

NARRATIVE INSIGHT INTO HOW RURAL,  
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS  
AND THEIR FAMILIES ESTABLISH NON-DEFICIT,  
MULTI-SITED IDENTITIES

BY

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For my parents, my first teachers and biggest supporters.

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## ABSTRACT

### NARRATIVE INSIGHT INTO HOW RURAL, FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES ESTABLISH NON-DEFICIT, MULTI-SITED IDENTITIES

by

Sarah Jusseaume

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This study explores the ways in which rural, first-generation college (RFGC) students position themselves in relation to dominant cultural master narratives and potentially competing alternative narratives related to community and family processes, norms, life pathways, and choices after college. Evidence is drawn from in-depth narrative interviews with 15 RFGC students conducted both at school and in students' home communities. The study contributes to an anti-deficit understanding of rural first-generation college students' college experiences and identity by focusing not on challenges and barriers but on the ways individuals both align and agentically reject dominant cultural narratives as well as the ways rural youth create new stories and possibilities.





## Chapter 1: Introduction

Rural communities across the country are experiencing dramatic economic and ideological transitions, leaving young people facing uncertain futures as industries such as timber, manufacturing, and mining – which once supported entire communities – are no longer available (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). In Northeastern rural communities specifically, jobs in timber extraction and paper manufacturing have only partially been replaced by alternatives in the tourism, healthcare, and prison industries (Dillon, 2011). While many researchers and policymakers have focused on the public health crises of unemployment, addiction, and depression associated with rural economic declines (Macy, 2018), much less attention has been given to the developmental and intergenerational consequences of such rapid socioeconomic transitions on young people and the choices they are making about their futures.

The disappearance of industries that provided jobs for generations, combined with, for example, advice from guidance and career counselors at school, has led to the idea that young people must leave home in search of educational and occupational opportunities elsewhere (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Johnson & Lichter 2019). For many young people, especially those from rural communities, pathways toward career advancement and economic security often involve a “mobility imperative” (Farrugia, 2016) or the idea that the pathway to a better future requires leaving rural communities (Byun et al., 2012; Corbett 2007; Tieken, 2016).

Given the importance of place to our sense of self and identity (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000), this tension between staying in rural communities, many of which have limited career and educational opportunities, or leaving to pursue opportunities elsewhere, may leave young people wrestling with issues of identity and belonging. Corbett (2000) calls this the irony of “learning to leave.” Crockett et al. (2000) describe this tension among rural students between feeling a

commitment and sense of obligation to home and community and the need for a more secure future with more career opportunities, the latter representing a cultural break from home, family and community. Youth in a number of rural areas report feeling torn between commitments to familial and community relationships and ways of life and their attraction to more economically promising educational and job opportunities elsewhere, representing a critical identity dilemma for rural youth (Crockett et al., 2000; Tieken, 2016). Having to choose between two mutually exclusive experiences, staying or leaving rural communities, could limit what rural youth imagine for their future, undermine their sense of belonging at home and away from home, and, at the same time, dislocate them from a sense of place in their home community.

Some youth may encounter this tension when weighing the decision to attend college, a decision which may have lifelong implications. In the post-secondary decision-making space, college is dominant. But how did this come to be? The idea of college-for-all is an educational policy which has its roots in the access and equity concerns of the Civil Rights era. A focus on universal higher education during this time meant most, if not all students were pushed toward 4-year college pathways at the exclusion of other, viable and potentially beneficial post-secondary alternatives (Boesel & Fredland, 1999).

This idea that everyone can and should go to college reflects the individualistic nature of American culture in that, “we welcome an increasing reliance on college as the arbiter of individual career opportunity since, in theory at least, using education to mediate opportunity allows us to expand merit-based success without surrendering individual responsibility” (Carnevale, 2008, p. 23).

Going to college, in addition to its economic prosperity promises, also sells itself as a pathway for finding out who you are, for finding your passions, an appealing idea for emerging adults who are trying to do just that. Emerging adulthood is a time of identity exploration, of figuring out who you are and what you want (Arnett, 2007). In college, you can choose a major, shape a career, and plan for the life you want. College-for-all evolved from being an educational policy of the 1970's to a contemporary ideology, offering a suggestion for what one should do at a time when they are in the process of trying to figure their lives out. In this way, it is also an identity resource.

Yet even when youth from rural areas do choose to attend college, it does not put an end to identity questions and tensions. It is possible that attending college brings the tension into even greater relief and urgency, with contradictions felt more acutely. The transition to college may be more of a divergence from familial and community norms and expectations among rural students who are more often the first in their families to attend college than among other groups of college students. These rural, first-generation college (RFGC) students are often less equipped to “imagine and prepare for the challenges of college life” and feel a greater disconnect from family and peers while on campus (San Antonio, 2016, p. 257). Stephens et al. (2012) refer to an “unseen disadvantage” impacting first-generation college students and argue that universities in the United States are “organized according to middle- and upper-class cultural norms or rules of the game and that these norms do indeed constitute an unseen academic disadvantage for first-generation college students transitioning to university settings” (p. 1192). RFGC students who tend to value the interdependence of close-knit communities and maintain stronger ties to family (Petrin et al., 2011) may also leave for college with a strong sense of guilt over having gained

life achievements characteristic of more advantaged social classes than that of family and friends (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014).

Positioning themselves in relation to new institutions and social groups, many rural youth may experience tensions between personal and social identities as competing cultural values and ideological models of success reveal contradictions. Identity researchers have called these broad cultural models of success “master narratives,” and they are instrumental in both creating and resolving such dilemmas (Hammack & Toolis, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015). Conflict between competing master narratives can trigger a sense of displacement from rural communities and resistance to educational expectations (Corbett, 2000; McLean et al., 2018; Willis, 1977). Conversely, “success” in college may involve hybridizing these narratives to define new identity possibilities (Stephens et al., 2012), a process that is poorly understood empirically or theoretically.

