college prep teacher and college prep counselor, who were friends and longtime colleagues of the partnership program director. Then, with the lead teacher's support, I recruited participants via online classroom presentations in two different senior college prep classes. About 30 total seniors attended the

presentations, and of these, 15 students expressed interest in participating in the study and voluntarily provided their contact information. I followed up with all of them via both email and text message. Of these, seven students met with me on Zoom for an initial discussion of the study, and five continued on as participants throughout the school year. One student who declined to continue with the study cited family stressors as a barrier to participation, and the other student expressed that their busy schedule created stressors which prevented them from taking on new commitments. Particularly, this student was struggling to complete their four-year university applications, which were due the following month. We remained in touch via text message for a few weeks, and during this time I connected the student with college advisors through my education partners, who assisted the student with the college application process.

Communication with my educator collaborators and student participants was essential throughout the case selection period. I corresponded with the school principal, my education partners, and the college prep teachers to provide biweekly updates from October through November. I was also in contact with youth via text message, email, and phone for two to three weeks to provide information, gain consent from students and their caregivers, and answer questions before meeting with them for the first research interview. Student interviews began in November 2020 and continued monthly through the end of the school year in June 2021.

Participants

This study focuses on students in the 12th grade because the final year of high school involves pivotal points for postsecondary planning and decision-making which span the entire academic year, such as when students submit college applications in the fall and graduate from high school in the spring. Educator collaborators including college outreach program directors and the school principal were consulted about the student population and case selection, and they

agreed about the importance of focusing on 12th graders. As noted above, the five student participants voluntarily participated in the study following a recruitment presentation I delivered virtually in their college preparatory class. Four participants identified as young women and one identified as a young man, with all students identifying as Mexican. Two students spoke to their mixed ethno-racial identities, with one identifying as Mexican and white, and another identifying as Mexican and African American. I refer to students by these pseudonyms in the remaining chapters: Andres, Claudia, Elba, Paola, and Sofia. This brief table summarizes key identifiers.

Table 3.1: Overview of Student Sample

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnic/Racial Identity	Age
Andres	Man	Mexican and white	18 throughout year
Claudia	Woman	Mexican and African American	17 and turned 18
Elba	Woman	Mexican	18 and turned 19
Paola	Woman	Mexican	17 and turned 18
Sofia	Woman	Mexican	17 and turned 18

Students' self-described identities and backgrounds are presented in greater detail in the individual student profiles provided in Chapter 4.

Interviews

Every participant was interviewed individually and confidentially a minimum of eight times across the eight-month data collection period, from November 2020 through June 2021. Additionally, all students voluntarily offered to extend their participation into the summer after they graduated from high school, so the total interviews amounted to 9-12 sessions for each participant. Interviews occurred approximately once per month, and each session lasted an average of one hour, amounting to a total of 50 interviews for analysis. Interviews were conducted via Zoom video calls and over the phone, and were audio recorded and transcribed.

Students also engaged in informal communication with me between interview sessions via text messages and emails. The focus of our discussions beyond the formal interview context were often logistical, such as when a student explained why they needed to reschedule an upcoming interview. However, such conversations also led to students briefly sharing about responsibilities they needed to prioritize over our interview commitments, such as activities they would be doing with their families, their birthday celebrations, or academic stressors imposing on their availability. In the more emotionally taxing moments of these exchanges, students expressed enduring some of the most difficult experiences of their lives due to the pandemic. One student's entire immediate family contracted COVID-19, leaving her to self-isolate alone, and another student's grandparent suddenly passed away from the virus. No matter the circumstances, I reminded students that our interviews were always voluntary, and that we could cancel sessions or stop at any point so they could invest time in other priorities. Nonetheless, students always circled back with me to be sure we could still meet, indicating their investment in the research experience.

Additionally, students contacted me for support in other ways. For example, early in the school year, Claudia sent me an email requesting, "Before we start the interview, may I ask you a question about college?" Her self-initiated inquiry indicated how she was already thinking about her aspirations and her future, leveraging the research context in her postsecondary planning. Other students also sent similar messages requesting support on a wide array of topics, often still related to academics. On his high school graduation day, Andres sent me a text message asking, "How do I put this on? Don't worry, it's just my grad cap. I just have trouble keeping the paper down to the cap but I'ma just hot glue it." I reassured Andres that, "There's an idea! It's going to look great!" while reminding him that at the end of the ceremony, he would move his tassel from

one side of the cap to the other -- so, hopefully, he could avoid getting any hot glue on that part. Such interactions illustrated the nature of our positive rapport and reciprocal relationships.

During the research interviews, I used a semi-structured format to explore topics related to students' aspirations and postsecondary pathways, such as influential relationships, school and community experiences, and students' beliefs about their future prospects. The interview protocol with initial questions is provided in Appendix A, and additional questions emerged through students' contributions to the collaborative dialogue. Guided by the "ethical" frame for aspirations research (Zipin et al., 2015), I considered interviews as potential sites of transformation, aiming to tap into imaginative futures and emergent thinking via dialogue about students' aspirations. Towards these aims, I drew upon a counseling approach called "motivational interviewing," as discussed below.

Motivational Interviewing as an Ethical Method

In response to Zipin et al.'s (2015) call for ethical research methods in alignment with their ethical framework for studying aspirations, I decided to utilize a well-known counseling approach called "motivational interviewing" (Miller & Rollnick, 2002) when interviewing students. Motivational interviewing is an evidence-based, collaborative, and empowering counseling process that aims to elicit interviewees' own motivations and concerns around achieving their goals, in congruence with their values, experiences, and needs (Merrill, 2014). The participant's experience of motivational interviewing is reflective, not instructive, making this technique well-aligned with the methodological standards of qualitative research. The interviewer is not viewed as an expert, but as a collaborator in a dialogue that elicits the interviewee's perspectives around their own goals, barriers, capabilities, and actions. Therefore, motivational interviewing offers an ideal method for qualitative research on aspirations,

especially in conjunction with critical theories that emphasize the knowledge of the participants over that of the researcher, such as community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

The ideal outcome of motivational interviewing is to elicit "change talk," which equips participants with the kinds of perspectives that will help them understand barriers to progress, and support movement towards their goals (Merrill, 2014). Notably, participants are ultimately equipping *themselves* with this new knowledge, because the motivational interviewing process is fundamentally reflective. Miller and Rollnick (2009) summarize:

> The typically brief course of motivational interviewing in one or two sessions does not involve teaching new skills, re-educating, counterconditioning, changing the environment, or installing more rational and adaptive beliefs. It is not about installing anything, but rather is about eliciting from people that which is already there. It is not the communication of an expert who assumes that "I have what you need," but rather the facilitative style of a companion whose manner says, "You have what you need, and together we'll find it." (p. 134)

Thus, motivational interviewing facilitates change, and within the research context, it offers one strategy to support students along their pathways. The approach addresses the call to move beyond talking about aspirations, by introducing support and building consciousness (Zipin et al., 2015). Without offering opinions, instructions, or other forms of guidance, the interviewer may ask questions that invite the interviewee to consider new points of view, or think about how the interviewee's current situation and behaviors are either in alignment or in conflict with their own values and aims. By helping participants build understanding and move towards action, I believe motivational interviewing is one strategy to bolster an ethical theory (Zipin et al., 2015) with an ethical practice from the counseling field. Below are some examples of motivational interviewing techniques (Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Hall et al., 2012; Merrill, 2014). Alongside each strategy, I provide example language and sentence stems I used with students,

either as part of the interview protocol or in follow-up questions. Additional examples of motivational interviewing exchanges with students are provided in the findings.

1. Use active listening strategies -- "OAERS":
    a. Use *open* ended questions: "What got you thinking about this?"
    b. *Affirm* interviewees: "I hear you."
    c. Seek *elaboration* or *examples* from interviewees: "Can you think of an example?"
    d. Make *reflective* statements: "You are saying this is a new experience for you."
    e. *Summarize*: "If I am understanding you correctly, it sounds like… (summary). Is that accurate, or am I missing something?"
2. Explore goals and values: "How does this fit with things you want for your future life?"
3. Ask about extremes: "What would be the best thing to happen if you achieve this goal? What would be the worst thing to happen if you didn't achieve it?"
4. Ask about benefits and adverse consequences: "How would this path benefit you? You've said good things about it. On the other hand, what could be the downsides?"
5. Ask "miracle questions": "If you were 100% successful in achieving your goals, what would your life look like compared to right now?"
6. Use scales: "On a scale of one to ten, how important is this goal to you? What would it take to move you to a different number?"
7. Look backwards and forwards: "How is your progress looking better or worse compared to last semester? If things continue on this current path, what do you expect to happen?"
8. Ask permission and emphasize personal choice: "If it is alright with you, can I offer some resources to consider? It fully is up to you to decide if you want to pursue any of them."
9. Go along with resistance: "You have some concerns about this pathway. I hear you."

10. Person-centered dialogue (show high degrees of empathy, support, acceptance): “This is very important to you, and I can see you are not going to give up on it. I believe in you.”
11. Create a context for change, but do not influence -- let the interviewee determine actions: “What do you think you will do now? What next step, if any, makes sense to you?”

Given that these counseling strategies are a natural fit for change-making and ethical scholarship, qualitative researchers may already integrate these kinds of principles into interview protocols without necessarily naming the strategy as an evidence-based communication practice. In this dissertation, my goal was to intentionally bridge theory and practice across the fields of education and counseling to foster a transformative interview space that elicits students’ consciousness about both individual agency in achieving aspirations and structural barriers that may impede progress.

Data Analysis

As in the data collection process, educator partners and student participants were also consulted throughout data analysis, which occurred in multiple phases and included analytic approaches such as explanation building and cross-case synthesis. Member checks were essential to support reliability of the findings, by ensuring that my methodological procedures for data collection and analysis accurately honored participants’ needs and perspectives. As described in the following findings chapters, positioning each student as a case offered one lens on the data, and I also engaged in cross-case analysis to examine patterns spanning individual perspectives. Organizing the data in multiple ways helped to facilitate an understanding of themes within and across participants, keeping in mind the bounds of the case (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

Member Checks

Member checks are a critical component of rigorous case study methodology (Yin, 2003), and thus, regular consultations with the student participants were a consistent analytic practice throughout the duration of the study. Through member checks, I tapped into students' views about the findings, as well as their beliefs about their own involvement in the study. Additionally, the opportunity to invite students' perspectives on the research experience itself allowed for me to intentionally support greater integration of student voice in the study. For instance, in every interview, I included questions such as, "How have things been since the last time we spoke?", "From your perspective, how do you feel the interviews are going?", and, "Is there anything we did not have a chance to discuss today, that you'd like to explore now, or add as a topic in future interviews?" This created space for students to introduce topics that were not part of my predetermined interview protocol, but arose as salient issues shaping their current educational experiences and future aspirations. As presented in the findings chapters, lines of inquiry invited by students included their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic socially and educationally, personal mental health concerns, and support they accessed via peers, family, and educators -- all of which were relevant to students' future-orientations and their transitions to young adulthood. Therefore, engaging in multiple student-centered interviews over time allowed for an iterative process of data collection and analysis that incorporated participants' perspectives about how to both enact agency and make meaning of the research experience.

Phase One: Case Descriptions

In phase one of data analysis, I developed a case description (Yin, 2018) for each student to illuminate differences and similarities in factors that shaped youths' school and community experiences, and mediated their individual aspirations, postsecondary pathways, and future-orientations. Case descriptions offer utility in identifying a pattern of complexity (Yin, 2018),

helping to explain how participants conceptualized and navigated their journeys to postsecondary opportunity given their unique identities and contexts. I also wrote memos to guide case descriptions throughout data collection. Organizing my analysis in this way helped me ultimately explore and explain the processes by which students conceptualized and made decisions about their transition to young adult life after high school. Drawing upon these case descriptions, I present individual student profiles in Chapter 4, alongside students' perspectives of their school and broader community contexts.

Phase Two: Coding

In phase two, I used qualitative data analysis tools embedded in the "AmberScript" transcription program to code the large amount of narrative text from interviews. Following the recommendations of Emerson et al. (2011) and Miles et al. (2014) respectively, I read through all of the data sources cohesively, and engaged in iterative analysis throughout the data collection period and afterward. I began the coding process by first reading through all of my notes and interview transcripts as interviews occurred without adding any codes, to gain a comprehensive perspective of the data gathered during each visit and across visits. Then I utilized an open coding approach and descriptive coding to label broad topics of interest. I also drew on relevant theories to make connections to the data. Ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) informed codes on school and community contexts, habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) informed codes on school culture, supports, barriers, and dominant cultural capital, and community cultural wealth informed codes on students' assets (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, Zipin et al.'s (2015) work on ethical frameworks for studying aspirations informed codes related to students' postsecondary goals and plans, which included college and career trajectories as well as other dimensions of life. The related focus on ethical methods for studying aspirations (Zipin et al., 2015) informed

codes about students' participation in the motivational interviewing process as well as their imaginative thinking about aspirations. A list of codes, definitions, and example quotes are included in Appendix B. Codes were refined and added as themes emerged throughout analysis. Being mindful of the intersection of ethical theories and methods, I also engaged in dialogue about the data and my interpretations with educator collaborators while maintaining student anonymity. Additionally, I conducted member checks with youth, remaining conscious of participants' expertise, and societal and interpersonal power dynamics in analysis. Explanation building and cross-case synthesis arose from this phase of data analysis, and these cross-case findings are presented in Chapter 5.

Explanation Building

As a form of pattern matching, I employed explanation building to reason about how and why certain aspirations, postsecondary planning activities, and decisions about specific pathways panned out for each student. This heavily iterative analytic process differs from general pattern matching because my final explanation of the cases was not necessarily proposed as a possible pattern prior to data collection. Eisenhardt (1989) notes that although early specification of the research questions and constructs may allow for strong empirical grounding, these early constructs are also tentative and may change during the study. In this dissertation, such changes arose throughout the process of student-centered interviews and member checks, when students introduced topics that were relevant to their experiences. For example, participants raised mental health concerns as an important topic throughout the school year. Therefore, explanation building served as a valuable analytic strategy, given that emerging themes extended beyond existing scholarship on aspirations and college going.

Eisenhardt (1989) argues that, "preordained theoretical perspectives or propositions may bias and limit the findings" (p. 536). Yin (2003) adds that an important process in building and refining an explanation is to consider alternate possibilities, and to show how other plausible or rival explanations "cannot be built, given the actual set of case study events" (p. 122). Aligning with these methodological perspectives, I conceptualized students' aspirations with consideration of relevant literatures, important contextual variables, and participants' own contributions without initially centering hypotheses about patterns and relationships. In this dissertation study, the process of explanation building was intertwined with cross-case synthesis, which helped drive contributions to theory.

Cross-Case Synthesis

Cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2018) enabled me to examine patterns and compare students' experiences. These cases were selected based on some presumed similarities (e.g., shared rural context and college preparatory activities), as well as some presumed differences (e.g., varied experiences and postsecondary pathways). Shared characteristics contributed to some commonalities in findings, and left space for exploring unique findings from each case without undermining the overarching argument made in my overall conclusions. Initial data also plausibly supported rival explanations that may contradict existing scholarship and theory. This drove me to more deeply analyze findings for each case, and then conduct cross-case analysis to illuminate important differences prompting ideas for a new contribution that complicates existing theory. Yin (2018) emphasizes the importance to "think upward conceptually" rather than "downward into the domain of individual variables" (p. 197). Thus, while critically analyzing students' individual experiences and cultural assets (Yosso, 2005), I remained attentive to the mediating influence of habitus via their socialization at school (with educators and peers) and at

home (with caregivers and families) (Bourdieu, 1990), as well as broader educational and community contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Methodological Benefits and Limitations

Through qualitative case study methodology, this dissertation provides a student-centered approach that foregrounds their assets to understand first-generation college-bound high school seniors' postsecondary aspirations, planning, and decision-making. While it makes contributions to theory and practice by offering alternate ways of thinking about youths' future-orientations and suggests possible pathways forward, there are also some limitations to case study methods. Namely, common critiques of case studies often point to the small number of participants as a limitation. This dissertation focused on the experiences of five students, and while the depth of data collection and analysis thoroughly represent the complex pathways of these youth, their journeys may not be representative of the experiences of other students in their school, home, or broader community contexts. As noted previously, the goal of case study research is not to generalize to populations but rather to generalize to theory. In the context of this study, findings contribute towards building an emerging theory about how students' postsecondary aspirations can be conceptualized holistically.

One limitation of these methods is the narrower focus on a small number of highly motivated college-bound students who participated in a college preparatory program throughout all four years of high school, which was intentionally structured to support higher education as a next step. However, these methods also facilitated unique benefits. Because my attention was focused on five students across an entire academic year, I was able to follow each participant through critical decision-making points that mattered to them in their transitions into postsecondary life as young adults. The students also introduced many additional influential

moments in their experience beyond college-going planning and decisions. The opportunity to accompany all participants through their holistic experiences as high school seniors allowed me to learn from them as they developed, maintained, and refined their individual aspirations over time. The study design also enabled me to celebrate students as they took actionable steps towards achieving their goals in ways that made sense to them given their own unique circumstances. Thus, although few students participated in the research process, the narrower scope of the study allowed me to attend to the full breadth of each student's complex personhood with greater depth and consistency. Additionally, the consistency and rigor of member checks with participants and consultations with educator partners served to minimize researcher biases and improve data triangulation, which supported greater reliability of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2003).

Conclusion

Overall, my deep involvement in the academic journeys of these five individuals created opportunities for rich, ongoing data collection across the entire school year. Regular engagement with students via emails, text messages, and Zoom meetings allowed me to build trust and foster meaningful relationships both within and beyond the interviewing context, which supported a mutually beneficial research experience. For instance, I was able to connect all of the students to additional college advising resources via my education partners. Along with rigorous methods, these meaningful interactions with students helped to generate new insights for the field about young people's aspirations and postsecondary pathways. Further, building reciprocal relationships with students provided opportunities to support them in ways that honored their humanity beyond their roles as research participants.

CHAPTER 4

Findings: School and Community Contexts and Student Profiles

To address how students' postsecondary aspirations, planning, and decision-making were shaped by features of their identities and community contexts, I begin with an overview of the broader regional setting and the high school, as described by students in interviews. I then present brief individual profiles of each participant, to summarize their unique aspirations and higher education pathways. Given that students spoke about their future-orientations holistically, their college choices are presented as one of many next steps that students took towards crafting their young adult lives. As noted previously in Chapter 2, it is useful to leverage a combination of theoretical frameworks to facilitate an analysis of the context in which students develop their postsecondary aspirations and decide upon their future pathways. Therefore, I integrate developmental (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), sociological (Bourdieu, 1990), critical (Yosso, 2005), and ethical (Zipin, 2015) theories to make visible the structures and systems that enabled and constrained students' aspirations and postsecondary pathways. I also examine how these factors intersected with students' individual perceptions and experiences that influenced their future-orientations. As explained across Chapters 4 and 5, students shared about the multiplicity of factors that shaped their visions for their future lives. In this chapter, I highlight the structures, perspectives, and experiences that were most salient for each student. In the following chapter, I present themes across cases.

Students' Perceptions of the Broad Community Context

All students described the community as a place they loved and felt connected to, while also perceiving few postsecondary opportunities available to them in the region. From an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), students' perceptions reflected both the

enabling and constraining conditions driving aspirations and decision-making within students' nested environmental contexts of their home, school, and community at large. Speaking to the broader regional climate, Claudia said, "I guess you could call it a rural area," characterizing the valley as "very small," and a place where "everybody knows each other." She viewed these as positive qualities of the community, which made it an "easier" place to live, because "people always know at least something about every single person." Highlighting changes she noticed in the community over time, Elba expressed, "I describe it as a growing town, because from what I remember growing up, there was nothing to do in this small town -- like, *nothing*. And over the years, I've seen more things open, more schools, more opportunities." Similarly, Andres described the town as "small" and "isolated." With respect to college and career opportunities, he also observed, "There's a limit to what you can do here […] It's mainly farming, or stuff like that." Knowingly, he then chuckled, "You get me." In the following chapter, I address how students' postsecondary plans were shaped by these features of the community, and by their individual home environments and collective formal schooling experiences.

When describing their neighborhoods, students also delved into further analysis of the broader social forces impacting their local opportunity context. Such considerations may be potentially overlooked in the more neutral framework of ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), but become foregrounded through the mediating lens of habitus as a socialization process (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus illuminates sociological connections between racialized and classed identities, social contexts, dominant cultural capital, and the oppressive structures that influence how students conceive of and move towards imaginable futures (Bourdieu, 1990; Zipin et al., 2015). Sparking a dialogue about socioeconomic disparities having lived in a stereotypically "bad" part of the region, Elba referenced gentrification and redlining in an area that "used to look

super suspicious and nobody wanted to go near," which now "looks completely different" and "super high class."

> Elba: It's like, "What happened?" From what I remember, nobody even wanted to go near it, and now it's all changed. And it has fences around it […] it's like it is changing for the better, but also, you could really see the division of sides. From where I live and then going to the southwest area, the houses are drastically different. So, it's drastically different if you go from one side of the road to the other.
>
> Interviewer: I've noticed that too. How does that shape your thinking about the valley, or your future?
>
> Elba: I don't know, I feel like it's *comfortable* where I live. It's not as bad as many people think, living on this side of town. It's not bad. It hasn't been bad in years. But I also feel like I want to live on the other side one day. So, I don't know, it kind of *pushes* you to be on *that* side, especially going to my high school. You see a lot of diversity between people from that side and people from this side, because the district divides us. Depending on the road, some students go to my school, and some go to the other school.

As illustrated in this exchange, Elba's ideas about possible futures were mediated by the socialization she experienced via her school and community -- assumptions and expectations about dominant cultural capital that she simultaneously questioned (Bourdieu, 1990). In real-time, Elba reasoned through her wishes to "live on the other side one day," while recognizing that the conditions of her neighborhood and school create "divides," which "pushes" her towards imagining a future that she, herself, might not fully desire. As addressed further in the next chapter, Elba's affection for her "comfortable" home on the stereotypically "bad" side of town actually factored into her decision to *stay there* when embarking on her postsecondary journey. Despite being admitted to multiple four-year universities in other cities, Elba chose to first attend the local community college so she could remain at home, before eventually planning to transfer to complete her bachelor's degree at a distant university elsewhere. Community cultural wealth offers an asset-based framework for theorizing how Elba's postsecondary pathway was shaped

by forms of cultural wealth extending beyond the narrow range of characteristics that are often centered in dominant cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). For instance, Elba's aspirational capital was bolstered by overlapping forms of familial capital, linguistic capital, and social capital which she accessed via her home, community, and peer social networks. Students often centered such forms of cultural wealth in their postsecondary planning and decision-making processes, prioritizing long-term community connectedness and personal wellness over immediate social mobility.