### **Purpose of the Study**

...I think that was like my path. I don't know what I would do if I didn't [go to college]. But it was never like a question growing up, either. My parents were just like, I was kind of just going to college and then, like doing more with my college education. And like, I don't know, I definitely feel like just the world as a whole, you're put into this thing where you're going to work and you're going to go to school, and then you're going to make money and live this life. And like, when really you're a grown human and can do absolutely anything you want to do. But then you, you can acknowledge that and still be doing exactly what they want you to be doing anyway. (Amanda)

This project sought to explore and understand these tensions and contradictions; namely, how (and whether) RFGC students work to maintain connections to rural places and identity while simultaneously finding a foothold away from home – specifically at university – where expectations, values, and norms may differ or even compete with their prior experiences. I am

interested in how rural first-generation college students contend with master narratives in the development of personal stories and future plans, and how they agentially use intergenerational narratives as resources in the construction of new identities.

This study aims to understand the interplay between societal expectations and individual identity work in how RFGC students negotiate their identities in relation to master narratives that may inform decisions to “leave home” both physically and psychologically, as well as potentially incongruent alternative narratives of family and community. Even though choices about the future may be messaged to rural youth in a binary frame (e.g., stay-versus-leave, workforce-versus-college), this study examines how RFGC students coordinate identity resources in ways that may or may not be well-characterized by a binary.

This study adopted a master narrative framework for data collection and analysis which is appropriate because it allows researchers to connect larger cultural trends to individual lives and experiences. This study explores the ways in which rural young people negotiate ideational resources in the form of master narratives, different types of engagement patterns with master narratives and how those are experienced and understood.

The extent to which a young person is willing to take on a new, unfamiliar role or identity, especially one they have not been socialized or otherwise prepared for, such as those who are the first in their families to attend college, is in once sense clearly a function of individual agency (Bandura, 2006). Yet, when individuals make choices that both align with and are made visible by culturally dominant master narratives, a more contextually situated view of agency is required that permits appreciation of, for example, material, relational, or other kinds of concessions or trade-offs of alignment with master narrative prescriptions.

This study views agency as not only aligning with one or another morally charged life course decision but seeks to understand how young people may agentially *modify, reject, or hybridize* available options that do not align with personal goals and commitments and in so doing, chart a new life course and claim roles and identities not previously available. As such, this study views rural, first-generation students as potential agents of cultural change with the belief that they are creating new stories and identities.

This study's focus on master narratives contributes strong ecological validity and a dynamic, flexible, and nuanced epistemological approach to studying the role of place in educational attainment of RFGC students, viewing home/school as culturally grounded ontologies rather than just physical locations. Furthermore, understanding how the agency and transformative activity of RFGC students may reshape conventional master narrative models can also lend insights into how RFGC students negotiate identity dilemmas across cultural environments often experienced as incommensurate.

The study contributes to an anti-deficit understanding of rural first-generation college students' college experiences and identity by focusing not on challenges and barriers but instead on the ways individuals both align and agentially reject dominant cultural narratives as well as the ways rural youth create new stories and possibilities. Examining personal narratives against larger cultural master narratives helps us understand the degree to which dominant cultural stories and expectations may influence personal identity development and how individuals agentially use resources to reject these stories and claim roles and identities not previously available.

## Positionality

“Everything about you – your race and gender, where and how you were raised, your temperament and disposition – can influence whom you meet, what is confided to you, what you are shown and how you interpret what you see.” (Desmond, 2016)

I recognize that as the researcher, I am an inseparable part of the study, but I am not the subject of the study. This is not a study of me and my research, it’s a study of a population of students whose experiences transitioning to and from university are underexplored and important to learn from. Still, my experiences and background as well as my presence and relationships with participants shape my interpretations of data.

Until recently, much of my teaching career had been with linguistic minority students and first-year college students. In this position, I have seen students struggle when the ways of knowing and being of home are not applicable in school, when values and expectations of home and school clash. Whether home is a 5-hour drive, or a 17-hour plane ride away, place is part of who we are and cultural values of home are part of who we are. One dominant paradigm grounding my language teaching is translanguaging, which is both a way of viewing language use and also a way of teaching language which values all of the linguistic knowledge a student brings with them and the ways that students try to leverage this ‘linguistic repertoire.’ Translanguaging is a hybridization and transcendence of discrete areas of linguistic competencies. I view my work on cultural resources in this study in a similar way. I want to understand how rural, first-generation college students’ identity resources transcend home and school settings.

“Methodological integrity depends on a reflexive process in which analysts carefully consider and document how their position influences every step of the research” (Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p. 14)



I am a first-generation college student from a predominantly rural state. I can identify with the experience of going to college when your parents did not, of being the first in one's family to attend college. Although I had a largely negative experience in college, I understand that there is not one single "first-generation" experience nor one single "rural" experience.

Another shared experience is the idea that the state school is perceived as the "safe" choice and simply a larger version of the high school you went to. This was something that I also heard as a high school student. I was able to talk to them about how I received the same messages but also ask pointed questions such as, "how did your friends react when you told them you were going to [university]?" And "despite this preconception, did you find this to be true of [university]?" Having shared experiences with participants served me as a researcher and I tried to use these to generate more specific questions without thinking of my experience as the only one.

I am also a faculty member at a large university, which exerts influence over how I view study participants. In the early stages of the study, I often called participants "students" instead of participants, and still sometimes do. Becoming aware of this one-dimensional framing and labeling as inconsistent with the aims of this study was useful and helpful. Of course, as a faculty member at a university, these participants *could be* my students – they share similar qualities and characteristics. However, I had a very different relationship with the study participants than I would have with students in my classes, so over the course of several months of interviews, I stopped seeing them as students because I had a much more complete picture of their lives than I would ever have as their teacher. I knew about their families; oftentimes I had visited their homes or campus apartments. I knew about their personal backgrounds (some of them quite

painful) and also about decisions about college and feelings about their futures, more than I would likely ever know about any student in my classes.

Still, there were times, even in later interviews, when it was hard to completely remove my “teacher” hat. One participant talked about how the transition to college was challenging for her academically and even when she got what she perceived as a low grade, she would sarcastically share with her mom and friends, “I got a C!”, and everyone would be excited in a joking way because the expectation was that she would do much worse. As an educator who no longer uses grades in my classes because of everything that is known about how extrinsic motivation has the opposite effect and ranking and comparing students is detrimental to their learning, I felt a need in this interview to tell her that grades aren’t really that important and are not a representation of her learning. This reflects who I am as a teacher and who I became as a researcher. It is important to me to connect with my students personally. I find this creates a safe and supportive classroom environment and a more comfortable and open interview.

In another interview, a participant shared with me that she had just gotten her first poem published. As a former writing teacher (and journalist) I was so happy for her. I diverged from the interview protocol and asked her questions about how she writes, where she writes, what she likes to write about. We shared our favorite books about writing. I might have forgotten my role as a researcher in that moment, but it was appropriate, genuine, and honest.

These examples show how I tried to not let the research process create coldness or dehumanize, even if that meant occasionally taking sideroads in the conversation that weren’t going to make it into the dissertation. These interactions helped to deepen these new relationships where curiosity and compassion were the overriding dispositions and aims, not transactionally “building rapport.” Going off script and engaging with participants on topics not

directly relevant to the research also expanded the conversations and allowed people to talk about more. At times I was conflicted about these tangents, wondering whether or not they were unscientific. However, I ultimately understood them as important to the relationships and didn't shy away from them as I moved through the project.

In the interviews with family, I also found it difficult to stay completely objective in every circumstance. Being in someone's home, sitting around the table with their family, is intimate and personal. I listened to mothers talk with pride about their children, tears welling up in their eyes, and also in mine. I found myself wanting to share information about myself that was similar. For example, one family was from the same community in Massachusetts that my family is from. We learned that we shared a strong cultural background and the conversation turned to food and family instead of college and work. The mood shifted and I was offered dinner almost immediately. It was hard not to share personal information about myself in that conversation. I also felt a need, at times, being in low-income homes, to share my background, coming from a low-income family myself, in an effort to connect with participants and their families and not be perceived as a cold, sterile researcher who was there in their homes to ask questions and then leave. It's human nature to want to connect. But how much should we share about ourselves? How much distance do we maintain? Overall, I tried to be myself, anything else would have been dishonest. I would like to think the positive rapport I developed with participants was one reason that all of the participants stayed committed to the study over several months and all of them eagerly agreed to be contacted in five years for a follow up study.

While I felt like a teacher a lot of the time, I tried to connect with the participants as a fellow student. Some participants were considering graduate education and asked me some questions before or after the interviews about graduate school, which I happily discussed with

them. Others asked about my own experiences growing up in [this state] and going to college. Exchanges like this, unrecorded or “off the record” also served to increase rapport and continue to develop the relationship.

I felt confident in my ability as an interviewer, having worked as a journalist for several years after college. But that was interviewing to ascertain facts only. This was quite different. I have always had to develop rapport with interview subjects, but in this case, because the relationship was so long and participants needed to be retained over several months, building rapport and trust was even more crucial. If I lost a participant after one or two interviews, this would have been a setback. I tried to cultivate “an approach to knowing that is contingent on creating relationship and establishing trust” because in many ways, “the relationship is the path to knowing” (Gilligan & Eddy, 2021, p. 144). The nature of the study, the amount of interviews, and the time and commitment that was required of participants was substantial, which made it vital to maintain a positive relationship throughout the study. The participant relationship began with their first email to me following an initial outreach email from a university resource center that partnered with us for recruitment. After that, there were multiple points of contact, in addition to the four interviews. There was an initial Zoom call to confirm participation in the study followed by several emails back and forth over the course of several months as four interviews were scheduled (and sometimes rescheduled!). “In the end, we can only do the best we can with who we are, paying close attention to the ways pieces of ourselves matter to the work while never losing sight of the most important questions” (Desmond, 2016, p. 326). I believe I stayed true to this throughout the study.

## **Overview of the Dissertation**

In Chapter 2, I will explore the literature on educational attainment, outcomes and future orientations of rural youth which are strongly influenced by a convergence of sociocultural factors including community and family relations as well as in-school and out-of-school experiences. I will then discuss identity and the view of identity adopted in this study, paying particular attention to identity as a social, cultural, and intergenerational construct. This chapter concludes with the specific research questions that guided the study.

In Chapter 3, I will explain the details of the study methodology including research questions, study design and participants. This chapter includes the definition of rural used in this study and the steps I took to operationalize this definition for recruitment. I also discuss the specific methods of data collection and analysis, including details and sample questions from the 4-part interview protocols.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study in three parts. Finding #1 is foundational to the other two findings. Finding #2 is presented biographically and Finding #3 is presented thematically. The structure of the findings represents the unique biographical and ethnographic aspects of analysis.