While multiple students raised issues related to social class, Claudia, an Afro-Latina young woman, was the only student to raise concerns about facing racism within the community. When I asked, "How does it feel growing up here?" she reflected:

> I mean, it has its difficulties. I mean, being darker than a lot of people. But I mean, I couldn't complain because I know once you go out there, there's more, I guess, "racism" towards African Americans. […] There's so much, I guess you can say, "negativity." So, I think it's better to be here in the valley.

Notably, although Claudia was uniquely impacted by anti-Black racism locally due to being "darker than a lot of people," she also found it "easier" to navigate life in the valley because of the largely ethnically homogenous Mexican population -- a widely shared identity. All five student participants identified as Mexican, with two students expressing multiracial identities: Andres described himself as "Mexican slash white," and Claudia described her mixed Mexican and African American heritage, emphasizing the "Mexican side":

> Well, my dad -- my "dad, dad" – he's African American, but my mom is Mexican. So, I grew up with the Mexican side of myself, since my second dad is Mexican, and then my mom is Mexican. So, like, the whole family is just Mexican. I basically grew up with the Mexican heritage, and the religion, and the culture.

Elba, Paola, and Sofia used the identifying terms "Mexican" and "Hispanic" interchangeably, sharing that their parents all immigrated to the United States from Mexico. Cultural norms shaped these young women's upbringings in what they called "traditional" "Mexican" and

"Hispanic" households, particularly with respect to gender norms. However, their shared ethno-racial identity fostered a sense of belonging in the community at large. As noted above, Claudia, along with other students, still upheld the valley as a comparatively "better" sociopolitical climate compared to life "out there," in larger, more ethnically and racially diverse cities. Claudia reasoned, "It's a lot easier to live here being a minority. I feel like here, there's a lot more minorities because of the border."

Students' Perceptions of the International Border Context

Students spoke of their international border context positively, highlighting community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) in the benefits of crossing back and forth regularly between the United States and Mexico, primarily to spend time with their families who lived on the Mexican side. Elba described, "Going from the border to see my grandma is *so close,* it's like my own house, being so close to me and safe." Similarly, Claudia spoke about the comfort and frequency of border-crossing to visit her family in Mexico.

> For me, it's easy to live near the border because I have family on the other side of the border. [pre-pandemic] We used to go over to Mexico every single weekend. I would always be there. So, for me, it's a benefit because it's super close to the other side of the family. I can go to Mexico, and I can be there in five minutes, 15 minutes tops.

Students also acknowledged their privilege in having the ability to navigate the border with relatively little difficulty, empathizing with community members who are "undocumented," and those who strive to cross into the United States seeking a "better" life through education and employment opportunities. However, even when students considered the broader sociopolitical context of regional surveillance, which shaped their experience of living in an international border community, they did not necessarily view recent increases in border policing negatively.

When speaking about regional changes, Elba pointed casually to the familiar and normalized presence of the Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

> Elba: I've noticed more Border Patrols passing by the streets and stuff.
>
> Interviewer: What are your thoughts on the presence of the Border Patrol here?
>
> Elba: My best friend's mom is a Border Patrol agent. Growing up, all my friends' parents were in Border Patrol, one was an ICE Officer, and stuff like that. I've grown used to it, and growing up in the valley, you grow numb to it. You hear sirens going off, and you're numb to it because you've seen it so many times. You see the Border Patrol and you walk on your way, or just ignore them, because you're like, "OK, just another day in the valley." I might see one, or two, or notice there's even three, and think, "Wow, OK, they're going after somebody," and just keep going to buy some ice cream.
>
> Interviewer: If you've grown up here and it's around you all the time, I can understand why it would feel pretty normal. What do you think about the agents' interactions?
>
> Elba: I never really thought about it. Being a U.S. citizen on this side, I just give them my papers and keep going with my life, unlike other people who hide. […] But I know I live my life carelessly, because I don't have to deal with that. So, I do feel for other people.

Andres echoed Elba's perspective, stating, "[The Border Patrol] is normal to me. They're just like policemen, so it's just really normal. I don't know how else to explain it." He also reflected on how the international border shaped his thinking about the future, particularly with respect to the regional opportunity context for other people, more so than for himself.

> [The border] doesn't really affect *my* thinking overall about opportunities, but I think for some people it really does, because some people I know come from Mexico to go to school [on the U.S. side]. I think they wanted something a little bit better than Mexico, so they tried to push so they could get out of Mexico. I know some people that are trying really hard to get out.

Andres believed the border should not create more barriers for people to "try to make life better for themselves." He empathized with "undocumented people" who "can't really cross over […] because they don't have the money, or they don't have all of the requirements." While he noted

that some people who cross the border "shouldn't be here" because they are "bad," he believed most are "really nice and good people who are hardworking" -- positive qualities he also valued in his family members and himself. As addressed in the student profiles later in this chapter, all students characterized themselves as hardworking and academically driven when they spoke about their postsecondary aspirations and future college-going plans.

Students' Perceptions of the School Context

When describing their high school, students positively highlighted its academic focus and the support they experienced through extracurricular activities. Students acknowledged how select opportunities, like taking a credit-bearing college preparatory class and participating in team sports, helped them remain engaged in school and focused on their futures. Reinforcing the academic culture of the school, extracurricular activities still emphasized school achievement as a priority. Some students participated in a college preparatory club and leadership roles, while others competed in athletics including swimming, wrestling, dance, and track and field. All student-athletes emphasized that their coaches continually reminded them that they are "students first, before athletes" -- an expectation which even extended to other "extracurriculars," as Paola explained.

> You are considered a student-athlete, so you're always a student before you are an athlete. And if your grades are not where they're supposed to be, you're not going to be able to do the sport that you want. I know they're very strict with that. And so, you always have to make sure your grades are where they need to be and maintain them. […] So you definitely have to *work* for what you want to do. With extracurriculars, at the end of the day, school does always come first. […] So that would definitely push me to try harder in school.

In addition to extracurricular activities, students also valued other opportunities outside the traditional classroom, such as experiential learning, which they believed were relevant to their postsecondary aspirations. As highlighted in her individual student profile, Sofia uniquely

benefited from Career Technical Education classes for "future medical professionals." The Career Academy offered applied learning experiences through hands-on exposure to the medical field, and inspired her to major in nursing.

> [The career academy] just opened my eyes to be more curious, which I really liked. I was able to see that "medical" is my "thing." Like, one time we took a field trip to this museum of the bodies. […] I don't know if you would be disgusted by that? But I was actually *really* interested. It was really, really, cool. […] And well, taking these classes and this program has helped me realize that – it has helped me make my choice. I want to study the medical field.

While many students sought out such learning experiences through Career Technical Education, few ultimately accessed them, due to systemic barriers such as class scheduling limitations, as well as perceived lack of support from educators. Such experiential learning courses are rarely encouraged for four-year college-bound students, as they often do not fulfill the curricular requirements for university eligibility and admission. At this high school, just 4.3% of Career Technical Education courses are sequenced or articulated with institutions of higher education (California Department of Education, 2020). Sofia was the only student to overcome such barriers to course access, thanks to the advocacy of her college counselor, who ensured that Sofia's class schedule could accommodate the Career Academy.

> I always wanted to take all these honors classes and all these medical classes. So, because of [my college counselor], he was able to make it possible, because my other original counselor -- I would talk to her about what I wanted, and she wouldn't really seem like she really cared.

Sofia considered herself somewhat of an anomaly in that her positive relationships with several key educators were a "big reason" for her to stay "motivated for school." Highlighting disparities in students' experiences overall, Sofia reflected, "I was able to have good teachers and good people around. And I know not everyone gets the same opportunity."

Thus, although students spoke positively of some academic and mentorship opportunities that enhanced their learning environment, they also acknowledged that their experiences were not universal. While Sofia thrived in the medical Career Academy, Elba expressed frustration about feeling a lack of support from educators regarding her interests in Career Technical Education classes, despite knowing that other college-bound peers were allowed to explore these options. Echoing such sentiments, Claudia indicated, "I have some friends that have told me like, 'Oh, I don't think any of the teachers are helping me. I don't have anyone to push me,' or this and that." Paola noted that while she generally had a good relationship with teachers because she was "already very academic," only "a few" stood out as influential in shaping her future trajectory.

> There have been a *few* that I can pinpoint out throughout my *whole* educational career that sort of have … made sure that I don't fall behind, that I do whatever I need to get done to further my educational career and get to where I want to go.

Likewise, Sofia summarized, "In general, I think throughout the years, I feel like all students get *one* teacher as a mentor or like, that they rely a lot on."

Although students' connections with a handful of caring adults suggest the power of even one supportive relationship to have a positive impact on students' persistence, these connections were not enough to protect against harmful aspects of the overall school climate, which students connected to their mental health challenges. Students felt that the school's emphasis on college readiness created a "stressful," "competitive" academic environment, and they believed that some of the mandatory college preparatory norms and practices fell short of fulfilling their intended purpose. Socially, students experienced frequent bullying, harassment, and judgement from peers, often with little intervention from adults.

Reflecting on their experiences within the broader school context, students recognized that they were each afforded some academic and social opportunities in school that peers were

not -- and vice versa -- which either facilitated or constrained their aspirations. Chapter 5 provides a cross-case analysis of how their experiences with school and school adults shaped their aspirations. To understand each student's unique experiences, I first provide profiles below summarizing their individual future-orientations and postsecondary journeys.

Individual Student Profiles

The following individual student profiles provide a brief overview of each participant's aspirations and chosen college-going pathways. Here, the students' stories are introduced independently to provide background information about each young person's postsecondary planning and decision-making process during their senior year of high school. Each story begins with an illustrative excerpt from one of my interviews with the student early in the school year, which highlights an important exchange reflecting how they thought about their futures. Then, in the next chapter, cross-case findings reveal how students' future-orientations were shaped by various factors impacting their academic and social-emotional development.

Andres

> Interviewer: What's going through your mind as you're figuring all this out?
>
> Andres: Mechanical engineering.
>
> Interviewer: Right, that major is really important to you. You've stuck with that plan.
>
> Andres: I don't know what's driving me, but it's something. My soul wants me to do it.
>
> Interviewer: Wow. Your soul wants you to do it. Do you want to say any more? What do you think that's about?
>
> Andres: It is a driven goal, I guess you could say. It is very important. It's important to me, but it's not, like, super, *super* important, like, "Oh, I *have* to have it." But it's just something I've wanted for a long time.

In our earliest interviews, Andres shared that since the seventh grade, he had envisioned going to a four-year university, majoring in mechanical engineering, and doing something "fascinating" in his career, although he was not sure what job he would pursue. While his "soul" remained committed to these aspirations, Andres knew that achieving his goals would require him to earn his bachelor's degree from a university in another city, because none of the higher education institutions in the community offered his intended major. The necessity of going away to college conflicted with Andres' desires to remain with his family and friends in his hometown.

> Andres: I think for most people, it's like they want to get out of the valley faster, because there's not a lot of opportunities here as compared to [nearest large city] or other places. But I want to be here with my family, because I'm not that great on my own.
>
> Interviewer: I see. OK, tell me a little bit more. What do you mean by that?
>
> Andres: For example, in [nearest large city], there's a lot more openings, jobs, there's a lot more things you can do over there. […] What I want to do, right now, is finish high school, go to college, leave for two years, and probably come back. Unless I find a reason to stay with the college I went to, or a job I found somewhere else -- that's one reason why I would stay instead of coming back to the valley.
>
> Interviewer: What motivates you to want to come back?
>
> Andres: Family. It's a place I grew up. It's everything to me. […] I'm not sure I can make it in this world by myself. […] So that's why I would like to stay where I can actually just ask for help from my parents and stuff. […] If I want to be on my own, I could always ask them for help, because I know I can rely on my parents, but if I were to move to [nearest large city], I wouldn't *want* to ask them for help, because I'm the one that left.

By the time applications were due for four-year universities, Andres had already decided that he would most likely attend the local community college first, and then transfer to complete his degree elsewhere. Nonetheless, he still submitted the university applications, despite his own prediction that if admitted to a four-year college, he "would have never [gone]" -- that is, until it

was time to transfer, “leave for two years,” and then “come back.” Even though his community college plans did not require Andres to fulfill the mandatory high school course curriculum necessary for four-year university admission, he remained self-motivated to do so. Committed to his postsecondary readiness, Andres still completed all the minimum coursework for university eligibility in California, as well as Advanced Placement classes and a credit-bearing college preparatory program throughout all four years of high school. Regardless of his immediate next steps, Andres said he was driven to “go the extra mile and try to get prepared for college.” Expressing positive self-talk about his own college-going potential, Andres viewed the process of applying and receiving admission to a four-year university as validation of his positive academic self-concept. He explained that rather than considering four-year universities as viable options immediately after high school, “It was more like, ‘Oh, I got accepted to a school. That means I could do it.’ I felt it was a way of pushing myself forward, so I can have that mentality that I can do it again.”

Indeed, Andres was accepted to a California State University with a mechanical engineering major, but he declined the offer of admission in favor of attending the community college in his hometown. Although Andres did not visit the distant campus where he was admitted, which was located in a large Northern California city, he had experienced college tours at multiple Southern California public universities located within a few hours’ drive from home. He decided that when he was ready to transfer from community college to a four-year institution, two of the nearby California State Universities that he had visited but was not initially admitted to would be his first and second choices. These were campuses that Andres’ best friend also aspired to attend, to pursue a similar college and career path in engineering. During interviews later in the school year, Andres spoke about the importance of remaining connected to not only

his family, but his close friends as well. Given that his best friend had also decided to attend the local community college, they were both excited about being able to support each other in their General Education classes -- just as they had done in high school. Although Andres planned to pursue mechanical engineering while his friend would be majoring in civil engineering, he summed up: “All in all, it’s great. Differences are really nice in friendships because it’s always interesting.” Imagining what may have happened if he had decided to go away to the California State University instead, Andres expressed reassurance that he would probably “be fine,” but he preferred the “better” option of staying “close to home.”

> I think I’d be fine. It’s just that, it’s better to stay close to home, that’s what I think. It’s not that I’m scared to be on my own or anything like that. It’s just that, sometimes it’s better to stay closer to home, where people can help you, instead of moving off.

Hopeful for accessing this “help,” Andres reflected, “Even though I’m 18, I guess I don’t consider myself an adult.” He looked forward to attending community college, characterizing himself as an “open-minded” person and viewing this next step as a chance to “grow up.” Andres also pondered the possibilities of his upcoming higher education experience, particularly with respect to his intellectual curiosity and the opportunity to encounter new perspectives.

> Honestly, a lot of things could happen, maybe for better. Or, I don’t know. [College] could change my views on some things, you know? You really don’t grow up unless your views change, I believe -- unless you're like some “almighty,” where your views are always the same and are always right. But, I just hope things change for me, because I know change is a really good thing.

By the end of the school year, Andres’ aspirations included securing his driver’s license and a part-time job as part of his journey to adulthood, and he began seeking entry-level work at various local establishments. Similarly, Andres’ peers also viewed the community college postsecondary pathway as a step towards greater independence and personal development, as

they pursued the simultaneous goals of completing General Education coursework while maintaining social connectedness and securing employment to support their financial security.

Claudia

> Interviewer: When you think about your future, what comes to mind?
>
> Claudia: Well, I have an image of my life. I'm in an office with my patient on the other side of me. I'm doing psychology, and still in school, trying to become a teacher. I guess you could say, I'm trying to be a part-time teacher, part-time psychologist. And then outside of work, I'd have a big family.

Throughout our interviews, like all participants, Claudia spoke about imagining a multidimensional life. As reflected in the above exchange from our first session, Claudia consistently incorporated college and career aspirations alongside her vision for relationships, which included peers, romantic partners, family members, and her own future children. While she was open to many possible options for her postsecondary trajectory, the local community context also factored into Claudia's long-term considerations of what she believed to be the optimal future life conditions for herself and the loved ones in her social network.

> I've always told myself I'm never coming back to the valley. […] But then I think about it, and all of my friends are here, every single memory I've had is always in the valley. I don't want to move somewhere with my kids. And them not meeting their grandparents, their uncles, their cousins, just because I decided to move away. So, I think if I bring my kids here, it's going to be a lot easier for them to live life, in a way.

Like many of her classmates, Claudia applied to a wide variety of four-year universities, including the University of California, California State Universities, in-state private schools, and out-of-state public and private schools. As she considered what it might be like for students from her community to leave their hometown to attend college, she explained, "I think at first, if you go far away, I think it's hard, since most of us have never really left the valley for a long period. … We will definitely, definitely get homesick." As she debated the potential benefits and

drawbacks of different postsecondary pathways, Claudia was "pushed" by adults in her life, such as her mother, to pursue her passions, resist and overcome racial discrimination, and do "even more" than what she might have imagined for herself.

> My mom has always told me, "Do something you like. Don't let people tell you, 'You can't do this because you're Black.' Don't let people tell you, 'You can't do this because you're Mexican. You can't do this because you're two different minorities.'" So I think my mom has always pushed me to not only do what I want, but do even more than I want.

Similarly, Claudia received "pushing" to "get into college" and "do more in life" from two close teachers and the dance coach of her high school drill team -- a woman with whom she had a very deep, trusting, long-term mentorship relationship. But despite this consistent encouragement to immediately attend one of many possible four-year universities that she had applied for in different cities and states, Claudia always valued the local community college as a viable option. In the end, she was admitted to one in-state private school and placed on the waitlist for another out-of-state school, but decided to attend community college first, with the goal of eventually transferring to either a top University of California campus or top California State University.

Claudia visited the in-state private school which was located in a nearby Southern California city. She attended a campus tour, and was heavily recruited by a staff member who was also a Black woman, whom she spoke with extensively. However, the student population was not convincing to Claudia -- a perception that she shared honestly with the staff member.

> I'm like, "I cannot connect with nobody here because the school population is very high on Caucasian people." And then the percentage for Black people, I think, is like five percent. […] So I was like, "Yeah, I can't do that, I'ma stay at [the local community college]." […] I definitely considered it, but I was going based off of, like, what I saw. So, I mainly saw Caucasian people and I saw their parents. […] So, I went to the lady, and I was like, "OK, so I have a few questions about your school. How is your psychology program? How is your population for the school?" She told me everything, and when she told me the percentage of Black people, I was like, "OK, have a nice day. Thank you. It's not going to work." […] I like African Americans!

While certainly an important factor in her college planning, the extent to which Claudia prioritized the racial composition of the student body varied depending on the full scope of academic and extracurricular opportunities that each campus could offer. Claudia's two aspirational universities, which she was not originally admitted to, were her preferred four-year campuses because of their robust academic opportunities in her intended field of study, and their reputable dance teams. Competitive dancing was one of Claudia's extracurricular passions which she felt also kept her motivated and engaged in school. In exploring these two prestigious institutions, Claudia reached out to the undergraduate captains of their dance teams to learn more about the culture of athletics, and opportunities to participate competitively or recreationally. Notably, at both campuses which were also in Southern California, the Black student population represented an even smaller percentage of the total student body compared to the private school that Claudia had visited and rejected on the basis of racial sense of belonging. However, feeling pleased with the interactions she had with the college athletes at these other campuses, Claudia solidified her aspirations to transfer to one of these institutions, with the future goal of connecting with peers who shared her interests in dance.

Ultimately, Claudia's postsecondary plans and decisions diverged from the immediate four-year university pathway that influential adults in her life had hoped for her. However, even before making her final choice to attend community college, Claudia critiqued the intensity of the four-year college-going culture of her high school, as in our first interview, captured below.

> Interviewer: What do you think most students plan to do right after high school?
>
> Claudia: I think most students want -- not want -- but feel like they *need* to go to college, because I feel like at school, and with our parents, they push us so much to go to college. I feel like most students are going to college, but they don't really *want* to go to college, which is affecting them. It's affecting them in school.

> Interviewer: You said that maybe they're pushed to go to college, but they might not really want to go. What do you think that's about?
>
> Claudia: I think there are issues with how our generation is growing up, because we've always been pushed to see [four-year universities] as our only option after school. Even since seventh grade, our teachers have always told us, "You have to do this because this is going to count good towards college." And then once you get into high school, every single classroom you join has a banner of a college. And your teacher, on the first day of school, the first thing they tell you is, "We're giving you this course so you guys can go to college" or, "You're taking this AP course because this AP course will look good on your transcript for college." I feel like teachers basically throw it in our face, like college is the only option, and you won't succeed without it.
>
> Interviewer: What do you think about that?
>
> Claudia: I think it's kind of harsh. […] Because if a student doesn't want to go to college, but everybody's throwing it in their face, they feel like they're not going to become somebody in life without college, when it's not like that. Sometimes it is true, but sometimes it isn't. […] So, I feel like it's harsh to just throw it into people's faces.

Notably, Claudia was well-aware that her career goals of becoming a psychologist and a teacher would require a bachelor's degree at minimum, and she planned to also pursue further education. As indicated previously, she envisioned herself "doing psychology, and still in school, trying to become a teacher." In multiple interviews, Claudia raised questions about college opportunities, and expressed strong academic motivation through her inquiries. For instance, upon learning that the field of psychology was just one of many possible social science majors, she excitedly investigated the fields of anthropology, sociology, and cognitive science as possible double major options to pursue. While remaining committed to achieving a bachelor's degree and more, Claudia was still critical of the "harsh" approach of her educators, who seemed to "throw [college] into people's faces." As addressed in the following chapter, Claudia and many of her peers deliberately chose to first attend community college instead of a four-year university, despite feeling that their preference was a largely unencouraged postsecondary pathway.

Elba

> Interviewer: What comes to mind when you think about your future?
>
> Elba: The first word that comes to mind is "scared." Because I'm still undecided. Nobody before me has gone to college, so nobody has guided me. […] I feel like I'm being left behind other people. It's hard. I feel lost with this whole thing, making my own decisions.

Elba consistently described herself as highly devoted to her education and her college journey. Although she expressed apprehension about her postsecondary pathway, her academic identity was central to her future-orientation. When she introduced herself in our first interview, Elba led with the statement: "I am a hard worker, very active in school, joined a lot of clubs, did leadership roles and stuff, and that's about it. I focus *so much* on school."

The school climate influenced Elba's postsecondary planning and decision-making process in both positive and negative ways. When describing her high school, Elba noted, "It's a really good school, but it's really competitive, and you're pushing yourself." However, the "competitive" climate also impacted Elba harmfully, as she recalled an interaction with a teacher that she initially characterized as "traumatic" with respect to her college readiness experiences.

> I did have an incident with a teacher though, which was traumatic. Well, it wasn't *"traumatic,"* but I cried. […] I was not going to be able to handle the IB courses. It was too much for me. I knew I had to cut off at least some classes, but I stayed in one class.

Elba explained that she had originally intended to complete the full course sequence for the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which is a robust curriculum similar to Advanced Placement classes, and highly regarded by universities. However, given her many academic commitments, Elba found the IB schedule to be too rigorous. Although she dropped some IB classes and "stayed in one class," one IB teacher demanded an explanation as to why Elba was no longer continuing with the full IB curriculum, and threatened that as a result, "no college"

would “want” or “pick” Elba. Elba thought back on how the interaction made her feel “broken,” while it also “pushed” her to “prove” she could “still go to college and be a worthy candidate.”

> [My IB teacher] looked me in the eyes, and she said, “No college is going to pick you. No college is going to want you. They’re looking for *high* students, who are completing the full IB program. *Other* students are going to get in. You should complete the IB program because that’s what colleges are looking for.” She kind of made me feel unworthy of college. […] I wanted to cry so bad, because I felt broken. […] That was one incident that pushed me -- I want to stand out and I want to prove that I could still go to college and be a worthy candidate.

Aside from this formative incident in Elba’s college-going journey, she believed other educators were usually “welcoming.” However, while Elba viewed her counselors as “really good” because they assisted with her college preparatory experience, she also expressed frustration that they “can’t really do anything” about supporting some of her college readiness needs.

> I feel like I have a really good counselor -- I actually have two, because of [college prep class]. If I need anything, I can go to the counselors, but then it’s also like, “Oh, I can’t give you this class,” or, “I can’t really do anything about this,” and I’m like, “Ugh, why couldn’t I get that?”

Because of such challenges in accessing support for her postsecondary goals at school from teachers and counselors, Elba primarily relied on assistance from a different college preparatory program that she attended after school and during the summers.

With extensive support from this other college prep program, Elba applied to many four-year universities, including the University of California and California State University systems, and in-state private colleges. She was admitted to one, three, and two campuses in these categories, respectively. Through an annual summer experience offered via her trusted out-of-school college prep program, Elba was able to live in the dormitories for one week at a time, with other first-generation college-going high school students, at multiple University of California campuses. As intended, these sought-after college readiness opportunities provided

Elba with an authentic glimpse of what the experience of living on campus at a four-year college might be like. However, she "really disliked the situation."

> When I went to a dorm and stayed there with the girls, I was like, *"Oh my God."* I really disliked the situation, because I would want to go, like, brush my teeth or something, and there was hair all over the sink. I'd be like, "Can you guys, like, *clean up after yourselves or something?!*" So, I was so not used to it, and I didn't like it. And I was like, you know, [in the valley], I'm in the comfort of my own home. […] [In the dorms], I'd be stressed out […] I don't like it. I find it disturbing.

Elba further explained that despite the allure of being "more independent," if she were to move away to attend college, she would find "stress" rather than "comfort." She preferred to continue living in her family home and begin her college experience locally, with her existing network.

> Even though I want to explore and just be more independent, I'm just so comfortable that if I were to go to a campus or be with other people, I don't know if I would be immediately comfortable. I don't think I would, because I'm living with totally new people. […] And you're not used to all the new experiences, and I wouldn't find comfort. I would find stress in that. So, I don't think I'm ready to find that stress.

In the end, Elba decided to start her higher education journey at the local community college, naming the "comfort of home" and the security of receiving ongoing support from her peers and her after-school college prep program advisors as key benefits of this choice.

Paola

> Interviewer: You mentioned writing the personal statement questions for your college applications. Do you want to talk about that at all?
>
> Paola: You know, I struggled with some things. […] But it's also like, "These were my circumstances, and although they were not the greatest, how can I use them to my advantage?" So, colleges look into these sorts of things because being through such difficult circumstances and getting through them, and still having the aspiration to go to college […] it's definitely something that shows determination. Because I have this determination to strive to better myself, I've never given up on that dream. And I've tried to always overcome anything that I'm going through and look at the bigger picture. And I try not to focus on certain specific times, but instead say, "When this is over, I'm going to have a career. I can lift up my family. I could come back and help them," you know?

Paola exuded self-confidence in her scholarly identity and her ability to be successful. She described herself as having "drive," and always being an "academic child" and an "asset." For Paola, experiencing a difficult upbringing and life circumstances motivated her to remain committed to her aspirations. Speaking about navigating challenges along on her college-going journey, ranging from generational poverty to her mental health, Paola reasoned, "I believe you can also use these certain circumstances to your advantage and let the colleges know, like, 'Hey, look, this is what I made of. I'm tough, I'm strong, and I can definitely succeed at your college.'" When I asked, "What do you think keeps you going?" Paola indicated that she had "always" aspired to go to college, and that "every decision' was made with her future-orientation in mind. Specifically, she viewed her future success as a means to honor the "sacrifices" made by her family members who immigrated from Mexico to the United States, and to continue the "legacy" of "improving" their circumstances.

> Since I was young, I've always wanted to go to college. So, everything I've done, every decision I have made, it has been, you know, thinking of my future. I'm aware of the sacrifices my family has made to bring us here. […] They suffered, they came here, they made a living for themselves here. And just, you know, it's sort of trying to continue that legacy of improving this family and getting us somewhere. […] But I believe that I can definitely do it. […] So, I believe that that's definitely my main drive. It's for them.

Paola called her family her "strongest motivator," as they are the ones who "pushed" her and will always "stick by" her during hard times, when she feels like she "can't reach" her goals. She summarized: "Everything I do is for them," and "Whenever I think of the future, I just know I want to make them proud." As the youngest child, Paola also referenced feeling "pressure" from her family because she was "expected" to graduate from college, given that her older siblings did not. She imagined it to be a "scary process," but also a "very possible journey."

> Paola: I come from a low-income family, single parent. I live with my grandma. I have two older sisters. They both attended college, but then they dropped out. So, I would be considered first-generation when going to college. It's always been a part of my dream. […] It's sort of expected of me to go to college […] since they did it, but they didn't really complete it, it's sort of on me to do it. So, I mean, I've always loved it, but there is that sort of pressure, to like, put up your family name.
>
> Interviewer: What do you think it might be like to be someone of your community, or of your identity, and going on to college?
>
> Paola: I think it's definitely a scary process just because most of us don't have someone to look up to or to follow. So, most of these things, we're creating our own path, we're trying to figure it out as we go. And I think that in a weird way, not having all that help sort of pushes you even further to want to better yourself or to want to accomplish it, because it seems like an unreachable challenge. When you're actually there, and you're reaching your challenge, it's just like, "Wow, I did that," and did it mostly -- I mean, with the help of many people -- but mostly by yourself. So, I think it just gives you that sense of accomplishment. And it's just a scary but very possible journey if you put yourself to it.

Paola believed that if she went to college, it would "lift everyone else up," noting that her sisters "tried, but they didn't have that drive." Given her desire to bring pride to her family name, Paola also described herself as "very much a selfless person" who likes to "please others." She also considered that this is "not always the best thing to do." As addressed in the next chapter, such beliefs and characteristics factored into Paola's postsecondary decisions.

> I try to put what I want last, which is not always the best thing to do, just because you always have to look out for yourself, which I've learned through certain things that have happened. So, you know, I just try to balance it. But I always love to give back, even when I don't have much to give. I always try to give anything that I might have to offer, whether it be the kindness of my heart, whether it be materialistic, or just support. I've always tried to do that for anybody that might be in my life, and that I care for and stuff.

Paola's characteristics of selflessness and generosity as well as her life experiences with social struggles and mental illness factored into her aspirations. She chose to major in psychology with plans to become a psychologist so that she could support others. Paola explained that "in the future," she envisioned herself helping someone to "go through whatever

they're dealing with," and to "have a better way of life." She imagined that this career path would be fulfilling because it aligned with her values.

> It's going to feed that sense of, like, I want to help people. But also, it just makes me happy knowing that I can help someone *be* better and *feel* better. So, I think that's also part of why I finally settled on becoming a psychologist.

While Paola spoke extensively about her scholarly identity, personal values, aspirations, and long-term commitment to college and career achievement, she was also quick to remind me that her higher education pathway was just one small part of her life as a young adult. Early in the school year, four-year college applications happened to be underway, but Paola's concurrent transition to adulthood as an 18-year-old sparked a "change of priorities."

> Interviewer: Is there anything that was on your mind that I didn't ask about, or that you wanted to follow up on, that we didn't get to talk through today?
>
> Paola: I've just sort of been through this college application experience *right now.* Finishing up school adds on to the things you have to get done, and then certain personal stuff, like getting my driver's license -- I turn 18 in two months. So, you know, it's definitely sort of like, "OK, well, you're 18, you have to get a job now. You have to start getting your license, getting a car, getting insurance," and all of these different things that come with that. I definitely have responsibilities that come with turning 18, and that's a big thing emphasized in my family […] getting things done like an adult. So, it's definitely a change of mentality, change of perspective, change of priorities, and stuff.

In introducing "personal stuff" as new topics in our interviews, Paola -- like all students I spoke with -- framed her aspirations as multifaceted. In future sessions, Paola spoke about navigating the processes of receiving her driver's license, and then securing a job.

> I finally got my driver's license, and I got a job. […] That was mainly the biggest thing. I feel like it's going good, but it's a lot on my plate. […] I feel like I was put out in this circus and I'm trying to juggle, but *I don't know how to juggle!* So, it's just been pretty tough. But I'm just trying to figure it out. Yeah, it's stressful. But at the same time, it's also very, very exciting […] becoming more independent […] doing a job, trying to figure out how to do this and that on my own. […] And I'm glad that I'm doing it now rather than when I'm over there at college, because then I would have my college courses and then I would try to figure out how to live on my own, and not even have my mom for advice, or

> whatever. So, I'm glad that I'm doing it here and I have her to, like, sort of guide me through and start me on that process, rather than just be thrown into the wild over there.

Like other students, Paola made concerted efforts to access out-of-school experiences that would support her personal development and independence while she was surrounded by family and friends who could "guide" her and offer "advice."

Ultimately, peer support factored most heavily into Paola's postsecondary pathway. Rather than attend one of the California State University or University of California campuses where she was accepted in Northern and Southern regions of the state respectively, Paola chose an out-of-state public university, where she felt a strong connection with the student community that she encountered during a campus visit. Compared to other options, this out-of-state institution was equidistant to the Southern California campus and closer to home than the Northern California campus where Paola was admitted, positioning it as a drivable option. Nonetheless, while proximity to home and family were important, and she initially considered attending an in-state university, Paola's realization that she needed to "look out for" herself and chart her own path took precedence over the competing tendency to selflessly "please others."

Sofia

> Interviewer: How do you feel about your decision [to attend community college]?
>
> Sofia: At first, I was upset, because I stressed myself out all these years to get good grades so I could get into good colleges. But then, right now I think -- *I know* – it's better for me. I think [the local community college] would be better because I'm going to stay with my family and my friends. […] It's going to be cheaper, and also during that time, I could work here and go to school. And then, when I'm ready to leave, I'll probably have some [money] saved up, and with the help of some financial aid, I think it will be better. I won't have to stress myself out so much to think about the cost, where I'm living, when I'm going to see my friends and my family, and stuff like that.

Early in the school year, Sofia had already decided that attending the local community college would be the best option for her, in alignment with her long-term postsecondary plans. Sofia was the only student I spoke with who did not apply to any University of California or California State University campuses, although she was eligible for admission to four-year universities and ultimately aspired to graduate with a bachelor's degree in nursing. The above exchange occurred in a fall interview during the four-year university application period, and reflects Sofia's rationale behind pursuing community college. Her aspirations included securing greater financial stability, housing arrangements, and a sustained network of support -- topics Sofia continually returned to throughout the school year. She also spoke extensively about her career goal of becoming a nurse, and how she planned to achieve this objective.

Sofia credited her high school's Career Technical Education courses designed for "future health professionals" with piquing her interest in the medical field. A guest speaker in one of these classes inspired her to pursue nursing as a college major and profession, as he shared about his career as a registered nurse. Then, doing further "career research" in these courses helped inform Sofia's long-term aspirations to "start as a registered nurse" and "work up."

> I've also done research, we've done career research. I learned about this career called "clinical nurse specialist," and it's like nurses who do more studies, and they still deal with people and helping them, but they do it by making studies, and learning how to help, and finding cures and things. I think I like that. I want to work in a research type of job, but for nursing. I could start as a registered nurse, and then work up from that, and then keep studying, and then go up to the clinical specialist.

By the beginning of her senior year of high school, Sofia had already investigated various nursing degree programs at four-year universities as well as at the local community college, and she had visited several college campuses.

> Sofia: The nursing program at one school that got my attention was at [Southern California city] -- [California State University]. So, I think what I'm going to do

> first, since we have a good nursing program here in the community college, is I think I'm going to start here and then transfer out.
>
> Interviewer: What got you thinking about starting at [the local community college] and then transferring?
>
> Sofia: [California State University] is expensive, and I want to stay with my family too. I want to save money and start here, and have the support of my friends and my family. Then, when I'm ready, I can leave.

Sofia framed her future-orientation holistically, with various aspirations interconnected with her ultimate goal of graduating from a four-year university. Although important adults in Sofia's life, such as her mother and her college preparatory class teacher and counselor, were "upset" with her intention to attend community college first, she remained committed to her pathway. She repeatedly used the phrase *"I know"* when describing the postsecondary plans that she believed made sense for her.

> Interviewer: What has your family had to say about your plans?
>
> Sofia: Well, my mom, she's kind of upset that I didn't apply to more colleges. But I'm just thinking, like, "Why am I going to waste money on these applications when there's a 90% chance I'm going to stay here?" There's a 10% chance that I'm going to leave, because *I know* that I want to stay.

Due to financial constraints, Sofia was discouraged by the thought that she might "waste money" on four-year university application fees, given the "10%" chance she might actually choose to attend one. Sofia was the only student I spoke with who did not qualify for an income-based fee waiver, and she chose not to apply to the University of California and California State University systems, in part, because the process was "expensive." Although she expressed frustration about this limitation, Sofia was still committed to paying for these applications when she was "ready to transfer." Thus, Sofia spoke less about such fees as barriers to achieving her aspirations, and more frequently framed the costly applications as a "waste," because she felt confident in her

plans to start coursework in community college and complete her bachelor's degree at a four-year institution several years later. Sofia reiterated rhetorical questions to illustrate her point.

> I'm thinking, like, "Why am I going to waste so much money to apply to all these colleges?" If I was certain that I'm going to leave and I wanted to, then I would, but I'm not sure. […] When I'm ready to transfer, I'll pay. I'll pay for them. But not right now.

Sofia's postsecondary planning and decision-making were largely informed by her feeling "not ready" to attend a four-year university immediately after high school. The local community college offered a "familiar" context, which she valued when transitioning into young adult life.

> I feel like [the local community college] is gonna feel like -- well, it's not going to feel like high school, because I know it's completely different -- but it will feel *familiar* to me. And then, like, when I'm ready to leave, it's going to be when *I'm* ready, and it's going to be something new for me, which will be going to an actual university.

Sofia also continually reiterated the importance of maintaining individual agency in determining when *she* felt "ready" to embark on the new experience of transferring to an "actual university."

Sofia reasoned that her ability to achieve her college and career aspirations hinged on the stability of her overall life circumstances, which would support her success. As discussed in the cross-case analysis in the next chapter, Sofia's postsecondary pathway included plans spanning the next several years, which involved multifaceted goals to secure stable employment and housing, explore volunteer opportunities for career exposure in the medical field, and remain connected with supportive friends and family members. Although Sofia's pursuits deviated from her initial intentions to apply to universities like her four-year college-bound peers, she expressed confidence in her ability to navigate challenges and "choose to keep going."

> My greatest talent is being able to solve problems whenever I need to, because I've been thrown a lot of problems throughout the years, and I have learned how to manage and work with them. […] I have been able to move myself from the thoughts of, like, just giving up, and I always choose to keep going. Because ever since I was a little girl, I have had to learn things for myself. For example, my dad

> was always working, and my mom didn't speak English. […] They went to school in Mexico, so that was really different. Due to all these things, I have been able to solve all my problems by myself, and learn how to manage through them and figure things out. I think that is one of my greatest skills.

As evidenced in the cross-case analysis presented in the next chapter, Sofia leveraged her ability to "solve problems" and "figure things out" as she strategically crafted her aspirations alongside close peers, and progressively put her postsecondary plans in motion.

By the end of the school year, Sofia was already taking advantage of opportunities offered by the local community college. Having researched the professional expectations of various nursing pathways, Sofia believed that expanding her knowledge of psychology would also be useful in a career that involves supporting people in need. The complex professional aptitudes required of nurses sparked her intellectual curiosity in related disciplines, and she stated, "I want to study the medical field, but I hope I can still do some type of psychology." She was excited that the local community college would be offering a dual enrollment opportunity for high school students to take an introductory psychology class, which she signed up to attend. Summarizing her scholarly journey, Sofia highlighted with pride, "One of my opportunities that I have been able to take advantage of is my education." Thus, Sofia viewed community college as another avenue to "choose" classes of "interest," and she proactively embarked on her higher education journey while she was a high school student.

Conclusion

The profiles presented in this chapter illustrate each student's journey navigating postsecondary decision-making, foregrounding how their identities intertwined with their values and priorities. While each student's pathway was shaped by their unique perspectives, there were several shared community and school experiences that mediated all participants' aspirations. A cross-case analysis of the impact of the school and community contexts on students' aspirations

are expounded upon in the next chapter, including the influential role of key educators. The chapter also addresses how students navigated the transition from in-person schooling to remote learning, as well as how mental health and peer relationships influenced their future orientations.

CHAPTER 5

Findings: Cross-Case Analysis

This chapter presents an in-depth, cross-case analysis of findings on how students' personal and social experiences in and outside of school, including their identities, sense of place, and relationships, profoundly influenced their aspirational thinking and postsecondary choices. As I explain below, while their aspirations included college success as one component of their pathways, students' visions for their postsecondary futures extended well beyond the academic focus of their school and related college preparatory opportunities, as they thought holistically about their full lives.

In the sections that follow, I focus on six themes related to students' academic and social-emotional development, and their navigation of postsecondary planning and decision-making processes during their senior year of high school. Students spoke about how their experiences and decisions were shaped by (1) improvements in their mental health, (2) the online schooling and pandemic context, (3) positive peer relationships, (4) their broader community context, (5) adults in their lives, and (6) college preparatory programs. Across cases, the novel conditions of remote learning in an online schooling environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic offered an essential backdrop for understanding how the above factors, and particularly mental health and peers, influenced students' aspirations and future pathways.

Mental Health Concerns Subsided Due to Online Schooling and Pandemic Quarantining

I've heard talk about your teenage years being, like, such a great time and all that. But most of that has been now as a senior, which sounds weird because of the pandemic. But I think I've really enjoyed my teenage years more now than I have in the past four years. - Paola

Few studies address mental health in relation to aspirations, but as students navigated the 2020-2021 school year, they often shared deep reflections about their mental health during interviews. Students directly attributed their long-term mental health challenges to the toxic social conditions of their in-person schooling experiences. In many cases, students were making these connections for the first time during interviews. Likewise, students attributed recent improvements in their mental health to their new online schooling context and the ability to be isolated at home, referencing the mandated "lockdown" and "quarantining" periods necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, the long-term process of motivational interviewing may have contributed to the depth of students' reflections by creating multiple opportunities for them to consider and share their experiences while feeling affirmed and supported. As addressed in Chapter 6, students also gained comfort in sharing their experiences as we established greater participant-researcher rapport over time.

Exemplifying the fluidity of students' mental health experiences, Elba expressed a growing awareness about her challenges with anxiety and the factors that may have caused this mental health issue to worsen and improve over time. In a January interview, when I asked about the extent to which Elba engaged in postsecondary planning conversations with peers, she initially explained, "I haven't really talked about it to my other senior friends. […] So, no, there's really no other conversations except for me and my best friend." She referenced her "social anxiety" and expressed that starting a conversation with peers would be "weird," contemplating, "What do I have to talk to them about?" In April, the topic of anxiety arose again, and Elba expanded upon her mental health journey:

> I struggle with mental health, and since a young age, I did receive some help and stuff, but it's kind of amazing that after the lockdown happened, I got way better. I think it came from my anxiety. […] I would just get suicidal thoughts out of nowhere. I would just think, "I wish I was dead." I know it's dark, and I don't talk

> about this often, but it's something that I do struggle with. But after the lockdown happened, I've become more happy and I don't know the reason why. I stopped going to counseling and stuff, but I've been so much happier. I don't get my suicidal thoughts as often as I used to, and some of them completely stopped.

Elba's comments reflect the rarity of conversations about mental health, and at the time, her uncertainty about what factors helped to improve her happiness. As she noted, despite no longer receiving mental health counseling, "I've become more happy and I don't know the reason why." About one month later, Elba made a connection between mental health and different school contexts for the first time:

> Elba: With the pandemic, everything has kind of been better with me because I'm always at home, so everything is online, school-related. […] We don't have to turn on our cameras most of the time. So, I'm happy about that. When I was going to school, I always felt judged. […] I was like, "Today I'm feeling really, really ugly and I don't want to go to school, but I have to go to school." […] I would just lay my head down. School was like, laying my head down, feeling really, really, bad about myself. I didn't want to go. […] I hated it.
>
> Interviewer: What were the experiences you had at school that felt like they really affected your mental health?
>
> Elba: Appearance is everything in school. I woke up and I didn't feel like "enough." Let's just say that -- "enough." […] My classmates made me feel like less and less and less. […] My mental health has increased in the way that I don't feel judged as much anymore, you know, like when going to school. My suicidal tendencies have stopped because I'm not in that group environment.

Echoing Elba's story, Claudia also shared about the negative impact of the social context when attending school in-person. When I asked how Claudia was feeling during the college admissions phase, she expressed shock, excitement, and sadness when thinking about her future. Reflecting on her prior suicidal ideation, Claudia said, "I really didn't think I was going to get this far," and explained that previously, she was "going to end everything" due to the bullying she experienced at school.

> Claudia: It's still shocking that I'm going to go to college. […] I start to process, and I'm like, "OK, you're going to college […] You're making it closer and

> closer to adulthood […] to start your own whole life by yourself. […] When it hits me, it's like, WOW, it's exciting.
>
> Interviewer: What are some of the feelings that come up for you when you think about all those things coming into your future, that you just mentioned?
>
> Claudia: Sometimes it gets me sad, because I really didn't think I was going to get this far. So, it gets me sad to think, "OK, you were going to end everything just because of one period in your life and you never stopped and thought, 'OK, I could get through this, and I can be something bigger.'" […] So, I think that's what gets me sad, because I was ready to just let go. And now I'm like, "You're getting stronger every single day with every single battle, about to go into college to get a degree, about to just start all of your life you never thought you were about to experience."
>
> Interviewer: Yeah, that is really powerful. Thank you for sharing that deep reflection. What do you think was making you feel like you weren't going to make it to this point, like you said?
>
> Claudia: Everything, just, it was all the bullying […] It was just too much. And I think I just started talking down to myself. I was like, "Well, if this happened, then it's probably just because you're not worth it. Everyone's bullying you. You probably shouldn't be here. You don't deserve to be breathing the air that everybody else is breathing. It's not OK to be different." I think that it was just me bringing myself down that affected everything.

After describing these complex feelings, Claudia reasoned that the catalyst for transformation was the "environment" of in-person school versus online school, which "changed drastically."