The document concludes with Chapter 5, Discussion. In this chapter I discuss the significance of the findings and suggest areas of future research. This chapter also includes the limitations of the current study as well as implications for those working with RFGC students across k-12 and higher education.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In the previous chapter, I presented several overarching questions related to rural, first-generation college (RFGC) students and their experiences with post-secondary decision making, the college experience and how they feel about their futures. This project will explore how identity is shaped by the decision to attend college and the university experience, how students navigate potentially competing expectations of home and community with broad cultural expectations and assumptions. I am also interested in how youth construct and reconstruct identities to find identity traction across different cultural spaces.

These questions led me to specific areas of the literature which will be covered in this chapter including, the educational attainment, outcomes, and future aspirations of rural youth as well as the deficit narrative surrounding rural people and places. I will also discuss identity and the view of identity adopted in this study, paying particular attention to identity as a social, cultural, and intergenerational construct. This chapter concludes with the specific research questions that guided this study.

### **Educational Attainment Among Rural Youth**

Post-secondary education is a watershed moment in the educational trajectories of rural youth. According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse (2017), although young people from rural communities graduate high school at higher rates than urban youth and at an equal rate as suburban youth, their college attendance is significantly lower, with only 59% of rural graduating seniors planning on attending college, versus 62% of urban and 67% of suburban students. In 2015, 42% of 18- to 24-year-olds in the US were enrolled in some form of post-secondary education yet only 29% were from rural communities, compared to 48% from

urban areas. That same year, only 19% of rural adults held a BA compared to 33% of urban adults (National Student Clearinghouse Data, 2015).

Yet before college, rural young people perform comparably to their suburban peers on math and reading assessments and complete school at similar rates (Aud et al., 2013; Jordan et al., 2012). In fact, between 1992 and 2004, standardized test scores among rural youth increased while they decreased for those from urban and suburban areas (Wells et al., 2019). Still, rural youth continue to have lower average rates of college enrollment and degree completion compared to their non-rural peers (Koricich et al., 2018, Wells et al., 2019). They are more likely than non-rural counterparts to delay college entry and less likely to select, attend, and complete a degree from a four-year post-secondary institution (Byun et al., 2015; Koricich, 2014). However, these numbers may also be starting to change. Enrollment in college among young people from rural areas rose from just over 27% in 2004 (Provasnik et al., 2007) to more than 29% in 2015, an increase of 2.2% (NCES 2015). Rural student enrollment in college may be rising in part because young people, families, and rural communities are finding ways to adapt to transformed economic and cultural realities in their regions.

Between shrinking and disappearance of industries that have for generations provided jobs and advice from guidance and career counselors at school, many rural youth may feel as though they must leave home in order to have a better future (Byun et al., 2012; Corbett, 2007; Tieken, 2016). Yet despite fewer job prospects and advice from important adults, the choice to leave home is complex and difficult for many rural youth (Looker & Naylor, 2009; San Antonio, 2016) as it can represent a breaking away from one culture to a very different one. Crockett et al. (2000) describe the tension between feeling a commitment and sense of obligation to home and community and the need for a more secure future with more career opportunities. Many young

people from rural or low-income communities also struggle with feelings of guilt for leaving home especially if their parents and friends did not attend college and especially if they did not approve of their decision (Tieken, 2016). Even if one parent supports the child entering college but one does not, this may leave youth feeling confused and conflicted (Schultz, 2004). This can create complex emotions and struggles with identity that can make the transition to college even more challenging. Having to choose between two mutually exclusive experiences could limit what rural first-generation college students imagine for their future, undermine their sense of belonging at university, and, at the same time, dislocate them from a sense of place in their home community.

Many rural young people are the first in their families to attend college and this is a growing demographic in higher education. More than 30% of first-year college students are the first in their families to attend college (Kirp, 2019). First-generation college students differ from their non-FGCS peers in several important ways: they are more likely to be minority, to come from low-income families, and to be children of immigrants or immigrants themselves (Terenzini et al., 1996; Thayer, 2000). Nationally, only 11% of first-generation college students graduate in six years compared to 55% of continuing-generation students (PNPI Fact Sheet, 2018). First-generation college students often arrive at college feeling less academically prepared and tend to engage less both socially and, in the classroom, than their peers with parents who attended college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Soria & Stebleton, 2012, 2013). This may leave them less satisfied with their overall college experience (Pike & Kuh, 2005) and, ultimately, place them at a greater risk of struggling in college or of not completing their education, as the data above illustrates.



Because parental influence and support is an important component to college success (Choy, 2001), when a student's parents did not attend college, the student may have a different degree of awareness and understanding of the norms, expectations, and anticipated challenges of college than peers whose parents did attend university. They may not have the same kind of knowledge or familiarity with the college experience, starting with the application process, leading fewer first-generation students to apply in the first place (Terenzini et al., 1996). Once they arrive, even the language of college – words like syllabus, credit hours, and recitation – can be unfamiliar. This combined knowledge represents a kind of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), or a level of familiarity with the dominant culture. At university, when students do not have equal access to this “insider” knowledge, it can be even more challenging to adapt and to connect to campus, socially and academically. When a student's parents or siblings did not attend college, ideas about college are largely based on popular culture rather than reality and experience (Pratt, 1996) which may deepen doubts about belonging. When a student begins college feeling out of place and like they don't belong, they may construe early negative experiences as evidence that they don't belong. They may internalize the narrative of not fitting in and when things don't go as planned, believe this is the reason, something social psychologists have called “belonging uncertainty” (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Yet, when one's parents have attended college they can provide much-needed guidance and advice on what to expect and how to navigate challenges and critical decisions such as which classes to take and choosing a major as well as degree of involvement in extracurricular activities. They can also support students and help them understand some of the unspoken rules and expectations of college. Schultz (2004) examined RFGC students' transition experiences and found that from the outset rural students struggled to transition into college, citing different

levels of awareness about financial aid options and uncertainties about what to expect in terms of academic rigor, course style and structure, and faculty expectations (Pascarella et al., 2004; Schultz, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996), they report feeling socially and culturally disconnected from both campus and home communities after having left home, with hesitancy, mixed feelings, or even guilt (San Antonio, 2016; Stephens et al., 2012).