> Interviewer: You really went through a lot, it sounds like. ... So, what do you think has changed for you this year, or at any other point in your life, that sort of turned your thinking around?
>
> Claudia: I think it's just the environment, because before COVID, everybody was just in school. […] Some students go through bullying every single day at school, which is something that's really hard to get through. […] So, I think now with quarantine, a lot of kids are realizing, "OK, I'm beautiful, I'm strong, what other people say doesn't matter." And so, I think everybody is gaining confidence. And it's the same thing that happened to me. I think that's what changed. The environment I was in, in both situations, really changed drastically. And that's what affected me mentally.

Like Claudia, Paola explained how the online schooling context alleviated "all these teenage problems," describing her growing awareness as a "weird existential crisis."

> I'm in this weird existential crisis, with more awareness, I'm finally getting to know myself. […] And it's very, very crazy to finally get to the stage where I'm seeing all these new things. I'm not here at school, and I'm not physically with all these other people. And I've spent so much time with myself lately, with COVID and everything. I'm basically in my room doing whatever, school, and homework. And I'm in this room with myself. So, it's sort of like, I only have my own company. I'm not constantly seeing my insecurities being reflected back at me […] it's just sort of like, seeing me here in this room. And I was like, "Hey, this is *you*. You are *you*. You know? I'm with *you*."

Noting peers' habits of coming together "in the little circle" at school, and "constantly trying to be with them," Paola concluded that, "Being online, especially with everyone in their own houses, nobody can really group together. Nobody is really together, so you don't feel left out."

Students also shared about the benefits of being able to "find time for everything" and how the online schooling context helped "keep it all balanced." Having previously discussed mental health challenges such as depression, Sofia and I revisited the topic in a spring interview. Although her initial experience of the pandemic was "really bad" due to adjusting to remote learning, she later characterized it as "really good." Over time, Sofia realized that the pandemic had created the unprecedented potential for "having everything," providing more opportunities for her to invest in school, work, relationships, and personal wellness.

> Sofia: I *like* having everything. I *want* to have a good school life, a good work life, a good social life, and life with my family too. So, I try to keep it all balanced, because I don't want to just give all my focus to just one thing. I like sharing it all, because these are all things that are important to me. Like, school is *very important* to me. But I try my best to find time for everything else, because they're things that I appreciate.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah, absolutely. That's so important. What you're saying now makes me think about a previous topic we talked about, which was mental health, and all the things that helped kind of create balance in life.
>
> Sofia: Oh yeah, that's exactly what it is. Like, having a balance with my family, my friends, my work, and school, and the gym too -- I have time to do it all. They're all things that make me feel, like, *sane* and *normal*. […] It makes me feel just a little bit of, like, *calmness* in me. And that's what I like.

Sofia reasoned, “These are all things that helped me feel better. And I guess they stimulate my brain or something, because every time I do these things […] it just makes my brain feel better or something. I don’t know.” To validate Sofia’s logic, I responded:

> Yeah, I think you’re right. From a psychology perspective, what you’re saying is completely correct. Doing these things like going to the gym, or seeing friends, or having habits that help you get through the day, are really important for mental health purposes. Those things can release certain chemicals in the brain that do help us feel better. So, what you’re saying totally makes sense.

Sofia concluded, “I was so tired of school and stuff like that. And now it’s weird, because even though I have *more* things going on, I feel like I’m doing better. I feel better.”

Synthesizing across cases, participants made clear that aspects of the in-person school environment were deeply harmful to their wellness. Peer relations in the former in-person context contributed to dangerous consequences, even pushing multiple students to consider ending their own lives by suicide. In contrast, the change in social environment via online schooling helped students with “gaining confidence.” Additionally, the opportunity to create a more balanced lifestyle during the pandemic, which was more aligned with their overarching values, allowed students to find “calmness” and “feel better.” In addition to reflecting on shifts in their mental health amidst remote schooling, students also shared how mental health shaped their thinking about the future.

Mental Health Improvements and the Online Schooling Context Positively Shaped Students’ Self-Concepts and Future-Orientations

“I have gained leadership skills, because […] I <u>had</u> to do everything on my own. And I think that helped me, because now I am <u>able</u> to do everything on my own.” - Sofia

The way students spoke about their mental health indicated their growing self-awareness about who they are and who they aspire to be, particularly given the recent improvements to their

wellness. Students also expressed that their online schooling experiences, along with the unique opportunities for self-reflection over the past year, contributed to a positive self-concept with regard to their academic and social identities. In our first interview, Andres expressed that during in-person school, he was "doubting" himself and what he wanted to do, but in the current pandemic context, he started to "think about it differently."

> Interviewer: What do you think changed?
>
> Andres: I think I have a better mind, ever since quarantine started. Quarantine has put me in a place where I have to be alone most of the time. I couldn't see my friends or anything, so it would be me and my thoughts most of the time. So, I decided to develop my mind a bit more, I guess you could say. I would try to clear my mind a bit because I would overthink things. I thought this would help with overthinking, and it really did, for me, in many, many ways. I learned how to set my mind to things.
>
> Interviewer: That sounds very introspective. So how have you gone about doing that?
>
> Andres: Mainly just putting my phone down a lot more, stopping playing games a lot more. It was more focusing on who I am as a person and what I want to do. And what type of person I want to be. And the type of person I wanted people to see me as.

Across multiple interviews, students expressed similar sentiments about their personal growth. Speaking about the "joy" that she felt for herself at the end of the school year, despite "what other people say," Elba described a breadth of academic pursuits she achieved "outside of usual school," and repeatedly emphasized that she felt "accomplished":

> I feel really, really, happy that I'm finishing high school. I got my seal of biliteracy. I think I have a really, really, good GPA. I have a 4.2 GPA. I was super surprised that it was so high. […] And I was telling my best friend yesterday, I felt so much joy for myself and I really didn't care what other people say. So, I'm like, super happy. […] I feel accomplished, even though it's like, "cliche" or something like that, I feel accomplished. This year I did my classes, I did dual enrollment, even if I didn't pass my AP test for European history, I took the test. I took the class, I passed the class. I took AP, completed my seal of biliteracy, dual enrollment. So, I feel like I did other things outside of usual school, and I feel accomplished.

Sharing a similar sense of pride, Sofia described developing a strong personal motivation to achieve top grades despite the initial challenges posed by learning remotely. In an interview early in the school year, Sofia reflected on her initial struggles with online learning, and her ability to "overcome that challenge" by learning time management skills:

> The pandemic and online learning made me think that I don't have to take school seriously no more, because it's on my computer. And that's how I was *at first*. But then, my last semester of junior year, I didn't do as well as I could […] It was really difficult for me to learn online. I just kind of gave up, I didn't like it. But then, this semester, my first semester of senior year, I learned more how to manage my time and take it seriously. And I put school first. […] I was able to overcome that challenge.

Sofia then expressed that reflecting on her academic effort was beneficial, particularly in light of her struggles with depression, which began pre-pandemic during in-person school. The invitation for reflection allowed her the chance to "look back," which helped Sofia realize that she had not been "lazy," and she "always did try really hard." Listing the academic opportunities that she continued to take advantage of during the pandemic, Sofia explained:

> I've taken advantage by taking [college prep class], taking AP classes, IB classes, and also by taking a program that we have in my school, which is basically like being able to take all the health and medical classes. […] I learned that I did try my best. So that made me feel better, because sometimes I'm like, "Work harder. I'm being lazy. I need to try harder." But when I look back, I'm like, "Oh, I did try." Like, I always did try really hard.

In a later interview, Sofia raised the topic of achievement again, noting, "If I do get straight A's this semester, I'm going to have all A's. My GPA is going to go up to 4.0, so I think that's good." Given her plans to attend community college, Sofia's grade point average would not affect her college admission and attendance in the same way it would for a four-year university that requires final grade reporting upon high school graduation. Nonetheless, Sofia remained self-motivated, stating, "I mean, I'm just doing it for myself […] So it's mostly because I want to

at least graduate with a 4.0." In the end, Sofia concluded, "My motivation for school has gotten better, even though we're still online. But now I feel like I'm *more* motivated."

Further, Sofia credited the online schooling context with creating a new opportunity for her to develop "leadership skills" by taking on more responsibilities through part-time employment. Noting that the traditional in-person school schedule would not have afforded her any available hours for daytime employment as a high school student, Sofia explained how her aspirations to secure her first part-time job were directly related to her future college plans:

> I'm glad that I was able to start [my job] before college, so maybe I won't stress myself out too much at the beginning […] having to take on all these responsibilities. Since I'm already doing it, I feel like I'm going to be able to adapt to college life a bit easier. I know high school can't compare to college, but I really have kind of a system now, like, "OK, school is this, work is this," and it's time for working in tandem.

Such examples indicate how students participating in this study took on new challenges during the pandemic with their futures in mind. They described feeling empowered to pursue opportunities that had previously existed during in-person schooling, but felt inaccessible at the time due to individual, social, and institutional constraints.

Students also linked the novel experiences of remote learning and quarantining during the pandemic to mental health improvements in ways that bridged their academic, career, and social identities. For example, Sofia expressed that having depression previously made it difficult for her "to be alone," and that the current era helped her "grow" in independence:

> I feel like this time did help me, because at times it forced me to have to be alone and to do things for myself instead of depending on others, or things like that. I feel like I was able to grow into being more independent. […] Before, I would not be able to do anything alone, and right now, I do *everything* for myself, and I'm not nervous or anything.

Paola, too, attributed a "big growth in personality" to her experiences with online schooling, and the associated improvements to her mental health and social-emotional wellness. Realizing that

she was liberated from the harmful interpersonal challenges of in-person schooling during remote learning, Paola imagined the possibilities of diverse peer groups and new social environments. These reflections inspired feelings of "positive energy" about the future.

> I was reflecting, like, "I don't have to make them like me." And I started realizing […] "No, I don't have to be [at in-person school], and *I don't have to put myself through this anymore.*" There's so many different types of personalities out there and so many different people and diversity, that I mean, just because I don't fit into this group doesn't mean I don't fit in somewhere else. […] It's a little scary, but now I'm definitely filled with positive energy … It's a big growth in personality for me, I guess.

Mirroring Paola's reflection, Claudia expressed similar sentiments about the transformative impact of developing a positive self-concept during the year of pandemic quarantining. Claudia postulated that "most" students would not have experienced the same mental health growth if they had been constrained by the typical social context of in-person schooling.

> I know school affected most of us mentally, in the way that we didn't see ourselves as capable of finding someone that likes us, and now we're finding our own selves, to love ourselves. And I think if we were still in school, none of us would have grown out of it. And I feel like, "You know what? I'm actually beautiful and I am actually worth that. I don't have to wait for someone to love me. *I don't have to wait for someone to love me.*"

In a separate interview, I asked Claudia, "Was there anything else on your mind that you didn't get a chance to say?" She introduced a related topic for comparison: sexual harassment at school.

> The difference between online school and then physical school? Sexual harassment. That's a whole other thing that also affects people at school. […] You're kind of praised because you got sexually harassed. […] Nobody seems to stop it, because […] "Shouldn't you be happy that they chose you?" And that's something that also affects the whole school environment that nobody talks about.

Claudia explained, "I never realized this until recently," and said that during in-person school, "It's like you have to put a mask on just so nobody knows." She described previously being stuck "in a place where you feel vulnerable and then not be able to speak up," and that once she

was removed from the in-person school environment, she began "mentally preparing" for the future. In reflecting on her experiences with sexual harassment at in-person school, Claudia reasoned: "OK, what happened wasn't *my fault*. That wasn't *supposed to* happen to me, but it happened." Pointing to developing a more positive self-concept, she expressed that the self-reflection she engaged in during the time of online schooling helped her "learn to stay strong through it all." Imagining her future college experiences, Claudia began anticipating potential encounters: "I know sexual harassment in elementary school and high school are two different types of sexual harassment compared to the sexual harassment I might encounter -- very different from what I might experience in college." Nonetheless, Claudia became more confident in knowing, now, that she could "definitely move forward" from such experiences. Other young women also spoke of commonly gendered experiences, such as body image challenges, which impacted their thinking about transitioning between in-person and online contexts.

Returning to Elba's story, in addition to expressing various indications of developing a positive self-concept in critical moments of transition (e.g., feeling "accomplished" during the pandemic and remote learning), she also struggled with other forms of self-love. She offered the following example of a tension she was still working through, as self-criticisms conflicted with self-affirmations in the process of "working on" herself to "feel better":

> I'm trying to work on not being so hard on myself […] you know, like, it's up to me to feel better about myself. So, I'm working on myself in that way. […] I still don't know. Right now, I'm kind of being a little too hard on myself with my weight. So, it's like, "I have to watch my weight, I have to watch my weight." And I *like* my body. So, I'm being too hard on myself, and I notice that.

When I asked how this reflection might relate to Elba's thinking about her future, Elba expressed feeling some trepidation about eventually entering a new social context, given her challenges

with anxiety. However, Elba also emphasized a fresh awareness that in her future, she should not disregard herself and her needs; she *can* take on her aspirations, albeit "slowly," "step by step."

> I'm just cautious about pushing myself to be more open and enter into a group setting. I think about it, like, "*What am I going to do* in my future? I can't be just like, you know, pushing myself to the side." I'm conscious that I need to work on myself. But I'm also cautious that I have to do it slowly. I have to just take it step by step.

Across cases, these renewed feelings of self-awareness and self-confidence were foundational to students' development of positive self-concepts and future-orientations. Such reflections on their self-concepts were often intertwined with students' comments about the experience of participating in the research interview process. This theme is described further in Chapter 6, which unpacks the contribution of the motivational interviewing method.

Overall, students believed the benefits they gained from online schooling helped to prepare them for future success across the domains of academic, career, and social development. For these young people, the remote education context sparked mental health improvements, shaped their positive self-concept, and enabled them to imagine potential futures. Given these realizations, students expressed how they began prioritizing such factors in their relationships.

Mental Health and Safety Became Priorities in Students' Approaches to Peer Relationships

I think my relationships have very much been affected. My best friend of nine years -- we just stopped talking. ... But I got two more best friends. And I think their way of seeing everything, the way I see it as well, it just benefited me emotionally, mentally, and in any other way. - Claudia

During online schooling and pandemic quarantining, students sought out relationships with greater intentionality, often for the first time. They reflected on their values and relationship expectations, and thoughtfully considered how peers were helping or hurting their mental health and social wellness. Ultimately, students believed that shifts in peer relationships during online

schooling and the pandemic -- new friendships they chose to nurture, and old friendships they chose to forego -- offered valuable learning opportunities about how to approach relationships in the future. In many cases, these relationships transformed dramatically, and redefined students' conceptions of friendship. In Paola's case, she narrowed her "friend circle" to "two girls," explaining:

> I've cut a lot of people out of my life. I mean, I used to surround myself with so many people and all of these friends. […] Slowly I left that group, and then learned a lot of things. They didn't like me, so why was I trying to fit in with them? I definitely have a much smaller group of friends now, but they're valuable friends, you know? They're friends that I know I can count on. I know that they're there for me, and they like me for who I am.

Elaborating on her relationships with her close friends, Paola stated bluntly, "I can be very open with them, and I can be myself. It's very liberating to not have to hide behind this wall, and try and pretend to be somebody else, or try and be more like them." This form of relationship liberation was a driver of Paola's growing confidence in her mental health, and inspired her optimism about future peer relationships in college.

> Interviewer: How does all this make you think about your future, if at all?
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> Paola: It makes me more optimistic. I used to think of going away to college, "I'm going to be all alone. I'm not going to know anybody. How is this ever going to work out?" And especially with my mental health, I was like, "Am I going to have a support system? Who am I going to have out there?" It was all these questions, and definitely surrounding myself with all these people, and finally finding my group now, I'm like, "Wait, I found one here, I can find one there," because especially in college, it's so big with so many different types of people. And not only that, but it's the academic pursuit that we're all trying for. We have this same goal at the end of the day -- to learn more, to grow ourselves. We're all trying to better ourselves in a way.

Navigating the process of losing and gaining friends during the unprecedented social context of "pandemic schooling" fueled Paola's positive future-orientation about relationships. Reiterating

her hopes to find camaraderie among peers who share "the academic pursuit," and her enthusiasm about the chance to "learn" and "grow" alongside new friends, Paola gushed:

> I was just filled with doubts about going away to college and being out there on my own. But now I'm very optimistic towards the future, and I'm very excited to see how much I grow, and what new friends I'm going to learn with -- What new things am I going to learn? -- and I'm very excited about where my life is going to go, and who's going to be in it, and what I'm going to find, and all these different things!

Like Paola, throughout the course of the pandemic, Claudia also narrowed her social peer group to "two amazing friends" whom she said made an "impact" and helped her "learn more" about herself. When the topic of friendships arose in interviews, Claudia referenced a marked decrease in text messaging and social media interactions with peers, along with an increase in what she called "close" relationships that "shifted" towards her "grown-up side."

> I definitely lost a lot of people. I definitely text less with people. My Snapchat numbers, when you view stories, were like two thousand people that I had, and now it's down to four hundred. […] But I definitely gained two amazing friends that I never thought I would have in my life. And I never thought we would be so close, that they would impact me so much, and that I would learn more about myself with them than I did with all those other millions of people. So that was something that was like, *wow,* I definitely shifted into my grown-up side more with my two friends than I did with all these other people.

Across multiple interviews spanning four months, Claudia also elaborated on her journey of ending a significant pre-pandemic friendship in favor of building these new bonds. Recalling the poor relationship dynamics with her former "best friend" of nearly a decade, she reflected:

> Claudia: I started realizing, "OK, is she *really* your best friend, or is she not? Should she be somebody that you should keep in your life, or should you just let her go?" And I think that's when I realized I should just let her go, because she's not benefiting me in any way, and she's just benefiting *from* me.
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> Interviewer: Yeah, those are important questions to ask yourself. What do you think pushed you to realize that, if there was anything?
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> Claudia: It was just the way that she was treating people in a way to make them feel smaller about themselves, because she's one of those people that really thinks

> she's on top of everybody. And I never saw it as wrong, because I always thought, "OK, she can see herself that way. Why shouldn't she?" But I never saw the signs that she would tell people things to make them feel smaller. […] So that's what really pushed me to just let her go.

Claudia then compared the varied impact that her "closest friends" had on her mental health in different contexts, noting negative effects during in-person schooling and positive effects during online schooling. She previously felt alone in "getting degraded" by peers, while her current friendships feel "supportive." When I asked how she selected her new friends after parting from her "ex-best friend," Claudia emphasized "the way they treat others" as an important quality.

> Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. That makes a lot of sense. It sounds like it was the right decision for you. How do you decide about the new people that you want to have in your network?
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> Claudia: I think it's just the way they treat others. […] I think it's different because now I know I'm not the only one that went through "degrading" -- I think that's the word -- getting degraded by other people. I recently noticed, "OK, other people go through it" […] I think that really changed everything.

Claudia realized that she and her two new best friends had *all* experienced the harm of social degradation when attending school in-person, as well as the consequential mental health effects. Appreciating the enduring, positive relationship dynamics being fostered with her new group, she said, "I didn't think we were going to get this close and be so supportive to each other. It's about to be a whole school year, and we're still talking." Claudia also made connections across her intended college major of psychology, mental health, relationships, and her own future resiliency.

> Interviewer: Wow, that's great. How have these conversations affected your own thinking about what you want for your life, if at all?
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> Claudia: It's pushed me more into psychology because I see how much [my best friends] get affected. We make jokes out of our mental health, and sometimes it's really funny. But then sometimes we're like, "OK, we're making a little too many jokes about it. We should really calm it down." But I think that's a really good way of coping with it […] and it makes them feel a little bit better about their

> issues. […] They're really my support system. They're the ones that keep me going and keep me together. So, I really feel like if I lose them, I'll probably break too. And I probably won't be able to get back as quickly as I have. So, I think that really affects me.

As she talked through prioritizing mental health and social wellness in relationships, Claudia credited her new fulfilling friendships as the source of numerous benefits to her personal growth, including "self-love," "self-respect," and higher "expectations." She also extended these values from platonic same-gender relationships to romantic different-gender relationships, thanks to her new friends' positive role modeling.

> My expectations for guys are very high compared to how they were before. Because before I would settle for anybody who was nice to me […] But now I expect you to be nice to me, respect me, show me you like me for me, because of the way my new best friends taught me how *their* boyfriends are, and the way my best friends showed *me* love.

Claudia also explained how her new friends helped her process the harmful interactions she had experienced with peers in the past, and how this affected her thinking about her future. She noted, "They definitely showed me how to speak up about things," concluding, "So, that has really shaped me as a woman now." When I asked, "Can you think of any examples of ways that you've spoken about things, or ways that you've shown the higher expectations that you have?" Claudia referenced two recent instances: one with her same-gender "ex-best friend," and one with a different-gender romantic interest. She recalled a friendship-ending conversation with the person she was previously "never able to speak up to," and recounted telling her: "I think you realize that I'ma speak up and I'ma say something back. Before, you were able to manipulate me […] but now, I speak up and you don't like it." This new confidence in communication and self-advocacy, and intentionality in approaching peer relationships, translated to Claudia's dating life for the first time. Speaking about a recent conflict with "a guy," Claudia explained:

> Something happened. We got into an argument, and he didn't want to talk it out. […] So I told him, "My expectations are this, this, this, and this. And I'm just settling for you, and I'm done settling." […] It's good, because before, I was like, "Well, guys like girls who act dumb, guys like this, guys like that." And maybe it's because in high school, guys *actually do* like that. I've realized I've grown into the person I'm supposed to be. […] I've grown up, and I know who I am. And I'm not so easily manipulated to think I'm something else when I'm not that.

When I asked about "what changed," Claudia reiterated, "I think it's just the people I surround myself with." Thanks to her new friendships during online schooling, she began to take pride in having "value," "goals," and "a plan for the future." She also believed her experience navigating new peer relationships would "benefit" her "in the future," because, as was validated by others' observations, she had become "confident" in her pursuits.

> I think it's really going to benefit me in the future, because I used to give up. I've been told by multiple people now that I give off a good vibe about myself […] that I'm confident and that I don't give up so easily.

Across cases, students noticed how friendship dynamics impacted their mental health, and thus, they came to value mental, emotional, and physical wellness as aspirational qualities when developing new relationships. Likewise, as students envisioned and planned their college futures, the possibility of accessing ongoing support from these friends -- and from other close relations within their community context -- became important factors that shaped students' postsecondary aspirations.

Peer Support and Community Context Mediated Students' Aspirations

I'm trying to get a job so I could be saving money. And that way, when I do transfer, I know how to work, because I've never had a job. Obviously if I leave, I'm going to get a job later on, too. So, I want to get all that experience here, where I have the support of my family and my friends, and then later on, when I'm ready, transfer. - Sofia

Across cases, students spoke about establishing healthy habits of regularly talking with one or two close friends about their postsecondary pathways. Often, these conversations strategically balanced both individual and collective interests, as students fostered their personal aspirations while simultaneously making future plans with their current friendships in mind. Students also crafted aspirations relevant to their community contexts. As students imagined pursuing their academic and career goals first locally, and eventually at more distant colleges, they continually considered their home community to be the foundation for their preparation.