Additionally, in a recent study conducted in the same geographic area as the current study, Sharp et al. (2020) found parents' level of education to be a strong predictor of a young person's future expectations. Youth whose parents had higher levels of education were more likely to be expected to attend college themselves. Similarly, Seaman et al. (2019) found parents' level of education was positively associated with the likelihood that their child would be enrolled in some form of post-secondary education. Youth from rural communities often found themselves on campuses larger than their entire hometown and with a greater range of racial and ethnic diversity than they have ever been exposed to. Although young people reported "excitement" and "surprise" at some of these differences, many felt overwhelmed and unable to connect to campus, leaving them feeling isolated and lonely (Schultz, 2004).

For young people who are the first in their families to attend college, this milestone is an important inflection point in their family history, representing a different road or a pathway that their parents did not take (Crockett et al., 2000). But this new and unfamiliar social context can present youth with potentially competing identity and biographical possibilities, including the conflation of their commitment to place, community, and tradition with deficit assumptions about rural youth's aspirations (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). Despite increasing enrollment in higher education among rural, first-generation college students and the increased educational training and credentialing demands placed on rural populations due to shifting local economies,

there has been scant research on the experience of belonging and identity among rural youth in higher education (Heinisch, 2016; Provasnik et al., 2007; San Antonio, 2016). This could be connected to the overwhelming deficit view with which many people view rural people and communities.

College success depends on many factors, not only cognitive and academic ability and skills, but also the capacity to transition into a different environment and adapt to the behaviors, actions, expectations and identities of this new context. As such, education is a key site of identity configuration and reconfiguration as it involves increasing participation in “communities of practice” and the development of new skills, competencies, and shifts in behavior and perspectives because of this engagement (Wenger, 1998). Learning is a process of change, a process of becoming (Inger, 1998). This view of learning “as an aspect of identity and identity as a result of learning” (Nasir & Cooks, 2009, p. 41) is central to this project.

Developing a learner identity (which may relate to classed notions of an aspirational self) is a “complex, longitudinal process of change” (Briggs et al., 2012) yet it is central to successful college integration. Learner identity is dynamic, socially constructed and develops through interaction with context, actors, and environment and by participating in the common practices of the dominant environment, in this case, the university (Briggs et al., 2012). The development of a learner identity is a process. It is not only about the development of academic skills but involves viewing oneself as a learner situated within a particular context. This “situated learning” considers the macro context, or the larger society and culture, as well as the micro context which relates to the individual and the setting (Sinha, 1999). College students learn to “develop strategies and nuanced understandings of their previous experiences, social background and

different learning cultures and contexts to inform the development of their learner identities” (McFarlane, 2018, p. 3).

But the norms and practices of American universities do not always align and often compete with those of rural youth. University culture in the United States reflects dominant Western cultural values, specifically, an “individually oriented learning culture” where young people must learn how to become autonomous learners (Sinha, 1999). This idea is echoed by Stephens et al. (2012) who found that higher education in the US values independence over interdependence. And in this individual-focused, meritocratic, achievement-based society, success and failure is placed squarely on the shoulders of the individual. This could be seen as a counter-narrative to the core values of rural communities where social capital and interdependence, or at least different versions of independence may serve as critical resources.

Although there has been considerable research on the transition *to college* among different populations of students, much less is understood about the transition *out of college*. College seniors face a variety of changes upon graduation, changes in relationships, changes in their schedules and how their time is spent, and changes in their sense of independence and financial security (Overton-Healy, 2010). This is understudied generally, but especially among rural first-generation college students for whom the challenges and uncertainties of deciding to go to college may have continued throughout college and may also be a part of their future aspirations. Many students may feel nervous and apprehensive about life after college (e.g., Roksa & Silver, 2019). Lane (2014) found that although students felt that college prepared them for life as it relates to skills like communication and problem solving, many still felt ambiguous about the transition, specifically about finding a job that ensures their financial security and

independence. Students are excited about freedom and independence but at the same time worried about how they will achieve that.

For all students, the transition out of college represents a time of great change which can lead to feelings of fear and anxiety, but first-generation college students may have less access to resources in their family and social networks and fewer models to look to as they navigate this transition. Some research points out a “do-it-yourself” attitude on the part of the university as it relates to planning for life after college. Resources such as career counseling, job fairs, and resume workshops are available but not required, and students need to locate those resources on their own (Roksa & Silver, 2019). First-generation college students are even less likely to take advantage of institutional resources and instead seek advice and support from friends and family (Roksa and Silver, 2019). Family members of first-generation college students offer strong emotional support; however, they may be ill equipped to offer practical advice because they have not experienced the transition themselves. “First-generation students did not look to their parents to read resumes, discuss which graduate school to attend, or provide job opportunities ... first-generation students were at a distinct disadvantage as they sought to blaze the path primarily on their own” (Roksa & Silver, 2019, pp. 1063-65).