Sofia explained how peer dialogues helped her navigate pivotal moments when she felt "stressed out" about postsecondary decision-making. For instance, during the application period for four-year universities, Sofia told her friends: "*Oh my god,* I stressed myself out, because I wanted to leave for college, and now I decided that I don't." Supportively, her friends responded, "Well, we could all stay at [local community college], or we could go to community college in [nearby city]." Sofia explained that choosing the community college path would fulfill their peer group's desire "to stay together" as they continued to craft and support individualized pathways. While Sofia aspired to quickly transfer from community college to a university in two years, one friend in the group planned to attend community college classes for a longer period of time, and the other friend planned to complete some courses while prioritizing beginning her career.

Claudia, too, shared about regularly structuring her peer dialogues around postsecondary planning. She confirmed, "With my two new best friends, we really talk about [future plans]," and explained that they had collectively committed to having strategic and supportive conversations that would nurture their aspirations throughout the school year:

> We always give ourselves one day in the week to always ask, "OK, how are your college applications going? How's your FAFSA going? Have you gotten anything back? Have you heard anything? Are you still on the same pathway, or did you

> change?" […] So we're always talking about our futures and how we want them to be.

Claudia and her friends valued this mutual support system so much that they preemptively built a schedule for virtual group conversations into their future college plans.

> We've agreed that we'll have, hopefully, one night every single week to do Google Meets. Right now, we do Google Meets every single day. So, we're saying when we go to college, we at least need to have one Google Meet every single week. And if possible, we should meet every single month at least once. That's our "thing" that we have right now.

Emphasizing the importance of maintaining these connections, Claudia lamented, "I feel like if I stop talking [with friends], everything will just fall apart."

Similarly, across cases, when planning and making decisions about their postsecondary pathways, students prioritized remaining connected to their existing support networks, which primarily included close friends. Engaging in positive self-talk to prepare herself for her future college transition, Sofia mentioned the kinds of life adjustments that she would find "OK" versus those that would be "scary," with hopes that she would not be navigating the process by herself.

> Sofia: I'm already getting used to the idea, or setting my mindset, like, "You're going to have to start at a university by yourself in a couple of years," which is OK, but I don't want to be by myself. I don't want to live in the dorms. I don't want to start with new people right away. Like, that's kind of scary to me.
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> Interviewer: Why is it scary for you to meet new people or do these new things?
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> Sofia: I'm not a risk-taker for the most part. I like to stay with what I know […] I like sticking to what is normal or usual for me. […] There are some things I'm willing to try, but for the most part, I don't like super big changes. If I'm going to do big changes, I hope there's someone there with me.

Elaborating upon her plan to ensure her peer support network would remain intact as she began her postsecondary journey, Sofia explained that she and her two closest friends "*want* to live together," but "don't *have* to live together" -- at least not immediately. By choosing to attend their local community college as a first step, the group reasoned that they could optimize at least

two more years of living at home with their respective families. They considered this a strategic decision, knowing that their goal of moving into an apartment in a new city would be "way more expensive." Thus, they needed time to "prepare for everything," including "saving up money."

> Sofia: We have talked about it. We feel like we could do it. If we really want to, we could make it happen -- if we prepare beforehand. Staying here for two years, like we were saying, would mean we're actually stable, and we could actually prepare for everything.
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> Interviewer: What are some of the things that you've been talking about, in terms of preparing for those next couple of years?
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> Sofia: Well, first, we want to get a job so we can start saving up money. And the second thing is that we all have to search for what we want to do. Like, *why* are we going to go? *Why* are we all leaving together? For me, it's because I want to go to school. But let's say, maybe there's another school that's near mine that my other friend could go to, to do something that she wants, and my other friend, too. And then we'll make sure that we can get jobs there -- like, we'll still need that later on. We'll figure that out.

Such conversations demonstrated how Sofia and her friends constructed *purposeful* aspirations together in real-time, and how those aspirations were shaped by the opportunities and constraints of their individual circumstances, their local context, and their anticipated future community.

These goals were often consistent across interviews over time; one month later, Sofia reiterated her commitment to their plans, reminding me: "You know how we were talking about staying here for two years, and then hopefully leaving for a university? […] I still think like that, and I hope we're able to do it." Despite previously saying that the idea of being with "new people" at a university felt "scary," Sofia had now decided to pursue "nursing," and realized that her career development process would require her to be more "independent" and "get experience with different things." Sofia enhanced her plans to transfer from a local community college to a university elsewhere, now including aspirations of volunteering and professional networking in a region with more opportunities in the medical field.

> I know that here, you can work in the hospital to volunteer. But maybe over there, I could have more opportunities, like at a lot of different hospitals. And then maybe I could meet new people outside of what I already know, because I know that building up relationships can help you a lot for your future.

By our next interview the following month, Sofia's plan was underway, starting with securing employment. After "applying everywhere" and "putting in application after application," she was hired for a job at McDonald's. She expressed feeling "happy," "scared," and "nervous" about the position, and highlighted the transferable skills which she believed would help her succeed as a future medical professional.

> Interviewer: Congratulations! I'd love to hear all about it. How are you feeling?
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> Sofia: I'm happy. I was like, "Oh I really hope I get it," and I'm glad to finally have a job. […] I am kind of scared. I'm happy, but nervous. […] I think it's also going to help me because it's going to be fast-paced and, you know, in the medical field, everything's more fast-paced. So, I think that will also help me start learning how to think really fast on my feet. […] That's kind of scary, but I just need to go through with it, and not be scared.

I followed up by noticing, "You've brought up this feeling of being scared a few times now. It sounds like it's kind of a prominent idea for you at the moment." Sofia exclaimed, "Yeah, because I'm *shy!*" More quietly, she stated, "But I'm trying to change that." After speaking with her friends, who also worked in the fast-food industry and encouraged her to apply for the job, Sofia confronted her fears, declaring, "I'm just going to do this." This exchange, as well as many reflections Sofia shared across interviews, reflects how friends' support was essential to shaping her goals, plans, and actions in academic, social, and professional life.

Beyond close peer relationships, students also looked to their local community context as a source of comfort and reassurance. Despite having "doubts" and comparing herself to a "baby bird" being forced to fly after a "push," Paola felt confident in being about to "figure it out" on her own. She questioned, "What if I don't get into college? What if I don't do good in college?

What if I drop out?" Yet, she expressed feeling secure in knowing that her home community would "always be there," reassuring her that she could "come back" if she were to "do poorly."

> It's such a beautiful little town where you have so much room to grow. There's no high expectations. There's no like, "You *have* to do well." And it's like, if you don't, you're OK. But if you do, good for you. And everyone is there to back you up and cheer you on, no matter if you leave and you come back. […] It's such a positive feeling from everybody to know that they will always be here to back you up when you do well, and then also when you do poorly […] it's a nice thing knowing that your community is always there for you and won't cast you away.

Although Paola believed her home community did not push "high expectations," she felt it still offered her "so much room to grow," despite being a place where "not a lot of opportunities are seen." Nonetheless, Paola felt "reassured" that regardless of future successes or challenges along her college journey, she could "always be satisfied" if she were to return to her hometown.

> Just because you come from this small town, this small valley where, of course, not a lot of opportunities are seen, doesn't mean that you can't go to a prestigious college -- and not even just college -- it doesn't mean you can't get this big job, this big house, this big family. I think that's the one thing that is constant, it's sort of the reassurance of knowing that you can be big, and even if you aren't, you can be small, and you can always be satisfied here in the valley.

Emphasizing "not even just college" as part of her thinking, Paola's future-orientation included considerations like a "big job," "big house," and "big family," extending her aspirations beyond academic achievements at a "prestigious college." Although Paola was the only student to immediately attend a four-year university after high school, and she did not establish a plan to remain connected to her local friends, she prioritized opportunities to develop new peer support networks over institutional prestige when selecting which college to attend.

> [In-state university] is not that far away, their psychology program is one of the best, the college is beautiful. I just don't feel excited to go there. This is the logical step I should take […] but my feelings were just never in it. And with [out-of-state university], I love the *people*. But the psychology *program* is definitely not the best. […] It wasn't the obvious choice because of the psychology program, and because of the difference in cultural aspects -- Hispanic, Latino, that's definitely not seen out there.

Paola explained that despite noticing cultural differences with the out-of-state university being a predominantly white institution, the peer connectedness that she felt with other students in the campus community impacted her positively.

> I started getting in contact with *so many* people who are going to [out-of-state university], just over text message. We're all getting along *so well* and getting to know each other online and all of that. […] I find myself being attached to my phone all the time because I'm talking to all these people who are sharing the exact same college. We're sharing information and we're all in love with the campus and the city, and we're going to experience the same things. […] It took that weight off my shoulders.

On the one hand, Paola reasoned that the in-state university would be "the logical step" and "the safe choice" because she would earn a psychology degree "from one of the top programs." On the other hand, she explained, "You know -- just for once -- I decided, 'Do what's going to make you happy in the end.'" In the conversation that followed, Paola again related her postsecondary planning to her personal-social wellness. Additionally, the sense of safety Paola felt through the "support system" of her community helped her to *reject* the "safe" college option. For the first time, she felt confident in choosing her own happiness, even if she might "make a mistake."

> Interviewer: It sounds like you've been really thoughtful about this process, especially when it comes to setting yourself up for the life that you want to have.
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> Paola: I've always thought of everyone else when making decisions. This is the one decision that I have to take for myself. The one who's going to be living it, is me. And no matter how everyone else takes it, I know that I am going to be so happy. […] I'm a huge perfectionist because I'm afraid I'm going to make a mistake. […] I realized that I don't always have to be perfect, you know? I'm human, and I can make mistakes in my life, and I can have those moments where it's like, you have to be selfish and you have to think of yourself, at least in certain situations.

Paola quickly added, "And of course, you have your support system." She concluded that, when choosing to attend [out-of-state university], "It's not only determining where you want to *study,*

but it's thinking of how it's going to affect your future, and *who you are going to meet*, and who you are *not* going to meet, and all of these things."

Overall, when imagining their college futures, students valued their social connections. Thus, students factored peers into their aspirational goals within their local contexts, and began envisioning what a college experience might offer beyond the academic opportunities available. Students also spoke about the distinct mechanisms of peer support they accessed throughout the process of postsecondary planning and decision-making, and narrated how peer dialogues helped shape their future-orientations. Across cases, while students recognized that some aspects of their postsecondary pathways would inevitably diverge from those of their friends (e.g., choosing different majors, or attending different college campuses in the same city), they nonetheless aimed to retain the mutually beneficial aspects of these relationships, which they felt would support their ability to thrive academically, socially, and professionally. As students considered varied forms of support as they navigated the college-going process, they also reflected on the influence of the adults in their lives, at home and at school.

Key Educators Positively Influenced Students' Aspirations to Attend College

I'm really lucky to have [college preparatory teacher] because she pushes us to do certain things. I've had her for four years, and she's one of the best teachers. But it's a lot of pressure, a lot of pushing from the teacher. She's really pushy. - Andres

When I asked students to reflect on the influence of adults in their lives, they explained how key influential educators positively stood out against the backdrop of a generally "stressful" school environment. As discussed previously, the school's rigorous college-going culture and "degrading" peer climate contributed to an often challenging academic and social experience for students. However, they named various athletics coaches, as well as one specific math teacher,

science teacher, and two college preparatory educators, as adults who would "push" them and "lift" them up through difficult times.

Students named their shared science teacher as a key figure, with Paola sharing that, "He is one of the people who helped me through a difficult time in my life." Similarly, students spoke of their shared math teacher as someone who would inspire them to ask questions, not just about algebra or geometry, but about their futures. Claudia referenced how she relied on him for career-related information outside of class time, which they would discuss during the lunch period. She recalled, "Every single day I would go in with one more question. I'd ask him a different question, ask a different question, ask a different question, and he'd always have the answers right there." Andres also recalled this same math teacher as someone who created one of "the best experiences in the class," which sparked his academic motivation, and thus, became an adult whom Andres did not want to "disappoint."

A habitus lens (Bourdieu, 1990) might suggest that the school had put in place the necessary norms to predictably support positive four-year college-going outcomes for its population -- particularly within a large comprehensive high school enrolling mostly first-generation students of color, in a rural community with a high poverty rate. However, in a school system that students perceived to be hostile in some respects, a community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) uplifts many other forms of capital that nurtured students' aspirations and pathways. Indicating the presence of rich "familial capital" (Yosso, 2005), many of the educators whom students viewed as positive role models had established roots in the broader community. Explaining his positive relationship with the influential math teacher, Andres said, "I think also the connection is with my dad, because he was my dad's teacher as well, for two years." Intergenerational connections were also common in athletics, with adult mentors who had

formerly coached students' parents, relatives, and older siblings. Yosso (2005) argues that this kind of familial capital "engages a commitment to community well being and expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship" (p. 79), which is reflected in relationships fostered via sports, school, and other community settings. Summarizing the impact of these influential individuals, Paola characterized them as the handful of people who would go "that extra mile," explaining such relationships as "parent-like."

> They have always just gone that extra mile to make sure that I'm doing what I need to do and like making sure, like checking my grades constantly. "Are you doing this? Why is this missing?" It's very much parent-like, but it helped, weirdly.

Notably, students often referred to these individual interactions with key adults as a haven from the toxic social environment they experienced with peers throughout their typical school days. As addressed earlier in this chapter, harmful peer interactions which often occurred without intervention contributed to students' mental health challenges, like depression and anxiety, ultimately impacting their future-orientations. Students said that the most meaningful mentorship interactions with teachers and coaches would often occur outside the traditional classroom, such as during extracurricular activities that they joined during the lunch period or after school.

When speaking about the influence of their sports coaches, students emphasized that their support encompassed "school" and "life." Claudia summarized, "My coach is one of the people that I could always go to for things. And she's always been there for me, pushing me to do more in life, and get into more clubs, and still be focused in school." Andres also appreciated lessons learned from coaches who fostered his commitment to "hard work" across all areas of life, which influenced his thinking about college readiness.

> It's not just in school that you have to be hard-working. It has to be at home. It has to be in sports. It's not just academics. It's in everything you do. And usually

> if you show that you have determination to do *other* things, it means you're a great candidate for college.

Thanks to his coaches' encouragement to try getting involved in sports, Andres characterized the experience of joining athletics in his junior year as "the best time" of his high school life, and lamented that he "should have done it awhile back." Likewise, Paola spoke highly of a coach who knew her "inside and out" and supported her as an additional "parent" figure. Through "tough love," the coach also ensured that Paola's grades did not "slip," rendering her ineligible to participate in sports or apply for four-year universities.

> She knew exactly how to push me, how far to push me, and when I was giving my best, and when I was definitely not. So, she is definitely tough love because she would yell at you. She'll be like, "You need to do better. I'm yelling at you because I love you." And you knew the minute she stopped yelling, she no longer cared. So, yes, please yell! She knows me inside and out and knows exactly how to push me.

Such coaches and teachers alike motivated students to remain focused on both academic and life goals. Reflecting on how their shared math teacher was influential, students described how he intentionally fostered a safe space in his classroom as well as outside of class time, making them feel welcome to visit. Sofia appreciated that, "He would give up a lot of his time, like his lunch, his breaks, after school, and he would let his students come in. He would let them come in and eat, and if they needed help, he would help them." His influence was so profound that Claudia said their mentorship dynamic "canceled out the rest of the teachers" whom she struggled to connect with positively. Claudia also directly linked the social support she felt from this teacher to her persistence to pursue her aspirations.

> He was one of the teachers that stuck with me all four years. He's always pushed me to work harder. My freshman year, he was one of the teachers who actually told me, "Keep focusing on your goals, because those goals will give your children a much bigger future." […] I think he really canceled out the rest of the teachers, because he was the one teacher that I would always go to. If I was feeling sad, I'd go to his class. If I didn't have anybody to eat with, I'd eat with

> him. If any little thing just changed my mood, I would go to him, and he'd always find a way to lift me up. So, I think that's mainly why I didn't change my focus from [studying] psychology or just think, "OK, maybe I'm just not good enough for psychology. Maybe I just shouldn't have that many kids. Maybe I should […] just settle." I think he's the main reason why I never settled for something less than I think I deserve.

Like other students, Claudia highlighted just a couple of influential teachers who "stuck with" her as she struggled throughout "all four years" of high school.

Collectively, students also noted that their college preparatory program educators played a significant role in keeping them focused on academic goals. As discussed further in the next section, this credit-bearing college readiness course was designed with the intention of fostering long-term student-teacher relationships. Compared to her dynamic with other educators, Paola described this connection as "a different bond" that helped keep her focused on her "studies."

> [College prep teacher] just creates a different bond with us because we would be with her for a lot of the time in our high school. So, she just sort of bonds with you and makes sure she knows your situation. She knows your background. […] She was one of the teachers who I would go to when I needed help. And there was a time when I was no longer focusing on my studies. I just threw everything out the window and she had a talk with me. I would always, like, go to her and be like, "You know what? This is going on. I don't know how to deal with this. I just need help." And she would definitely be there […] and she would just encourage me and tell me all these positive things and just, you know, at least bring me up for that day. […] So, she would always just be there, and she was the one person who I could always, like, go to, no matter what time it was in the school day.

Similarly, Sophia valued her long-term relationship with her college prep teacher and counselor. Sofia anticipated keeping them in her network as she pursued her higher education journey, and explained, "I know that if I need help with anything in college, I can always look back and ask them for help." Although Claudia had a more tenuous relationship with her college prep teacher, who often sent her out of class with "referrals" for acting "defiant" and having an "attitude," Claudia acknowledged some positive outcomes of the relationship.

> I've always been a pain in her butt […] and she's never really -- she's never stopped pushing me to do more, and she's never stopped believing in me. She's always told me, "Stop doing that, do this. You're not going to get into college if you keep playing around." […] She's always pushed me and she's taught me a lot of things, and I'm pretty sure if I hadn't learned them, I'd be a whole mess right now.

While Claudia appreciated that the college prep teacher "never stopped believing" in her, Claudia characterized the disciplinary actions she faced as "confusing" and "unfair." She maintained that adults "barely listened" and should understand that, "I'm not the problem, and it's actually the teacher." Claudia concluded that, "Most people in society have to realize that sometimes a child is actually telling you the truth when it comes to their teachers."

As addressed previously in Chapter 4, students recognized that their own few positive relationships with teachers were unique, and not necessarily reflective of most of their peers' experiences with adults at school. But overall, despite commonly feeling a lack of connection based on the general school climate, students did speak highly of key adults in their lives who consistently supported them, including educators who encouraged their college-going goals in particular. However, students found the structure of their college preparatory experiences to be both enabling and constraining when developing and pursuing their aspirations.

College Preparatory Program Experiences Enabled and Constrained Youths' Aspirations

[College prep] did help me in knowing information about [college], but I could have also done that outside of [college prep]. And it was just a little disheartening that it wasn't what I expected, and it just took so much time, and was more workload than what I really needed. - Elba

All students had participated in a credit-bearing classroom-based college preparatory program for all four years of high school, which was intended to support first-generation college-going students through the process of four-year college eligibility, applications, and admissions. While students mentioned some important benefits they gained from the college prep class, such

as being “guided” and held “accountable” on their college-going journeys, they also perceived some significant shortcomings.

Across cases, students found the most value in the program’s accountability processes to ensure they met college-related deadlines. Sofia credited the program with keeping her “aware,” admitting that outside the college prep class, she did not “pay attention” to college information.

> When the bulletin was read in the morning, I wouldn’t really pay attention to what it was saying, or I would be late to school, and I wouldn’t hear the bulletin that tells you about all the events. Thanks to [college prep], I was always aware of needing to sign up for things and meet all the due dates.

Similarly, Paola also noted how the college prep class provided such reminders.

> I think it guided me in a certain direction, just because I need to be held accountable for my actions. I sort of needed someone to be like, “OK, you need to do this, the deadline is going to pass, you need to do that,” so it sort of helped me in that sense.

However, students also felt confused about the purpose of some of the college prep class’ requirements, questioning, “Why am I doing this? How does this help me?” Paola characterized certain activities as a “waste of time” that created “more stress for the student than help.”

> I’m going to be completely honest. I don’t think it helped me very much. I don’t think it really helped me, especially with the skillset. A lot of the skills that they advertise are organization, time management, and all that, and I don’t think their methods gave that. Certain things they do are more of a waste of time, and more stress for the student than help. I think [college prep] taught me how to deal with the stress that came with it, but not much else.

Paola added, “But then again, I did make a lot of really great connections. I found some friends who were also on the college path. I had a good teacher. But as far as the course goes, their methods weren’t the best.” Elba’s experience mirrored Paola’s, both positively and negatively. Acknowledging that although the first year of the class was “cool” because she “had fun” with friends, Elba found the following years to be repetitive and unhelpful. Further, she felt that the unnecessary workload in the college prep class, which often emphasized binder organization and

specific note-taking strategies, detracted from her ability to focus on other academic priorities, like when she needed to "study for an AP test."

> From my freshman year, I started off with [college prep] and I was super pumped because I was like, "They're going to help me with college, going to help me with scholarships, going to help me with everything they promised." And yeah, it was cool the first year, like, I had fun with my friends, and I met people. But after that it was just repeating itself, like doing binders, doing notes … it gave me so much more workload. So, if I had to study for an AP test or something like that, I still had to do my binder check. I already had everything ready, but my notes weren't the "right" way in "Cornell style." I liked doing my notes in a different style, but I couldn't turn in my binder that way, because I would get reduced points because it wasn't the way that *they* wanted. […] It just gave me so much workload instead of helping me out.

Paola echoed that because she preferred using her own note-taking strategies which helped her "understand," the binder checks created "double the work." She explained, "I would be copying my notes in 'Cornell style,' just so I could have them for the class. I was doing double the work, and it would take up my time from other homework that I still needed to do."

Students also perceived a lack of support for a range of possible postsecondary pathways. Because they had committed to completing the college prep class throughout all four years of high school, students felt they could not "branch out." As a result, they missed out on learning about and experiencing other academic opportunities of interest, including community college and Career Technical Education classes that were relevant to their professional goals. Claudia felt that, like "most kids," her community college options were limited because of the push to "qualify for" and "only apply to" four-year universities.

> They never encourage community college, which I think most kids stress out about, because it's like, "I have to get my [four-year state university eligibility] requirements because I need to qualify for these schools, and I can *only* apply to these schools."

Similarly, Sofia expressed having ideological differences with her teachers when it came to her choice to attend the local community college rather than go directly to a four-year university.

Sofia explained, "[My teachers] want me to leave. […] They want me to actually apply to colleges. I think they're kind of upset because I didn't really apply to any." But despite her college prep educators' disappointment, Sofia reiterated the rationale driving her postsecondary decisions.

> I've always gotten good grades, because I always thought, "I need to have good grades to leave -- to go to college." But, like, *community college is not a bad thing.* And I think it's going to help me more, especially for my mental health. I'm not ready to leave yet. I feel like first, I need to stay and organize all that, because I feel like I could get lost on the way. Then, when I'm ready, I'll leave.