### **Rural Deficit Narratives**

A deficit-modeled narrative of rural people and communities has been part of an American cultural consciousness for generations, glossing over both cultural strengths and regional variability (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Rural America is viewed by many as uncultured and uneducated; words like “hick” or “hillbilly” reflect this stereotype (Lichter & Brown, 2011; Theobald & Wood, 2010). Theobald and Wood (2010) argue that rural communities have existed

on the margins of society – culturally, socially, and economically – for generations, including a dominant, oppressive moral message of the “backwardness” of rural culture which has been circulating for more than one hundred years, beginning in the 18th century with the industrial revolution and continuing under today’s neoliberal economic policies focused on globalization and urbanization. The possibility that deficit narratives of rural communities deepen during prominent moments of economic and cultural transformation is instructive: deficit narratives of rural communities may function less as veridic descriptions and more as a kind of moral and political foil that serves the interests and eases the anxieties of urban elites during times of economic, cultural, and political uncertainty (Said, 1978). Rural people are seen as hard working and with a strong sense of connection to family and community; however, even this seemingly generous view can be problematic. Such vague characterizations can involve patronization and recall tropes such as the “noble” cultural Other.

Although many different “rural Americas” exist, perceptions of rural America seem to remain largely homogenous and negative: uneducated, poor, and simply as a source of food and resources for the rest of the country (Lichter & Brown, 2011; Theobald & Wood, 2010). Despite these narratives being widely accepted, our “cultural conceptions of rural life often do not match rural realities” (Lichter & Brown, 2011, p. 567). Corbett (2014) argues that this dominant view of rural life “obscures the multiple layers of difference in the rural community” (p. 32-33). Outsiders often characterize rural communities and industries by jobs and industries that traditionally defined the economies in rural areas such as farming and extraction work, even though today, many of those jobs are gone, factories have closed, mines are shut down – further evidence of a static, ahistorical understanding of rural communities possibly linked to a skewed deficit-model romanticism.

Still, these widely accepted and largely negative cultural representations of rural places – whether accurate or not – have the power to strongly influence the identity of those who live there. Negative stereotypes reflect cultural messages which are often imparted and maintained by those in power to “keep people in their place” (Prince, 2014, p. 707) while they may also be internalized by people who identify as rural or as being from a rural community.

### **An Anti-Deficit Approach to Studying Rural People and Places**

This study takes a cultural strengths-based view of rural communities. Cultural research allows researchers to move beyond deficit assumptions about people or communities “which contribute to the maintenance of societal inequities” (Rogoff et al., 2017, p. 879) and instead “identify strengths of cultural communities that are often viewed through a deficit model” (p. 876). Cultural research encourages scholars to identify the unique resources within a population that might be incongruent or incommensurate with the dominant context but that can be leveraged for success and may also serve as models for others. Instead of focusing on deficits, unique cultural strengths will be foregrounded. The goal is to not only identify strengths, resources and unique practices but also to build on them, to expand on existing “repertoires of practice” (Rogoff et al., 2017).

This study will explore rural youth engagement with deficit-oriented master narratives but does not assume the validity of such deficits despite the fact that this message has been prevalent in our society for decades (Reagan et al., 2017). An anti-deficit approach seeks to explore the ways in which youth engage with master narratives, the ways they adopt them and especially the ways they resist or transcend dominant messages and expectations. Of particular interest in this study is how engagement, rejection, or hybridization of master narratives reveals

evidence of resources that young people draw on to construct robust, healthy identities and chart aspirational trajectories for the future.

This idea of moving beyond deficit assumptions that are often incorrect and damaging, and perpetuate inequity, of not only understanding but celebrating each person's unique cultural strengths, is transformative. It creates new pathways and new trajectories which transcend existing structures and boundaries. When students are encouraged to employ resources and tools learned at home and bring them into the classroom, not only is the students' culture appreciated and validated, but also their entire identity – language, values, and traditions. It offers a space where cultures do not compete with each other but are brought together, leveraging home and school practices, supporting “blended ways of knowing” (Garcia & Wei, 2014, p. 69).

Although substantial research has revealed the inequity in educational experience and outcomes among marginalized groups such as minority, immigrant, and low-income students (Choy, 2001), little research has focused on youth from rural communities who are the first in their families to attend college (Heinisch, 2016). Not only may these young people feel socially and culturally disconnected from campus, but they also may feel disconnected from their home community which they've left behind, often with hesitancy, mixed feelings or even guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; San Antonio, 2016).

This inquiry does not view the home/school cultural disconnect and possible contradictions therein as fact. Instead, I view the dominant culture, or the dominant narrative of the studious and engaged college student, as a possible or “figured” world or story that rural youth can choose to appropriate, reject altogether, or hybridize thereby creating new narratives, new identities, and new futures for rural first-generation students to imagine (Holland, 1998).



## **Rural Youth: Future Aspirations from an Anti-Deficit Perspective**

Research suggests that adolescence is a critical time when individuals begin thinking about their futures and that youth future orientation, especially in the ways that it influences present behavior and actions, can greatly influence outcomes later in life (Nurmi, 1991). Much of the literature on youth future aspirations suggests that young people from rural and low-income families have lower aspirations and expectations for their futures (Antonoplis & Chen, 2020; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Hu, 2003; Khattab, 2015; Rojewski, 1999). Crockett et al. (2000) found that rural youth often hold a narrower view of future possibilities and have a strong sense of obligation to family. Although commitment to family and community is itself aspirational, most researchers view family commitment as indicative of low aspiration.

However, this doesn't tell the whole story. Understanding rural youth future orientation requires a broader view, one that considers aspirations but does not assume or confine aspirations to that of class ascendancy, geographic mobility, or economic success. Although it may be the case that some rural youth do, in fact, have narrower and less articulated ideas about and goals for their futures, pervasive deficit discourses about rural communities make it difficult to parse such possibilities in the literature. For example, when dominant narratives of success do not align with a young person's culture, values, community, traditions, and available resources, they may choose to oppose such narratives and as a result, may *appear* as having lower educational and occupational aspirations. Yet aspirations are not static; they are dynamic and evolving. Many young people from rural communities may have a fluid ever-changing – and under-studied – “aspirational repertoire” that develops through messages and narratives that circulate in their communities, families, schools, and peer networks (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019, p. 10).

Post-secondary decision-making among youth and emerging adults, including migration decisions, are influenced by a convergence of sociocultural factors including family relations, school and community experiences and socioeconomic status. Irvin et al. (2011) found that positive school experiences including having positive perceptions about their academic ability and the sense that they were valued by the school community were associated with positive academic outcomes. Similarly, Johnson and Hitlin (2017) found that academic success is related to higher educational aspirations post-graduation.

Family context and relations are also factors in youth post-secondary decision making (Byun et al., 2017; Byun et al., 2012). Agger et al. (2018) found that high parental expectations were associated with increased educational aspirations and outcomes among rural youth. As mentioned earlier, Sharp et al. (2020) found parents' level of education to be a strong predictor of a young person's future expectations. Youth whose parents had higher levels of education were more likely to be expected to attend college themselves. Similarly, Seaman et al. (2019) found parents' level of education was positively associated with the likelihood that their child would be enrolled in some form of post-secondary education.

Processes related to socioeconomic status (SES) also impact young people's conceptions of not only their present self, but also their future self (Antonoplis & Chen, 2020). Relative to families with a higher SES, those with a lower SES "had a less vivid image of their future self, liked their future self less, felt less similar to their future self, had lower esteem for their future self, and allocated less money to their future self" (p. 14) while youth from wealthier families had higher educational and occupational aspirations and were more confident about their goals (Meece et al., 2013). As a result, much of the literature suggests that young people from rural

and low-income families have lower aspirations and expectations for their futures (Antonoplis & Chen, 2020; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Hu, 2003; Khattab, 2015; Rojewski, 1999).

Youth aspirations develop from interaction with the social world, through external, cultural and social relations and interactions with family, peer networks, in communities and schools and also by individual and personal considerations (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019). Some research on youth aspirations considers alignment between educational aspirations and career goals (Meece et al., 2013; Sabates et al., 2011). This approach to understanding youth aspirations can be informative. When aspirations and goals align, young people are more likely to devote the time and energy into educational efforts to achieve the career goals they seek (Meece et al., 2013), while those whose expectations and goals do not align have worse long-term career and educational outcomes (Sabates et al., 2011). Other research considers different aspects of future goals, examining educational, occupational, and residential aspirations and how they interact. For example, McLaughlin et al. (2011) found that among rural youth who expressed strong connections to their home community, many plan to return home after college or once career goals are attained while Ulrich-Schad et al. (2013) had similar findings and highlight the importance of the natural environment to young people's migration intentions.

Carr and Kefalas (2009) identified "achievers" and "stayers" in their study on migration patterns of rural youth. They associate 'achievers' as those with high career and educational aspirations but who believe that geographic mobility is the only way to reach their goals, contrasted with 'stayers' who are said to have lower aspirations. While this literature is helpful as it explores how career and education goals can inform geographic intentions, it assumes aspirations develop siloed and separate and does not consider structural impacts on youth aspirations such as poverty, nor does it allow for aspirations to evolve and change. The binary

analytical lens is also vulnerable to deficit thinking, wherein “achievers” as a category is assumed to be clarified by contrast with “stayers,” obscuring the possibility that those who “stay” do so to achieve something of local value and significance.

Wang et al. (2021) examined the ‘aspirational profiles’ of rural youth in Pennsylvania and found evidence that complicates the stayers versus leavers dichotomy. They found that a large percentage of young people had high career and educational aspirations, typical of ‘leavers’, but who wanted to stay in their home communities, in contrast to the findings of Carr and Kefalas (2009) and Corbett (2007) who found youth with high aspirations also seeking geographic mobility. The young people in the Wang et al. (2021) study had high aspirations but did not feel as though they must leave their community to reach their goals. The present study adds to this work through a qualitative narrative study of college experience of RFGC students, including the post-secondary decision-making processes of rural young people and their families.

Aspirations are complex and greatly impacted by the structural effects of poverty, social class, geography and place attachment (Antonoplis & Chen, 2020). Importantly, the kinds of commitments that are deemed “aspirational” are inseparable from dominant cultural narratives and models of success that suggest what one ‘ought’ to aspire to (McLean & Syed, 2015). That aspirations cannot be separated from cultural values suggests that a more nuanced understanding of youth future aspirations is needed. Zipin et al. (2015) argue for a “complex understanding of how aspirations are constituted by multiple social–cultural resources, including policy and populist ideologies but also family and community histories and the lived-cultural agency of people in the present” (p. 228). When dominant master narratives of success (e.g., class ascendancy, economic mobility) do not align with a young person’s community culture,

traditions and values, they may be seen as having lower aspirations, limiting not only what they may believe is possible for themselves but also what others believe about them.