Other students also reflected on alternate educational pathways they could have chosen instead of committing to the traditional college prep program. Considering the option of taking Career Technical Education courses or other professionally "relevant" training, Paola said she "wouldn't really recommend" the college prep class for other students.

> I wouldn't really recommend it. I think that you would be much better off going into a Career Technical Education course, or one that might be more relevant to your skillset. I would have loved to have taken sign language. I believe that would come in handy for me, especially because I want to work with children. […] I think my time would have been better spent there, so it sort of makes me feel like I just wasted a lot of useful time.

Elba also felt "regret" about not enrolling in other courses which could have benefitted her "career pathway," such as "finance" and "medical terminology," as she was debating between choosing a college major in either business or nursing.

> Elba: Even though I took [college prep] for four years, I feel like I would have enjoyed high school so much more if I had taken a career path. I regret that I didn't do finance and I did four years of [college prep], because I don't feel like they were worth it in the end. That was the only regret, that I don't feel like [college prep] for me was really worth it. Instead, I would have preferred taking finance or something on a career pathway.
>
> Interviewer: What made it feel like [college prep] wasn't worth it for you in the end?

> Elba: I feel like this could be a little bit mean, but whatever, I'll just say it. I feel like [college prep] took too much space in my schedule and that it didn't let me branch out. […] I also wanted to do medical terminology, but I couldn't do medical terminology because I had [college prep]. […] So, it didn't hold up to expectations. […] I feel like it wasn't really worth it, instead of taking banking or finance or something else.

Despite the constraints that students identified related to the college prep class, they were able to navigate their postsecondary planning and decision-making processes through individual and collective advocacy. When Claudia and her college prep classmates were only getting "half of the process and half of the answers" from the course, they organized amongst themselves to secure the necessary information.

> Claudia: [College prep] always told us since the beginning, "If there's any problem, we can help you. If there's any questions, we can help you. We will guide you through the whole process." But then when it comes to the whole process, they only give you half of the process and half of the answers. And sometimes we ask questions, and they don't know the answers. So, they say, "We'll get back to you," but they never really get back to us. So, we're just there with no answers.
>
> Interviewer: Despite all of that, how did you navigate to find information about college?
>
> Claudia: The whole class, we all made a group chat, so we were all helping each other. If there was any question, there was one person who was in charge. We had kind of like, our president and vice president, and everybody like that. So, we were just helping each other with questions, asking the president, the president looking for the answers. […] So, we had to be on top of everything ourselves instead of actually going to the teachers and them not giving us those answers.

Elba self-advocated and fulfilled her postsecondary planning needs by participating in an additional college prep program outside of class time, which was run by a different organization supporting first-generation college-going students. She said, "We really didn't get the outcome that we wanted from [college prep], but I got everything I was promised through [outside program]." Elba then leveraged her access to the additional resources to support her friend's needs for college readiness information as well.

> I got so much in [outside program] that [college prep] promised us, which we never really received. So why did I need that class when I was getting it from a different program? […] I feel like my other peers didn't have that backbone; they didn't get what I got. So, my friend was always asking me, "How do I do this?" and I would tell her, "Let me ask my program counselor, and I will give you the information." So, we weren't even asking for help in school, we were asking for help from my program instead.

Paola, too, took advantage of targeted support offered through this program outside of school. She explained, "They help you with applications and all of these different things. In communities like this, it's so great, because it gives the student a person to reach out to, to know that they are there. Their services are completely free." Paola appreciated receiving guidance from the advisors with this community-based college readiness program, whom she credited with helping her craft compelling personal statement essays for her four-year university applications.

Overall, students felt they did not receive what was "promised," or what they expected from the college prep class. They hoped for better experiences for future high school students whose postsecondary needs and interests might diverge from the program's standard goals and practices. Paola asserted, "You can't try to fit someone into a mold and not let them grow and find their own ways that work best for them, *especially* because when going to college, they're going to end up doing that anyway." Sofia also advocated on behalf of peers who might not decide to go straight to four-year universities after high school, expressing, "I think it's good that they have other options than just college, because I know it's not for everyone -- and it shouldn't have to be, because everyone thinks differently."

Although students perceived shortcomings of the college prep class, they also credited individual teachers, counselors, and peers with creating valuable learning opportunities outside of the rigid structure of the program. Sofia appreciated that her college counselor was always able to "figure out a schedule" that allowed her to enroll in Career Technical Education classes

along with the college prep class -- something Elba was not able to experience. Thus, Sofia successfully completed high school coursework in medical terminology, medical biology, sports medicine, and the community health worker profession. These experiences convinced her to major in nursing, and informed her aspirations to enroll in community college and transfer to a four-year university. Despite sharing the same aspirations and feeling supported by her college prep teacher and counselor, Elba faced structural barriers that prevented her from exposure to Career Technical Education classes. In the end, Elba chose to major in business, not nursing.

Conclusion

Cross-case analysis revealed a breadth of factors shaping participants' aspirations and decision-making, including their experiences navigating mental health challenges and developing peer support networks. Students' college preparatory class teachers and the associated college counselor arose as important supportive individuals in the school, who instilled the values of a college-going culture and accordingly, reinforced students' college-going beliefs and behaviors (Bourdieu, 1990). However, from a structural standpoint, students expressed dissatisfaction with the formulaic college-readiness programming that they encountered. The critiques students raised about their college preparatory experiences, as well as the academic and personal-social challenges presented in previous findings, speak to the arguments posed by researchers who advocate for more "ethical" approaches to studying youths' aspirations (Zipin et al., 2015). In the next chapter, I discuss findings from the methodological strategies I employed, which aimed to support ethical research on student's future orientations.

CHAPTER 6

Findings: Motivational Interviewing

This chapter highlights findings from an innovative approach to researching aspirations that I leveraged in this study. While the development and study of young people's aspirations have historically been mediated by the "powerfully constraining forces" of schools and society, scholars argue that in the current era, "ethical" researchers should aim to foster students' "imaginative voice and agentic impetus to pursue alternative futures" (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 240-242). Zipin et al. (2015) propose two necessary dimensions of "ethical" approaches: (1) "capacitating agency," and (2) employing sufficient "methodological sensitivity" to research "funds of aspiration," based in the established concept of "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992; González et al., 2005). When conducting interviews with student participants, I drew on evidenced-based counseling approaches borrowed from "motivational interviewing," a person-centered style of communication used with individuals navigating a change process (Miller & Rollnick, 2009). As explained below, employing this approach helped to foster transformative dialogue with students and provide a validating space to explore their own aspirations.

Motivational Interviewing Methods Supported Transformative Dialogue on Aspirations

Engaging in the process of motivational interviewing on a monthly basis helped cultivate consistent and supportive spaces for students to talk through their aspirations across the school year. By establishing a trusting partnership with each participant, and leveraging counseling approaches like reflection, validation, and consciousness-building throughout each participant's change process, the research interview context facilitated co-constructed dialogue about students' future orientations. In the findings presented below, I first provide a basic overview of motivational interviewing principles. I then explain how these interviews fostered a reflective,

validating, and imaginative space to explore students' aspirations, and how motivational interviewing afforded rare opportunities to center youth voice and autonomy.

As discussed in the Methods in Chapter 3, motivational interviewing offers an affirming, empowering, person-centered communication approach. Unlike more instructive counseling models (Miller & Rollnick, 2009), and similar to radical qualitative research methods (Green, 2020; Paris & Winn, 2014), effective and ethical motivational interviewing should aim to dismantle hierarchies between a presumed "expert" interviewer who imparts information, and a "novice" interviewee who receives it. The facilitator simply serves as a conversation "companion," and aims to help a participant verbalize how their own motivations and concerns about a life change may be in congruence or in conflict with their values, experiences, and needs (Merrill, 2014). Preceding any attempts to leverage specific dialogue techniques, motivational interviewing must be genuinely grounded in a fundamentally humanistic spirit, meaning the interviewer honors the complexities of the whole person, values their unique individualism, and affirms their identities and experiences without judgement (Hall et al., 2012). Given these principles, motivational interviewing is most accurately described as a complex "communication method" upheld by a continually adaptive "guiding style" of goal-oriented dialogue, rather than a formulaic practice which can be proven effective if "specific prescribed steps" are followed (Miller & Rollnick, 2009).

In this study, I maintained adherence to the research interview protocol to pursue an academic line of inquiry on aspirations, while also aligning my approach with elements of motivational interviewing, by selectively offering follow-up comments and questions in response to particular thoughts and feelings that each student shared. This balance of conversational structure and fluidity may have enhanced the depth and complexity of students' narratives about

their future orientations, by creating multiple opportunities for them to consider various options, share their experiences, and feel supported in moments of confidence, ambivalence, or concern.

Both initially and throughout the interview experience, it was ethically important to demystify the process of qualitative research and ensure that students had the opportunity to offer feedback and ask questions. At first, students indicated that their expectations of "research" and "interviews" were based on studies they had seen in the media, which differed significantly from their experiences speaking with me for this study. When I checked in with Elba during our first interview, she said she felt the process was "going good" because "the conversation flows, and the topics keep flowing." Elba referenced other "research" she had seen, which she described as "more dramatic, interrogation-style" compared to our interviews. In an early conversation, Sofia also said that the interview experience was "good" and "easy," and that the opportunity to speak her mind alleviated her initial "nervous" feelings about participating in the research.

> At first, I thought, like, "Oh, what am I going to talk about with your questions?" […] because at first, before having any interviews, I was all nervous, wondering what I would talk about, but now it's easy. I just say whatever is on my mind, and I feel like I like it.

Similarly, when I first asked Claudia, "How do you feel like the interview went?" she described it as "comfortable" compared to her initial expectations.

> I think it went pretty good. I felt like I could say anything and just let it out, so I feel very comfortable, actually. […] I honestly thought it would be like, "Oh, do you think this is how society works? Yes, or no?" Because I watch videos on research, and it's always a "yes-or-no" question. I didn't think it would be like, *actual questions,* you know?

Paola also described our first interview as "comfortable," "enjoyable," and relaxed." Sparking my own joy and surprise, she immediately wanted to schedule another session for the next day, and said she could "go as long as needed."

> I think it is going great. I feel like I'm talking a lot. It went by so fast. This is definitely enjoyable. It doesn't seem anything like an interview – it's a very relaxed zone and I feel comfortable sharing all these stories. […] I don't think I have anything tomorrow. If you want to do another one tomorrow, I'm available. I can go as long as needed tomorrow.

As students' initial nervousness and curiosities about participating in these research interviews subsided, two meaningful processes unfolded: They began to directly connect the experience of interviewing to their journey of refining and acting upon their aspirational ideas, and they became invested in the research themselves. These themes span the following three sections.

Interviews Fostered a Reflective, Validating, and Imaginative Space to Explore Aspirations

Students reflected on how each interview supported their thinking about their aspirations by inviting opportunities to imagine future possibilities, as well as receive validation for their thoughts and feelings. As Andres indicated, during this period of time when students were all feeling "pressure" from their school climate and the adults in their lives, the interviews offered a welcome reminder of his own wants and beliefs.

> [The interview] is based on what I'm thinking, what I want to be, or what I want, so I feel like it's more like, I guess you could say, my opinions. Yeah. So, I actually kind of enjoy the interviews. It really reminds me of what *I want* -- what *I want*, and what *I believe in,* I guess. I enjoy answering the questions.

Similarly, Sofia said that "before," when she did not "talk about it," she found it difficult to "understand" her own path. Verbalizing her rationale in interviews helped Sofia make sense of the choices she had made in the past, and planned to make in the future. She noted, "When I talk about it, I'm like, 'OK, *I know what I'm doing.*'" Tapping into a more imaginative space, Claudia believed that this chance to "reflect on life" offered "benefits" to the interviewee "on the other side of the screen," and helped students "realize" the various options they could pursue. The process of "going deeper" to unpack topics of personal importance "really helped."

> Interviewer: What are your reflections on the interviews, and this process that we've been going through?
>
> Claudia: I think it's really good. I think it benefits whoever is on the other side of the screen just because it helps us reflect on life all throughout. And academically, it helps us realize, "OK, well, I could have done this instead of this. I could go to this school instead of this school." Like in the beginning of our interviews, we would talk a lot about colleges and stuff. So, I think that really helped me because […] I started going deeper into that [topic] and I really liked that.

In a different interview, Claudia elaborated to explain that this experience gave her "insight" into future possibilities. Additionally, the ability to "make it fun" kept Claudia interested in the research process, both presently and perhaps later on, potentially as part of her career.

> Interviewer: What motivates you to keep doing the interviews, if you don't mind sharing?
>
> Claudia: It kind of gives me insight of what I could possibly be doing in the future.
>
> Interviewer: Oh, great. How so? What are you thinking about?
>
> Claudia: Um, researching! It seems fun. I mean, maybe it's just research in the way *you* make it fun. Because I know, like with science, sometimes people make it seem like the way research goes seems kind of boring. But maybe it's just the way you make it seem, and the way you step forward for it. I think that's what makes it fun.

Elba also spoke about the value of the interviews in prompting her "thinking." She said, "I feel like they're going really, really good, because they also got me thinking of things. I have to stop myself, to be like, 'Wait, how do I really think about this?' You know? It gets me *thinking.*" Similarly, Sofia expressed that these conversations, which she had "never" engaged in before, helped her "figure things out." And, being validated and remembered made her feel "happy."

> I think I really like this. Like, I've never sat down and talked to someone about, like, all my school things. And I think this also helps me figure things out. You remember me, you remember my questions […] you make me think of everything in general. […] and that makes me happy.

While most students indicated that they "never" had such conversations with adults in their lives, Claudia added that she had tried to raise the same topics of discussion with "teachers at school," and was unsatisfied with their response. Despite Claudia's belief that such topics, like bullying and academic stress, are "things that every single student goes through," teachers dismissed these experiences as "just teenage stuff." After discussing challenges with academics, mental health, and friendships in the in-person school context, Claudia expressed the following observation.

> Claudia: I don't think it's as easy to speak to a teacher than to speak to you.
>
> Interviewer: Why do you say that? I'm curious.
>
> Claudia: I think it's just because you're not one of my teachers at school, because we could tell our teachers one thing, but they'll be like, "It's just teenage stuff." […] So, if we were to tell them all these things that every single student goes through, they wouldn't understand. You have a psychology background, so you kind of understand more about it. And it's easier to talk to you than to talk to the teacher.
>
> Interviewer: I see, and I understand, and I am grateful to you for sharing your experience. Because even though I do have a psychology background, I am not in your shoes. I'm not living a high school student's life right now.

Aligning with both motivational interviewing and critical qualitative research methods, I followed up on her comments by positioning Claudia as the expert on own lived experience, while still acknowledging my role as a conversational guide. Overall, students' reflections on the intentionality of the interview process -- including thinking through their past experiences and future orientations, raising particular topics that resonated with them, and having their thoughts and emotions validated -- also pointed to the rarity of such conversations in their daily lives.

Motivational Interviewing Cultivated Opportunities to Center Youth Voice and Autonomy

Students appreciated the opportunity to explore their future orientations by sharing their experiences, and expressed feeling personally invested in the interview process, in part, because such conversations felt novel and supportive. This approach to invite and honor student voice

contributed to participants' commitment to the overall research process on both individual and collective levels. Paola highlighted this balance in her investment when she described our interviews as "sort of like a therapy session," and also as a chance to "make sure that the world is aware of what certain kids and students have to go through," particularly given that she did not think "anyone really talks about these issues."

> Interviewer: I just want to check in. How do you feel like the interviews are going? Are there things you'd like for us to focus on, or do you just want to go along with the questions that I had planned out? What do you think?
>
> Paola: I think they're going great. […] It's sort of like a therapy session. You know, I'm getting to talk about these experiences, but I don't think anyone really talks about these issues. So, I think that, you know, especially in low-income communities, small towns like these, a lot of the kids, you know, we face different struggles that most people don't. So, I think this project is amazing, being able to share our story, and make sure that the world is aware of what certain kids and students have to go through in order to achieve the same things that for somebody else, it might not be as hard for them. So, I'm very grateful to be a part of this. The interviews are going great. I mean, the questions you have and the way you're planning this out is great. It hits the nail on the head. Yeah. They're right on. I definitely enjoy them. And I think that you're doing a great thing here.

While centering student voice was essential to the goal of contributing youth perspectives to the body of literature on aspirations, the reflective practices embedded in motivational interviewing served a meaningful purpose beyond calling students to narrate their experiences for scholarly consumption. Complementing the methodological aims of radical qualitative research strategies (Green, 2020; Paris & Winn, 2014), motivational interviewing is explicitly grounded in the humanizing value, assumption, and practice of honoring individual autonomy. Similarly, in a counseling context for change-making, the "change involved is one that is in the individual's own interest, not the interests of another person, service, or organization" (Miller & Rollnick, 2009, p. 131). Thus, this student-centered study incorporated counseling strategies such as active listening, exploring goals and values, considering benefits and consequences,

emphasizing personal choice, and going along with resistance. By employing these practices in interviews, students were supported in transitioning from reflection to analysis to action while sharing their journeys. Sofia described the interviews as a chance to "organize" her thoughts, and consider throughout the change process, "How does this *affect* me? How does this help me for the future?"

> Interviewer: What has the experience been like for you to do these interviews?
>
> Sofia: They've been good. I feel like they make me organize my thoughts and help me, like, really understand what I'm thinking, because other than that, I don't really sit down and think, like, "How does all this help me?" And when I talk to you, like, I'm like, "Oh, *that's how* all these things helped me in my life," and all that stuff. And you ask me questions that I don't really think about. Of course, I do think about them, but I don't *realize* I'm thinking about them. […] So, they help a lot.
>
> Interviewer: I'm so glad to hear that. I'm curious, are there any other things you do to kind of prompt yourself to think about this stuff, or is it really just through the interviews?
>
> Sofia: Well, sometimes when I'm thinking about my life, I guess I do think about these things, but I don't really analyze them as I do when I'm going to answer a question. Like when you ask me a question, I think about it first, and organize my thoughts, so I can say what I want to say. I don't really do that on my own, because no one's there asking me a question. […] No one's there like, "Oh, how does this affect you?" and stuff like that. I do think of a lot of things of my own -- I overthink everything. But I guess in the interviews, I think about things that I normally wouldn't, and I think of them in a different way, too.
>
> Interviewer: In what different way, if you don't mind me asking?
>
> Sofia: I guess that I just think about, like, "Oh, yeah, I got a job," like, "Oh, yeah, I'm doing this," and that's it. But in the interviews, it's like, "Oh, how does this *affect* me? How does this help me for the future?" […] I don't really sit down and think, like, these things are *changes* in my life, and how they're affecting me, and stuff like that.

In a briefer reflection, Claudia summed up the process of consciousness-building, simply stating, "I think I'm getting a deeper knowledge of my own experience and everything." This kind of

reflective feedback from participants highlights the importance of centering student voice and autonomy throughout the research experience.

Motivational Interviewing Leveraged "Just Talking" for Emergent Aspirational Thinking

As highlighted previously in the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5, students were already envisioning their aspirations holistically prior to participating in this study. Then, in exploring their future orientations through our dialogues, students revealed deep and complex thinking about their postsecondary planning, and were also strategic in their decision-making about next steps to support their life goals. Aligning with traditional methodological standards of qualitative research interviews, the motivational interviewing process did not introduce new ideas from the interviewer's point of view to direct participants' beliefs or actions. Strategically, this method of communication cultivated a dialogue space in which the interviewer could subtly evoke participants' "change talk" and facilitate sense-making about their goals. In motivational interviewing, "change talk" refers to specific language describing an individual's desires, reasons, and plans for making a change in their life (Resnicow & McMaster, 2012). Thus, as asserted by counseling clinicians and scholars, motivational interviewing is not about "manufacturing" motivation; "It is about eliciting the person's own arguments for change, not imposing someone else's" (Miller & Rollnick, 2009, p. 131).

Accordingly, in this study, students' future-oriented beliefs, plans, and actions were invited in an open-ended, trusting, and humanistic spirit of communication, and affirmed through person-centered dialogue emphasizing empathy, support, and acceptance regarding students' individual aspirations and choices. As we concluded a session at the end of the school year, Elba captured the transformative impact of the conversation, and expressed her desire to "keep interviewing" over the summer.

> Interviewer: Thank you for taking the time to share all your thoughts with me. How are you feeling about the conversation today?
>
> Elba: Can we schedule another meeting? I want to keep interviewing. They're actually fun, because they keep me thinking. I feel like I did something good today.
>
> Interviewer: That's great. And you don't *have* to keep going with the interviews, but I'm happy to continue if you want to. What keeps you staying involved?
>
> Elba: They keep me active, even though it's like, something so insignificant -- just talking. They keep me active and get my mind thinking. I never really thought, like, "What about this question?" It's something I never even thought about. Like, it's a good question, now I'll think about it, I'll process it. Like, "What am I *really* thinking about? Why did I stay [to attend the local community college]? Why didn't I go [away to a university]?" That kind of thing. It gets me thinking, and then it makes me realize, "Yeah, I made the right choice," or, "No, actually, I thought about it wrong. It would have been better this other way." I compare things, like, "Yeah, actually, what my friends said was wrong." It kind of gives me encouragement. I'm also thinking about stuff that I didn't really give much interest to, like, "Oh yeah. That did kind of give me some reference as to why I stayed, why I didn't go. Oh yeah, everything's connected." Instead of thinking about it separately, like I used to, I'm thinking, "Oh, this makes it all wrapped up in a way."

Thus, this dialogue experience that Elba described as "something so insignificant -- just talking," became an opportunity to "think," "realize," "compare," and receive "encouragement," as she navigated through changes that made sense for her during a major period of transition in her life.

Given that the motivational interviewing approach is intended to support a participant through a change process, applying these counseling methods in a research interview context fostered the development of a co-constructed dialogue space with transformative potential. Employing such strategies may raise questions among qualitative methodologists, especially considering that motivational interviewing "arose from intuitive clinical practice rather than any particular theoretical model" (Resnicow & McMaster, 2012, p. 2). However, scholars and practitioners speaking to this communication framework continually reiterate that, while "many counseling models rely heavily on therapist insight and directive advice," motivational

interviewing is unique in that the interviewees themselves "generate the rationale for change" (Resnicow & McMaster, 2012, p. 2). Andres expressed, unprompted, that our conversations tapped into the "set of circumstances" affecting his rationale for what he wanted to do after high school. He also noted that talking about his aspirations was "refreshing," and reminded him of his personal autonomy.

> There's a set of circumstances going on right now, you know? Thank you for the conversation. It's always a pleasure to talk with you. I find it refreshing, I guess. It reminds me of what I want to do. Because there's no one really pushing what I want to do, except myself.

Additionally, as quoted throughout this chapter, students indicated the interviewing experience invited reflections and offered validation regarding how they thought about their futures, without directing them towards a particular pathway. Like other participants, Elba described that because of our conversations, she moved away from thinking about things "separately" like she "used to," and shifted to consider how "everything's connected" -- particularly with topics that she "didn't really give much interest to." Scholars calling for ethical studies of aspirations posit that it is the role of the researcher to capacitate this kind of "emergent" thinking, while recognizing that future orientations are not linear nor distinct, but "mix profanely in the subjective lives of young people struggling towards possibilities" (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 242). To illustrate how motivational interviewing approaches support students' reflections and emergent thinking, the annotated interview excerpt below expands upon the above dialogue with Elba. These annotations draw attention to the utility of applying evidence-based counseling approaches in a qualitative research context with youth.

Annotated Interview Excerpt

The interview below occurred in the summer, after Elba graduated from high school and before she started her college classes in the fall. In this excerpt of an hour-long conversation,

Elba questions her choice to go to the local community college instead of moving away to attend a four-year university. At this point in our relationship, Elba and I had developed strong rapport and had progressed through earlier stages of the research interview protocol such as "individual background questions" and "school experience questions." This conversation deepened my understanding of Elba's thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding her aspirations and postsecondary trajectory. The bulleted annotations point to motivational interviewing approaches and basic active listening techniques that are employed in the counseling field. I used these techniques to support Elba's reflections about this time of change, while also attending to the research questions.

> Elba: Graduation happened […] it's like, "What now?" Everybody's going on their own. I'm like, "OK, cool, I'm just sitting on my couch, eating chips and a lollipop." I haven't really talked to anybody.
>
> Interviewer: Well, that's OK. You know everyone's kind of in their own process right now. You all finished this major milestone, and you're going your own ways.

- At this moment, I chose not to pose any questions or ask for elaboration just yet. Instead, I let the conversation unfold with Elba in the lead, and to do so, I strategically leveraged counseling approaches to maintain an open dialogue. First, I drew on the spirit of motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2009; Resnicow & McMaster, 2012) to validate Elba's experience and emphasize her personal autonomy. I then pointed to the big change which recently occurred in her life, by echoing the topic of graduation and framing it as a "milestone." I used the reflective listening strategy (Miller & Rollnick, 2009; Resnicow & McMaster, 2012) of repeating or rephrasing Elba's words that specifically reflected change-related action ("going your own ways"), sticking close to what Elba said.

Elba: Yeah, it's exciting, but it's also like, "Am I doing enough, did I do enough?" Like, "Is this the right path? Should have gone in a different one? No, I'm OK." So, it's a little weird.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's common with times of transition, when you're kind of questioning things, and thinking, "Did I do the right thing? Am I on the right path? Should I have done something different?" And when you're not fully in one phase or the other, it's tough to be in that middle ground and think, "Well, what's next?"

- Again, I did not pose new questions, but simply employed active listening strategies to truly hear Elba's experience. I led with efforts to validate and normalize her "common" feelings of "questioning," and then drew attention to the time of "transition." I repeated Elba's rhetorical questions, reflecting Elba's own language back to her (Miller & Rollnick, 2009; Resnicow & McMaster, 2012). I concluded by responding with empathy in attending to the emotional dimensions of Elba's thoughts, and acknowledging that she is in a "tough" position.

  Elba: Yeah, it's like that "in-between," because I just graduated as a high school student, but still haven't become a full college student. So, yeah, in-between. […] And I made my choice to stay. […] The [college prep program] was supposed to help us to go off to university and stuff like that. And I'm not the only one staying here, like, a lot of my peers are actually staying here. So, it's like, "OK, I made the right choice," but that doesn't matter. Comparing myself to this big university versus community college […] I *wanted* to go to community college. But there's still this stigma about community college, "two years at home," kind of feeling.

  Interviewer: Mm hmm. Yeah. That makes sense. And I think you're talking about a really common experience. A lot of students, I think, feel the way you're feeling. You made a choice that you wanted to go to [the local community college], to stay here. You have your own plan based on what's going to work for you, with your wants and needs. And yet, it still kind of feels like there's a stigma against that somehow.

- I continued leveraging the counseling strategies of active listening, without posing any of my own questions. I first offered validating comments with the aim of normalizing Elba's "common" emotions and experience. I harnessed the spirit of motivational interviewing

to honor personal autonomy by naming Elba's "choice." I then drew on the motivational interviewing approach of connecting to goals and values (Miller & Rollnick, 2009; Resnicow & McMaster, 2012), by linking Elba's choice to her "wants and needs." I concluded by acknowledging how Elba "feels" and repeating her language ("stigma").

> Elba: Yeah, because I was like, "Ooh! In just two years, I'm going to get my classes to transfer [to a four-year university]." That's what my professor said from [community college], and she's giving me good advice. […] So, it's cool. But when I'm hearing things like, "I'm going to University of California, I'm going to Cal State," it feels like I'm just stuck here in [hometown], like I'm stuck in the valley. Am I going to be able to get out? Even though the valley is great, it's cool, there's not much here. There's not a lot. So, when I hear everybody's leaving, even though not a lot of people are leaving, it feels like it -- it feels like all my friends are leaving, like, if a handful actually stay, the rest feel like a million people actually leaving the valley -- and I'm just stuck here. Am I actually going to get out of the valley? Am I going to actually go ahead and go to Davis or Fullerton or whatever other university? Am I going to be able to achieve it in the end? Or am I gonna get stuck here?
>
> Interviewer: You bring up really important questions. It's important that you're thinking about all the possible considerations. I certainly believe in you, especially with everything you've told me about how hard you've worked, and how much of an achiever you are. I know that's true. What do you think brings in those feelings of doubt for you?

- At this juncture, having created space for much reflection from Elba, I felt I had a strong understanding of her concerns in this moment of her change process. Elba's rhetorical questions consistently focused on doubting the college path she had chosen, as well as her ability to achieve her goals. I realized this was an opportunity to tie back to my line of inquiry for the research study, which was broadly focused on understanding the factors affecting students' perceptions, aspirations, and decisions about postsecondary pathways.
- Before probing with an evocative question (Merrill, 2014) about Elba's doubts, I offered affirmations to acknowledge that Elba's questions about her path are "important." I expressed my own confidence in Elba's abilities, validating her strengths and supporting

her empowerment moving forward. I then leveraged the motivational interviewing practice of "looking back" (Miller & Rollnick, 2009) to reference a time before the concern emerged. In motivational interviewing, as with qualitative interviewing, the participant should do most of the talking. Therefore, to "look back" concisely without occupying much speaking time, I recalled a couple of Elba's self-identified strengths and briefly referenced our past conversations. These were times when Elba had described having confidence in herself as a "hard worker" and a "high achiever." Simultaneously, this was also a chance to repeat the same language Elba had just used, when she questioned her ability to "achieve." Next, I perceived Elba's concern ("doubt") and employed the motivational interviewing approach of "developing a discrepancy" (Miller & Rollnick, 2009; Resnicow & McMaster, 2012) between Elba's prior feelings of confidence and her present uncertainty. I ended by asking an evocative question (Merrill, 2014) to invite elaboration about this discrepancy.

> Elba: My doubt is about not leaving right away, when I got the chance. Like, is this the chance I had, and I missed it? Did I pick the wrong choice by staying? I got accepted to really good schools, like Cal State Los Angeles and Cal State Fullerton, and University of California Merced even accepted me. […] When I had choices, I still stayed. I mean, *I made my decision* to stay. […] Was that my one choice of a lifetime? […] And also, I see my tutors from [college prep program]. They stayed here […] One of them is staying way longer than he was supposed to. And what if that happens to me? He's barely getting his bachelor's degree while my other tutor is already getting her master's degree, even though it's here in [hometown]. But how come he's barely getting his bachelor's and she's getting her master's when they both started at the same time? What if that happens to me? But also, I don't want to ask him, like, "Hey, what's up with you?" because that's insensitive. What if something happened? What if he kept failing classes or something? In my mind, I'm thinking, "That could be me. I had a chance to get out. I didn't. I could be at [community college] for five years, and that's a nightmare for me." So, I don't know.
>
> **Interviewer:** Those are all compelling concerns. These are things you've seen happen, and that kind of influenced your own thinking. Now you're thinking, "What if *this* happens? What if *that* happens?" You have the idea in your mind

that maybe things won't go the way that you were planning on. What do you think about that?

- At this point, Elba had raised many hypothetical scenarios about a "nightmare" situation possibly arising from the postsecondary path she was now pursuing. In motivational interviewing, when a person undergoing a change process expresses ambivalence, questioning, or even resistance about an idea or action, it is often unhelpful and even damaging to push back, or try to convince them otherwise (Resnicow & McMaster, 2012). Similarly, in qualitative interviews, it is important for the researcher to avoid imparting new ideas or expressing opinions that might influence the participant's responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, in this exchange, I decided to use the motivational interviewing approach of "coming alongside," which is also known as "rolling with resistance." This involves explicitly siding with the interviewee's perspective in moments of doubt, without judgement.
- To "come alongside" with Elba, I expressed agreement with her doubts, by validating that her concerns were "compelling," and considering that maybe things actually would not work out as she had intended. I also used the active listening strategy of "summarizing," by reiterating Elba's points to express understanding, and asking what she thought about my comments.

  Elba: I feel like it scares me more than it should. With all these possible scenarios that I had imagined, or I got to see, I get this feeling of worry. I get so much into my head when I *shouldn't* get so much into my head, because when I get so much into my head, I'm like, "That scenario could actually possibly happen to me," because I'm so deep inside that negative space. I know the worst scenarios that can happen. When I think about all the worst scenarios, the positive scenario of getting out in two years seems so far away, because I have so many cons and just one pro. […] It's a "slippery slide" kind of thing. I don't know.

  Interviewer: You're really processing a lot right now. There are so many possibilities, both good and bad. I know that can be really hard. I'm also reminded

of earlier conversations when you were talking about all the reasons you decided to stick with [the local community college]. So, I'm curious, have those things changed at all?

- I responded with empathy by acknowledging Elba's "processing," the "good and bad" possibilities, and the "really hard" situation. Again, I "looked back" to past interviews and honed in on Elba's previous "change talk" (Miller & Rollnick, 2009; Hall et al., 2012). In motivational interviewing, "change talk" includes any language a person uses to describe disadvantages, advantages, optimism, or intentions relating to a change. Recalling Elba's past reasons for attending community college, I developed a discrepancy between Elba's positive rationale for her choice and the "negative space" she had just described. I also showed respect for Elba's personal autonomy by noting that community college was ultimately her decision. Lastly, I asked an evocative question (Merrill, 2014) to invite Elba's thoughts about that discrepancy. Here, I was conscious of framing my question as a "curiosity" to avoid the perception that I might be "challenging" or "pushing back" on Elba's ideas, feelings, and experiences.

  Elba: Not really, I still have "my people" from [the local community college]. I have my [college prep program] counselor, my tutor, all of my friends that I know who are going to [the local community college]. I know they're there, but I feel so up-in-the-air, so anxious right now.

  Interviewer: Yes, I sense your anxiety, and I understand that must be difficult. You've talked about your connections, along with your worries about some challenges. I'm curious, can you imagine getting through? What if things worked out?

- Here, I recognized an opportunity to use the motivational interviewing approach of "shifting focus" (Hall et al., 2012) in a way that would maintain adherence to my line of inquiry about aspirations, while supporting Elba's self-empowerment. To do this, I leveraged the counseling strategy of asking a "miracle question" -- also known as

"querying extremes" -- to "look forward" towards a possible outcome of the change (Miller & Rollnick, 2009). These kinds of questions are also embedded in the research interview protocol focused on "future orientations."

- I first expressed my understanding of Elba's emotional state and repeated Elba's language ("anxiety"). I also referenced pros ("connections") and cons ("challenges") of the change. To shift focus and look forward (Hall et al., 2012), my miracle question invited Elba to imagine how things might be different if her worries disappeared and "things worked out." Again, I gently positioned myself as "curious" about Elba's ideas.

  Elba: I have faith because I'm still in [community-based college prep program] officially. They help us […] for graduated seniors, they have a program called Bridge. So, after high school, they're helping us in the summer to bridge over to become a college student. And I built such a bond with one of my counselors […] She even said, "Hey, if you ever need a job, remember, [community-based college prep program] helps out students who were former students." I'm like, "Yeah, but I'm not looking for a job yet," and she said, "But when you're ready, come and give your resume to me." She looks out for me […] I know she'll help me out.

  Interviewer: That's such a story of caring. I can see that she really cares for your success and who you are as a student. Hearing your story feels encouraging to me.

- The miracle question turned the conversation towards Elba's strengths and assets. After hearing Elba express "faith" and offer a tangible example of a time when she felt supported on her journey, I chose to use the motivational interviewing approach of eliciting optimism about change (Hall et al., 2012). Therefore, I expressed an observation about the "caring" and "encouraging" nature of Elba's relationships with college-going mentors.

  Elba: Yeah, it does, because for example, I tried to contact the person for my financial aid, and I couldn't get through to him. I asked her to do it and she's like, "Yeah, I got through to him because I have his personal number. He's on vacation, so we can't do anything." I was like, "Yeah, but I only have a couple of days before it closes for the summer," and she's like, "OK, we'll figure it out." So, over the next few days I went to [community college] orientation, and they

had a financial aid specialist, and she was like, “Do you want to ask about your problem?” I was like, “Yes, please!” And she’s like, “Ok, I’ll see you there with her.” And so, we fixed it, but it was all through her help, you know. And like, I didn’t even think about asking the lady. But I talked to the lady […] now I have my financial aid ready for this. […] I’m actually really thankful for that.

Interviewer: Yeah, that’s wonderful. Thank you for taking the time to share all your thoughts with me. How are you feeling about the conversation today?

- By now, we had been speaking for an hour. Time was running short, and I needed to conclude the interview rather quickly. I used the motivational interviewing approach of offering affirmations to express appreciation. Before ending the conversation, I checked in with Elba to invite feedback about the interview process.

  Elba: Can we schedule another meeting? I want to keep interviewing. They’re actually fun because they keep me thinking. I feel like I did something good today.

  Interviewer: That’s great. And you don’t *have* to keep going with the interviews, but I’m happy to continue if you want to. What keeps you staying involved?

- I again expressed an affirming statement while also honoring Elba’s personal autonomy in choosing to continue interviewing. I asked an evocative question (Merrill, 2014) to elicit Elba’s reasons for continuing to speak with me about her change process.

  Elba: They keep me active, even though it’s like, something so insignificant -- just talking. They keep me active and get my mind thinking. I never really thought, like, “What about this question?” It’s something I never even thought about. Like, it’s a good question, now I’ll think about it, I’ll process it. Like, “What am I *really* thinking about? Why did I stay? Why didn't I go?” That kind of thing. It gets me thinking and then it makes me realize, “Yeah, I made the right choice,” or “No, actually, I thought about it wrong, it would have been better this other way.” I compare, like, “Yeah, actually what my friends said was wrong.” Like, it kind of gives me encouragement. I’m also thinking about stuff that I didn’t really give much interest to, like, “Oh yeah. That did kind of give some reference as to why I stayed, why I didn’t go. Oh yeah, everything's connected.” Instead of thinking about it separately, like I used to, I’m thinking, “Oh, it makes it all wrapped up in a way.”

  Interviewer: Thanks for sharing that. That’s really helpful to hear, because of course, I want you to benefit from these too. Even though you're helping me learn

about your journey, I want to be sure that you're getting something out of it as well. Is there anything that we didn't get a chance to talk about, that you want to add for the next time?

- I tapped into the spirit of motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2009) by focusing on our partnership in dialogue. I put Elba in the lead of our next conversation by turning the focus back to her interests and goals.

  Elba: Probably by next time, I will have started my community college classes. So, I'll probably talk about that a little bit, like, how it's going.

  Interviewer: Great. In any of our conversations, you can share whatever you want to. Thank you for sharing all these stories. I really enjoyed chatting with you.

- I concluded the conversation by reiterating affirmations, appreciation, and partnership.

  Elba: Thank you. Bye!

Summary and Conclusion

This excerpt illustrates how motivational interviewing offered a humanistic and ethical approach to supporting Elba through her change process, while also facilitating a deeper exploration of my lines of inquiry for this study. Through our dialogue, Elba came to address multiple facets of the research questions, although in this interview, I rarely asked her a research question directly. The spirit of motivational interviewing, which centers a collaborative partnership while honoring personal autonomy, cultivated a trusting space for communication. The reflective nature of this approach elicited Elba's reasoning about her pathway in new ways. As addressed in the implications in the following chapter, leveraging person-centered strategies from the counseling field to nurture students' sense-making represents a promising pathway for supporting students' future orientations. I also present implications of the findings presented previously in Chapters 4 and 5, offering considerations for theory, research, practice, and policy regarding young people's postsecondary aspirations and pathways.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to explore the factors influencing rural students' aspirations and understand how they made decisions about their postsecondary pathways during a pivotal era. Employing theories focused on ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and ethical frameworks for studying aspirations (Zipin et al., 2015), as well as empowering qualitative methods, this research centers individuals' positionalities and contexts to examine the future orientations of five students. Participants identified as "Mexican," "low-income," and "first-generation," and were enrolled in a college preparatory program at their large comprehensive public high school. They lived, worked, and attended school in a "small town" located in a geographically remote region of Southern California, along the border of the United States and Mexico. Via monthly conversations in which I utilized a motivational interviewing approach, I closely followed each young person's journey from the start of their senior year through graduation and beyond, conducting a total of 50 interviews. Across multiple goal-oriented, reflective, and affirming interviews, students shared their future orientations and explained their reasoning about postsecondary planning and decision-making.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings of this study highlighted multiple factors that mediated how students developed aspirations and pursued postsecondary pathways. These influences included youths' experiences in their regional and school communities, and personal networks with close peers and select adults in those settings. Students reflected on how peer relationships transformed during this transitional period of their lives, and considered how significant educators factored

into their aspirational beliefs and choices. Across cases, students discussed academic and interpersonal experiences that shaped their future orientations, such as challenges related to the in-person school climate which impacted their mental health throughout their high school years, and new growth opportunities introduced by distance learning. Notably, the current conditions of online schooling and physical isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic presented a novel context for understanding how these factors mediated students' aspirations and future pathways. Addressing this unique context, I briefly summarize findings from each research question below.

Overarching Question: *How do students attending a rural school located along the U.S.-Mexico international border envision their college and career opportunities, and make decisions about their postsecondary trajectories?*

Participants spoke to this question throughout the study, elaborating upon their college and career considerations and how they made intentional choices about their next steps based on their values, needs, and aspirations. All five students aspired to earn bachelor's degrees, and they qualified for application and admission to California's two public four-year university systems, as well as other in-state and out-of-state public and private institutions. Although all students had the option of attending a four-year university immediately after high school, four of the five participants chose to enroll at the local community college first, with goals to later transfer to a California public university to complete their bachelor's degrees. One participant enrolled in an out-of-state public university. The findings in relation to the sub-questions below elucidated students' reasoning driving certain decisions they made during this period of change in their lives.

Sub Question 1: *How are students' schooling experiences, including the presence (or absence) of college and career role models or mentors, related to their perceptions, aspirations, and decisions about postsecondary pathways?*

Students partook in a breadth of college readiness activities commonly considered essential to fostering a college-going culture in schools. Such experiences are often framed as necessary to facilitate admission to competitive four-year universities (Alvarez & Mehan, 2006), particularly for students of first-generation backgrounds and those who have been historically excluded from accessing higher education. Students' engagement in college readiness activities included completing a rigorous and comprehensive academic curriculum, enrolling in a credit-bearing college preparatory class across all four years of high school, and visiting numerous University of California and California State University campuses. While students valued some aspects of such activities, these structured experiences were not enough to convince most students to enroll at four-year universities immediately after high school. With respect to four-year college readiness specifically, students discussed benefits and critiques of their college preparatory experiences, and how these opportunities within and beyond the school context both facilitated and constrained their postsecondary pathways.

Although students' college choices ultimately deviated from the pathways that were most encouraged by their college readiness programs and significant adults in their lives, students nonetheless remained committed to their own visions for their holistic futures. They also actively constructed the academic, personal, and social supports they believed would help them sustain their motivation and achieve success in the long-term. Thus, students enacted personal agency and operated as active sense-makers who made intentional choices about their multi-year trajectories. They took actionable steps towards crafting their future lives in ways that sometimes

ran counter to the normative beliefs and values of equity-focused educators, caring parents, and even the field of education researchers and practitioners at large.

Sub Question 2: *How do students' identities, including their sense of place, and home and community contexts, factor into their postsecondary perceptions, aspirations, and decisions?*

Throughout their college and career planning and decision-making processes, students continually reminded me that their future-orientations included a breadth of factors beyond higher education aspirations. When asked about how they envisioned their lives after high school, all students framed the goals of attending college and securing a meaningful career as only a piece of their multidimensional identities. They also prioritized their personal wellness, raising the topic of mental health throughout the school year. We discussed how students navigated issues of concern, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, which peaked during in-person schooling and subsided during distance learning throughout the pandemic. During these conversations, students reasoned through the kinds of personal-social dynamics they believed would foster their wellness presently and in the future.

Throughout the study, students also transformed their interpersonal relationships, and discussed specific qualities they valued and sought out in peers who supported their aspirations and postsecondary thriving. Across interviews, students reflected on how feelings of confidence, joy, and intrinsic human value factored into their postsecondary aspirations both academically and socially. These personal-social dimensions unfolded alongside the school-based factors addressed above, mediating students' perceptions and decisions about their futures.

Sub Question 3: *How are students' proximity and relationship to the U.S.-Mexico border, and border-crossing experiences, related to their perceptions, aspirations, and decisions about postsecondary opportunities?*

Findings revealed that while the international border context did not specifically arise as a prominent factor driving students' aspirations, they nonetheless viewed their border-crossing experiences as relevant when comparing their pathways to those of others. When discussing postsecondary plans, students framed their personal lives and opportunity contexts in relation to "undocumented" individuals and family members "on the Mexican side," reflecting upon the privileges they held as United States citizens. Although they recognized the "sacrifices" their parents had made to cross the border in pursuit of "better" opportunities for their children, students' beliefs about their local community at large were more influential than the international border context as they navigated their college-going pathways. Thus, the previous two sub-questions occupied the majority of my conversations with students.

Motivational Interviewing Method

Lastly, students spoke to the affordances of the qualitative research process, and how they gleaned valuable insights into their own aspirations through the experience of participating in interviews for this study. The motivational interviewing approach cultivated dialogue spaces in which students could "really think," "realize," "figure things out," and receive encouragement about their "school things," "beliefs," and "opinions." Interviews also offered a venue for youth to make sense of how changes in their lives affected their future orientations. Given these findings, I offer implications for theory, research, and practice regarding students' aspirations.

Implications for Theory and Research

Drawing on ecological frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and centering students' assets (Yosso, 2005), this study revealed that youth envision their aspirations far more holistically than education scholars and practitioners might attend to. Schooling institutions and the educational research field at large have traditionally focused on the twofold outcomes of four-year "college

for all" and entry into the workforce as measures of success, equity, and social mobility for students (Tieken, 2014; San Antonio, 2016). The pressure to achieve these outcomes is often particularly salient in rural communities that have been historically disadvantaged by multiple measures of opportunity (Tieken, 2016). Findings from this dissertation prompt considerations of how adults' long-standing beliefs about the connections between educational aspirations and life outcomes may be in alignment or in conflict with youths' own future orientations.

Expanding Postsecondary Aspirations Beyond College and Career Frames

While prior research on rural students' postsecondary aspirations has often focused on important questions regarding youths' educational and occupational attainment, this dissertation was unbounded by college and career frameworks. Academic and professional pathways became a natural focus of research interviews due to my line of inquiry and the timeframe of the study, which was conducted throughout the college application and admission periods of students' senior year of high school. However, in interviews, students were positioned as conversation partners in a shared dialogue, and provided feedback about possible talking points as experts on their lived experiences. While utilizing touchpoints of my research interview protocol to guide these discussions, I also intentionally followed students' own framing of their postsecondary aspirations as they introduced salient topics. Progressively, each participant's responses revealed the depth, breadth, and personal significance of their full future orientation. Therefore, findings from this study address aspirations from a student-centered, holistic, and humanistic lens, expanding prior conceptions of youths' possible postsecondary futures beyond the dominant frame of college and career trajectories.

To further expand theory on students' aspirations, education researchers might consider the utility of the "future orientation" concept, which is a complex multidimensional construct

originating in the field of psychology (Seginer, 2009). Generally, an individual's future orientation reflects their capacity to set goals, make plans, and pursue action; however, this process also encompasses "imagining possibilities, doubting trajectories, and navigating the relations through which futures unfold" (Huijsmans et al., 2020, p. 3). This construct has been recently theorized as a conceptual framework in relation to other social science disciplines, such as youth development (Huijsmans et al., 2020), adolescent health and wellbeing (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2014), and secondary education (Zipin et al., 2015). While such research contributes robust and novel approaches to theorizing on aspirations across different scholarly domains, researchers acknowledge that studies applying future-oriented theories in real-world contexts are scant (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2014; Zipin et al., 2015). Additionally, much of the recent scholarship on youths' future orientations has been situated in international contexts and in settings beyond schooling institutions (Huijsmans et al., 2020; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2014; Zipin et al., 2015). Fewer current studies take into consideration individual students' future orientations in relation to the unique histories, policies, environments, and intended outcomes of the socialization they experience via the contexts they are embedded in (Bourdieu, 1990).

To build upon the holistic framing of students' aspirations stemming from this dissertation, scholars and practitioners focused on college access and career attainment may benefit from an interdisciplinary approach when considering how school systems might support youth navigating their transition to adulthood. Such approaches could draw on frameworks from psychology, as well as international scholarship. Developmentalists, for instance, argue that particularly for young people in the many places around the world facing "adverse and rapidly changing circumstances," ever-evolving aspirations are "key to making life meaningful" (Huijsmans et al., 2020, p. 13). Similarly, Zipin et al. (2015) propose reconceptualizing youths'

aspirations given the current global era, as adolescents in various regions face increasingly uncertain future prospects. Shifting theoretical orientations to better address students' aspirations beyond college and career frames may help inform educational practices that honor each young adult's complex personhood and holistic life outlook.

Reconsidering Conceptions of Postsecondary Readiness and Success

In this study, students' future orientations involved visions and plans for how to configure their lives to support their overall postsecondary success -- not only in college, but in their transitions to achieving greater independence and happiness as young adults. While students thought deeply and intentionally about their college options, they were simultaneously developing aspirations for all facets of their lives. When developing these holistic aspirations, students attended to several dimensions of readiness and success. These domains extended beyond academics to include their mental health and personal wellness, peer relationships, and efforts towards self-sufficiency -- which included securing employment, housing, transportation, and support networks as they transitioned into adulthood.

The novel circumstances of the pandemic prompted students' reflection about these dimensions of success in potentially unexpected ways. While much recent research demonstrates how "pandemic schooling" exacerbated educational equity issues and posed new challenges for disenfranchised student populations (Dorn et al., 2021), participants in this study described how the pandemic motivated them to reconsider how their postsecondary choices might support their holistic thriving. For example, during distance learning amidst the pandemic, students relished new opportunities to cultivate balance in their lives by attending to the priorities of school, work, family, and self-care. Likewise, all participants referenced intentionally attending to their mental health and peer relationships throughout the pandemic. They framed the ability to cultivate

personal and social wellbeing as integral to their preparedness for life after high school, and considered these factors to be important dimensions of their visions of postsecondary success.

Participants in this study highlighted various examples of thriving during the pandemic, sharing how the experiences of overcoming new challenges, developing time management and leadership skills, reevaluating relationships, and practicing self-care activities supported their growing independence and self-assuredness. Thus, despite widespread concerns about the negative impacts of quarantining on learning and social isolation (Dorn et al., 2021), navigating the pandemic may have helped these students feel more prepared to successfully navigate the multifaceted dimensions of life after high school. These findings suggest that students may benefit in myriad ways if scholars and practitioners expand their own conceptions of postsecondary readiness beyond the central focus on academic preparation. Such implications may be especially relevant with respect to the potentially overstated role of academic achievement as an indicator of success, particularly for students who are already engaged in a rigorous college preparatory curriculum and college-going experiences.

Implications for Future Research

Findings from this exploratory study have several implications for advancing research on students' future orientations. Prior studies have assessed students' college and career aspirations quantitatively, often utilizing surveys asking students to report their goals at a single moment in their educational trajectories, and positioning students' aspirations on a spectrum of "high" to "low" in relation to peer groups (Meece et al., 2013; Irvin et al., 2016). Prior qualitative studies have also explored students' aspirations on a comparative spectrum, and focused on the extent to which youths' educational and career goals aligned with their college readiness, admission, and attendance (Gándara et al., 2001; Doyle et al., 2009). Largely absent are longitudinal studies that

consider the intersection of students' identities, school and community experiences, and sense of place with respect to their future orientations. In future research, it may be beneficial for studies to span multiple years of students' transitions to adulthood, such as the critical years bridging high school and postsecondary experiences.

Findings from this dissertation also reflect the influential role of research methods in shaping understandings of students' future orientations. In her work on rural youths' aspirations, San Antonio (2016) advocated for dialoguing with students beyond linear conceptions of the "right" kinds of high school courses, college choices, career readiness skills, and postsecondary pathways -- particularly given that youths' journeys towards young adulthood are often highly *nonlinear.* Emphasizing the importance of seeing *all* aspects of who students are, she called on educators to "give time, resources, and value to the work of listening hard for the complexity of a young person's decision making -- their expression of desire, doubt, fear, and ambition, and their calculation of the losses and gains that they will encounter" (San Antonio, 2016, p. 265). Building upon this work, findings from this dissertation study demonstrate how student-centered dialogues and active listening skills can be applied in research through the use of motivational interviewing. As explored below, the methods employed in this study expand upon Zipin et al.'s (2015) recommendation for the use of ethical strategies in studying aspirations.

Ethical studies of aspirations should employ sensitive methodological approaches (Zipin et al., 2015). This study offers one pathway for achieving this goal by integrating communication models such as motivational interviewing with asset-focused frameworks focused on students' and communities' many forms of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). The conversations I facilitated with participants created an opportunity for students to refine and reflect upon their aspirations and feel validated along their journeys. These ongoing dialogues showed how aspirations did not

exist as stagnant or singular goals, as the affirming and trusting researcher-participant relationship contributed to how and what each student shared about their future orientation. Thus, students' contributions to these interviews were in alignment with the developmental understanding of aspirations as "assertions of identity" -- refinements of young people's full narratives about themselves (Huijsmans et al., 2020, p. 3).

In this study, the use of motivational interviewing responded to a call for the field to investigate aspirations differently, capacitating students' emergent thinking. Implications for further research include exploring how researcher-participant relationships factor into outcomes, and considering how practitioners might contribute their expertise and skills from related fields (e.g., counseling) to guide researchers in humanizing approaches (Green, 2009; Paris & Winn, 2014). Leveraging these approaches to support reciprocal and supportive relationships with youth participants may extend future possibilities to put scholars and students in ongoing conversation within the research context, especially when investigating questions pertaining to youths' identities and trajectories. This work also presents implications for how scholars and educators invite and affirm students' future-oriented beliefs, values, and goals in practice.

Implications for Practice

Findings point to the need for educators to more directly attend to students' holistic aspirations, particularly in the context of college readiness programs. Students' broad views of success incorporated attention to their mental health and personal wellness, peer relationships, and overall self-efficacy and independence. Given the complexity of students' self-awareness, needs, and values as young people, it may be beneficial for educators and leaders to broaden conceptualizations of postsecondary planning beyond the framework of four-year college eligibility and admission. As demonstrated across participants' interviews, students' aspirations

were well-reasoned and deeply connected to their identities, sense of place, peer groups, and desires for happy and fulfilled futures. Within students' conceptualizations of postsecondary pathways, academic and professional ambitions were a small part of the whole. Thus, to ensure alignment between college preparatory programs and students' visions of meaningful future lives, it could be empowering to involve students in the development or refinement of the initiatives and programming designed to support them. Recognizing that several students framed relationships with key educators as positively shaping their aspirations, collaborations between educators and students to refine postsecondary planning efforts may also expand students' access to influential mentoring in critical times of transition.

Creating Opportunities for Student Reflection

In addition to valuing student voice in the development of college preparatory programs and postsecondary planning initiatives more broadly, findings from this study illustrate the importance of integrating ongoing reflection as a key element of student support. Across interviews, students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to think deeply about their aspirations and have their considerations heard, sharing how these conversations served as venues for recognizing, questioning, affirming, and refining their values and goals. Both within and beyond formal college preparatory programs, educators may consider dedicating time for students to reflect about their futures in an affirming fashion. While such practices are potentially useful across a breadth of schooling contexts, the importance of honoring the heterogeneity and unique needs of rural communities and students cannot be overstated. Thus, when considering life prospects, rural youth may particularly benefit from opportunities to reflect on rurality itself as one component of their multidimensional identities. Findings from this study could be used to develop asset-focused and holistic reflection prompts, such as questions encouraging students to

consider what it might look like for them to have positive mental health, supportive peer relationships, fulfilling academic and professional experiences, and overall wellness in the context of their individual lives and broader communities.

The affordances of motivational interviewing in this study suggest that students could benefit from access to similar kinds of short-term, asset-based, reflective communication with mentors. Further, given that these research interviews were successfully conducted virtually, findings demonstrate the feasibility of providing robust student support remotely, which may be particularly useful for rural schools. As discussed below, students expressed that opportunities to explore dimensions of their aspirations beyond university pathways seldom arose at school.

Transforming School Climate

Zooming out from individual aspirations, many findings from this study speak to school climate and inform actionable strategies for educators and leaders. Participants explained how their school's rigid focus on academic norms and the harmful social climate they experienced among peers were in some ways detrimental to developing positive future orientations. Students noted how academic "pressure" bred feelings of "competition," and they also spoke to the regularity of socially "degrading" interactions that affected their in-person schooling environment. These experiences contributed to students' mental health struggles before the pandemic. Participants remarked how the shift to virtual learning shaped more optimistic perspectives about their ability to thrive academically, find balance, "calmness," and fulfillment in their lives, and create more validating social connections in new contexts. Whereas some students previously "hated" in-person school, online schooling during the pandemic seemed to positively shape their future orientations, which students said led to feelings of pride and

accomplishment. Thus, moving forward, educators might consider working towards fostering school environments that meaningfully attend to these many dimensions of students' wellbeing.

Lindstrom Johnson et al. (2014) note, "Efforts to modify the environment have traditionally focused on improving school quality particularly for the lowest income students (e.g., Race to the Top) as well as reducing the financial barriers to college attendance (e.g., Pell Grants)" (p. 9). Such initiatives are important structural components of creating more equitable schooling conditions that may support students' aspirations and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1990) via access to higher education. However, the intended outcomes of these efforts are often constrained to dominant paradigms about what constitutes postsecondary success. The first-generation students who participated in this study were highly motivated to attend college, and they rigidly adhered to the traditional academic requirements designed to support their university readiness, eligibility, admission, and attendance. Having been fully engaged in the multi-year processes of completing a rigorous college readiness program, enrolling in a college preparatory curriculum that included Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses, receiving college application fee waivers and financial aid, and being admitted to a variety of four-year institutions, students perceived little room within their school contexts to nurture their own distinct aspirations. Most students chose to attend community college with hopes of later transferring to a university, for reasons that had little to do with these structural dimensions of school support.

Aiming to explain such phenomena, Zipin et al. (2015) point to possible generational differences, considering that adults' assumptions about educational equity and postsecondary success may no longer hold true or make sense in the minds of today's young people. San Antonio (2016) highlights the value of educating "beyond duality" for rural youth specifically, to

consider the many non-academic factors that inform aspirational beliefs and decisions, helping educators to better understand students' postsecondary goals and plans. Thus, youth in rural communities, and perhaps in other education contexts as well, may benefit from novel efforts to transform their school climates in ways that honor their full personhood and many cultural assets (Yosso, 2005). Such humanizing approaches may afford greater consideration of the complex and uncertain circumstances that today's young people are navigating in their transitions to life after high school. Towards these aims, educators might also explore mechanisms to invite and value students' voices about their holistic school experiences and multidimensional lives. Expanding avenues for student input could inform school climate initiatives aligned with broader conceptions of educational equity, beyond the promise of social mobility.

Concluding Thoughts

This dissertation addresses timely needs in education research, and offers implications for advancing equity-focused scholarship and practice involving rural Latinx students, who represent an institutionally underrepresented and marginalized population. Much research on the schooling experiences of Latinx youth has focused on socioeconomically disadvantaged urban areas, yet educational inequities faced by Latinx students are often exacerbated by rural schooling conditions (Bajema, et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2014). Given that students' aspirations are one of the strongest predictors of their college and career trajectories (Bandura et al., 2001; Behnke et al., 2004; Buriel & Cardoza, 1988; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Meece et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1983), and school achievement is tied to social mobility (Bourdieu, 1990), it is important to research the postsecondary goals, plans, and decision-making of Latinx youth in geographically isolated communities. Expanding beyond traditional conceptions of school success and college readiness, this study leveraged the power of student voice to understand the many factors mediating youths'

future orientations, revealing how they enacted agency to cultivate fulfilling lives -- often in ways that diverged from trusted adults' notions of postsecondary thriving. Collaborative and affirming dialogues facilitated via motivational interviewing illustrated how students' identities, sense of place, and school and community experiences profoundly shaped their intentions and trajectories in ways that aligned with their values and goals. Thus, the findings of this case study extend theory about the aspirations and pathways of rural students given their unique social and geographic positioning, and have important implications for transformative research and practice.

This study achieved its ethical and empowering aims of inviting students to express their hopes and dreams, while honoring youths' autonomy and supporting those aspirations, whatever they might be. As an education researcher bringing professional expertise as a former K-12 school counselor, undergraduate college advisor, and university-school-community partnership liaison, I have a vested interest in transforming school systems to facilitate equitable access to meaningful college and career outcomes for institutionally marginalized populations. However, participants' thoughtful reflections about the intersection of their identities and school and community experiences challenged me to frame these outcomes as just one dimension of postsecondary readiness and success. The first-generation college-bound students participating in this study illuminated how adults' priorities for student success can be highly constrained to dominant paradigms that often fail to value students as whole people. Such paradigms can reflect little alignment with students' holistic future orientations. Beyond the aims of social mobility, college achievement, and lucrative careers, participants thought deeply about elements that might constitute a meaningful existence while enabling them to achieve these traditional milestones in their transitions to adulthood. When focusing narrowly on college and career readiness, adults

can largely miss the many dimensions of young peoples' journeys that they say make life worth living -- such as their mental health and wellness, relationships with their peer groups and loved ones, and joy stemming from engagement in academic activities that spark their curiosities and passions. Moving forward, frameworks for inviting, understanding, and supporting youths' aspirations and postsecondary trajectories must hinge on these essential dimensions shaping their holistic future orientations -- otherwise, equitable aims risk unintentionally neglecting students' complex personhood and full humanity.

Appendix A

Student Interview Protocol

Pre-Interview Questions (students fill out in the online research interest contact form):

Name? Age? Gender? What racial/ethnic group do you most identify with? What language do you prefer to speak in the interview/focus group (English/Spanish)?

Research Questions for Reference:

Overarching Question: How do students attending a rural school located along the U.S.-Mexico international border envision their college and career opportunities, and make decisions about their postsecondary trajectories?

- **Sub Question 1:** How are students' schooling experiences, including the presence (or absence) of college and career role models or mentors, related to their perceptions, aspirations, and decisions about postsecondary pathways?
- **Sub Question 2:** How do students' identities, including their sense of place, and home and community contexts, factor into their postsecondary perceptions, aspirations, and decisions?
- **Sub Question 3:** How are students' proximity to the border, and border-crossing experiences, related to their perceptions, aspirations, and decisions about postsecondary opportunities?

Individual Background Questions ("SQ" refers to the Sub Question addressed)

1. Please introduce yourself however you wish to do so. You might consider: What do you feel is important for others to know about who you are as a person? (SQ 2)
2. As a current high school senior, what do you think about when you think of your future? Can you think of specific people in your life who influenced those ideas? (SQ 1, SQ 2)
3. Do you know anybody who has gone to college? Any thoughts about what it might be like to be someone who is Latinx/from this community and going to college? (SQ 2)
4. How would you describe this community to a person who isn't from here? How does the larger community affect your experience, or thinking about your future, if at all? Have you ever left this area? Do you wonder what that might be like? (SQ 2)
5. What is it like living along the U.S.-Mexico border? How does the border affect your experience, or thinking about your future, if at all? Any thoughts on the Border Patrol presence specifically? (SQ 3)

School Experience Questions

6. Tell me about this school. What is it like here? How do you think this school compares to others in this region or elsewhere? (SQ 1)
7. Has there been a particular person, program, or opportunity at this school that really made a difference in your experience here? If so, how? If not, why do you think that is? (SQ 1)

8. Who do you see as a role model or mentor? Why do you value them? Who do you think most students view as role models? Why? (SQ 1)
9. What do you think most students plan to do right after high school? Do you and your peers talk about what it might be like to be Latinx/from this community, and going to college/career/etc.? What do you think about that? (Overarching)
10. What kinds of college and career options are promoted at this school? Why do you think that is? What options do your educators, family, and peers support for you? (SQ 1)
11. What do you ultimately envision for your future life? How did you come to these ideas? Have you always wanted those things? At some point, did you have other dreams for yourself? Why do you think those dreams changed/stayed the same? (Overarching)

"Future Orientation" Motivational Interviewing Questions

12. On a scale of one to ten, how important is this goal to you? Why are you at a __ instead of a __? What would it take to move you to a different number?
13. Right now, do you think things are looking better or worse compared to the start of the school year, in relation to achieving your goals? If things continue on this current path, what do you expect to happen? What might get in the way of achieving your goal?
14. What would be the best thing to happen if you achieved this goal? What would be some downsides to this path, if you can think of any? What would be the worst thing to happen if you did not achieve your goal?
15. If everything worked out, and you were 100% successful in achieving your goal, what would your life look like in one year? Five years? Ten years? What would be different compared to now?
16. What next steps do you think are required to continue moving towards your goal? What specific steps, if any, make sense for you to take right now?

Conclusion

17. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences, or thoughts about your future plans? Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B

Code Book

Code	Definition	Example
Aspiration - College	Expressions about student's future related to college path	*Since I was young, I've always wanted to go to college. So, everything I've done, every decision I have made, it has been, you know, thinking of my future.*
Aspiration - Career	Expressions about student's future related to career path	*It's going to feed that sense of, like, I want to help people. But also, it just makes me happy knowing that I can help someone be better and feel better. So, I think that's also part of why I finally settled on becoming a psychologist.*
Aspiration - Holistic	Expressions about student's future related to holistic life	*I <u>like</u> having everything. I <u>want</u> to have a good school life, a good work life, a good social life, and life with my family too. So, I try to keep it all balanced, because I don't want to just give all my focus to just one thing. I like sharing it all, because these are all things that are important to me.*
Postsecondary Planning	Experiences related to postsecondary planning (e.g., college readiness activities)	*When the bulletin was read in the morning, I wouldn't really pay attention to what it was saying, or I would be late to school, and I wouldn't hear the bulletin that tells you about all the events. Thanks to [college prep], I was always aware of needing to sign up for things and meet all the due dates.*
Cultural Wealth/Asset	References to student's cultural assets/strengths	*I have been able to move myself from the thoughts of, like, just giving up, and I always choose to keep going. Because ever since I was a little girl, I have had to learn things for myself. For example, my dad was always working, and my mom didn't speak English.*
Mental Health - Positive/Strength	Positive, strengths-based, or beneficial mental health conditions	*So, I think now with quarantine, a lot of kids are realizing, "OK, I'm beautiful, I'm strong, what other people say doesn't matter." And so, I think everybody is gaining confidence.*

Mental Health - Negative/Challenge	Negative, challenging, or harmful mental health conditions	*I would just get suicidal thoughts out of nowhere. I would just think, "I wish I was dead." I know it's dark, and I don't talk about this often, but it's something that I do struggle with.*
Peer Relationships - Positive/Beneficial	Positive, supportive, or beneficial peer interactions	*I definitely have a much smaller group of friends now, but they're valuable friends, you know? They're friends that I know I can count on. I know that they're there for me, and they like me for who I am.*
Peer Relationships - Negative/Harmful	Negative, challenging, or harmful peer interactions	*When I was going to school, I always felt judged.*
Adult Relationships - Positive/Beneficial	Positive, supportive, or beneficial adult interactions	*And there was a time when I was no longer focusing on my studies. I just threw everything out the window and she had a talk with me. I would always, like, go to her and be like, "You know what? This is going on. I don't know how to deal with this. I just need help." And she would definitely be there.*
Adult Relationships - Negative/Harmful	Negative, challenging, or harmful adult interactions	*I did have an incident with a teacher though, which was traumatic. Well, it wasn't "traumatic," but I cried.*
School Context - Positive/Strength	Positive, supportive, or beneficial school experiences	*[The career academy] just opened my eyes to be more curious, which I really liked. I was able to see that "medical" is my "thing." Like, one time we took a field trip to this museum of the bodies.*
School Context - Negative/Challenge	Negative, challenging, or harmful school experiences	*When I was going to school, I always felt judged.*
Community Context - Positive/Strength	Positive, supportive, or beneficial community experiences	*I think that's the one thing that is constant, it's sort of the reassurance of knowing that you can be big, and even if you aren't, you can be small, and you can always be satisfied here in the valley.*
Community Context - Negative/Challenge	Negative, challenging, or harmful community experiences	*I mean, it has its difficulties. I mean, being darker than a lot of people. But I mean, I couldn't complain because I know once you*

		go out there, there's more, I guess, "racism" towards African Americans.
Research Experience	Mentions of student's experience participating in the research process	*There's a set of circumstances going on right now, you know? Thank you for the conversation. It's always a pleasure to talk with you. I find it refreshing, I guess. It reminds me of what I want to do. Because there's no one really pushing what I want to do, except myself.*

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