Therefore, conceptualizing youth – especially rural youth – future orientations simply through existing aspirational frameworks may be an inadequate and narrow and as such, may contribute to the deficit narrative that plagues rural youth and communities. This is not to suggest that researchers should avoid examining youth aspirations as part of understanding their views of the future. But if going to college is the only model of success that RFGC students have to look toward, it may be difficult for them to emerge from the "lose/lose" identity dilemma of staying or leaving rural communities. In order to understand various models or narratives of aspiration, we need a conceptual framework that is inclusive and non-deficit. We cannot simply look at whether or not rural youth attend college as a measure of their educational or occupational aspirations. Instead, we may choose to view aspirations as a sociocultural possibility which can be developed, with youth imagining more expansive social futures. Zipin et al. (2015) conceptualize an anti-deficit approach to viewing youth aspirations as emergent and developing through engagement and support from family, community, and school networks regardless of social class, income, or geography. Similarly, scholars such as Gutierrez and Larson (2007) imagine expanded spaces for learning which foreground students' lived experiences and sociocultural resources. If nontraditional students such as rural, first-generation students are going to be successful in college, institutions and educators should seek to create such spaces and opportunities for all students, not just during the transition and first year but throughout college and also preparing for the transition out of college.

This study views youth aspirations as a dynamic and evolving “aspirational repertoire” that develops through messages that circulate in communities, families, schools, and peer

networks (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019, p. 10). Imagining future aspirations among rural youth in an expansive way, this study explores contextual and sociocultural patterns of youth future orientation, acknowledging that aspirations are not purely cognitive but influenced by several contextual factors such as social class, geography, and place attachment (Appadurai, 2004), and that “capacity” to aspire is a frame that carries deficit assumptions and may obscure more than it reveals.

### **Place as Multidimensional Resource for Rural Youth**

For many, home and sense of place are core aspects of identity, simultaneously involving family and community history, personal biography, and a sense of future orientation and possibility. Where we were born, our memories, and our life story all contribute to our individual identity. “We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering” (hooks, 2009, p. 5). Place informs our sense of identity - the people, traditions, industries and relationships form a “geography of place” (hooks, 2009, p. 9) which informs our sense of self, our “sense and sensibility.” It goes beyond the physical space, the environment and the land and includes people, stories, values and traditions passed down between generations, a “cultural legacy” (hooks, 2009, p. 9), which engenders a culture of belonging.

Place-identity, the psychological concept coined by Proshansky et al. (1983), asserts that questions of who we are cannot be unbound from questions of where we are (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). Decades of research on place identity demonstrates “the importance of place to the production of self” (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000, p. 28). Similar theoretical concepts connecting place and identity and sense of self include *topophilia* (Tuan, 1980), *insideness* (Rowles, 1983), and *sense of place* (Tuan, 1980). The present study drawn most from the concept of *place*

*identity* first presented by Proshansky et al. (1983) which describes the “potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of settings” (p. 60). These memories and connections “help to define who and of what value the person is both to himself and in terms of how he thinks others view him ... home is where we find ourselves, it is intimately connected with an individual’s sense of self, of being, of belonging” (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 60). As such, place “as experienced, imagined and remembered” is a salient aspect of identity development (Prince, 2014, p. 698).

This project is also informed by Altman and Low’s (1992) concept of place attachment which recognizes that the connection between an individual and a place is a complex phenomenon and involves interaction between environments and people. Our identity is developed through these attachments and by the social connections we keep. Our attachments to place are not only physical but emotional and relational, “attachments may not only be to landscapes solely as physical entities but may be primarily associated with the meanings of and experiences in place – which often involve relationships with other people (Altman & Low, 1992, p. 7).

In a study of youth future development, Prince (2014) asserts that “physical environments are not inert backdrops against which social life unfolds; rather, it is in the transactions between people and their everyday socio-physical environments that identity is created” (p. 698). Our future self-concept is grounded in past experiences, and place is a major factor in our past life experiences. Taken a step further, how we identify with our physical world is not simply a function of the place itself and how we interact with the physical environment, but also “a function of what other people do, say, and think about what is right or wrong and good or bad about these physical settings” (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 60). In fact, “the stigmatizing labels

attached to people because of place may also be internalized and become part of one's current and future self-concept" (Prince, 2014, p. 709). So it can be said that our identity is partly a result of where we live and grow up, the people and physical environments that we interacted with, and also what other people think and believe about where we live and grew up.

Not only is place a core aspect of our identity now, it can also shape how youth think about and plan for the future, especially among rural youth experiencing possible 'lose/lose' dilemmas about their choices around post-secondary education and making difficult decisions about whether to stay or leave home. "Place is embedded in how young people think about themselves in the present as well as who they imagine themselves to become in the future" (Prince, 2016, p. 699). Places are socially constructed, as such they are evolving and dynamic spaces (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000), our connections to them are both emotional and ideological (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004). According to Erikson (1968), identity is "a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture" (p. 22).

Place connection is true for some people, but not all. Place can also be an identity resource among those who plan on leaving their home community. Individuals may oppose the physical and cultural place they were born. As such, place, as an identity resource, is not taken up in the same way by everyone. Individuals may also choose to re-place in their identity the values and stories of a different location.

Given the strong currents of deficit thinking regarding rural youth and their families, Biddle and Azano (2016) argue that educational researchers should "reevaluate education's relationship to marginalized places and spaces in a holistic and inclusive way" (p. 316). Recognizing that "place" is much more than a physical location – it is cognitive, relational, emotional, familial, and ideological. Understanding how identity is impacted by geographical



and cultural change, such as moving from home to college, can reveal how identity travels across different and often incommensurate environments.

### **Identity: Familial, Historical, and Cultural Influences**

The core research questions of this study all seek to explore and understand identity development in some way. Identity is about how we see ourselves and plays a major role in decisions we make about our lives and futures; from the choices we make on a daily basis to long term planning and decision-making. The field of identity development is vast. For the purposes of this study, I primarily draw on the work of Holland (1998) and Erikson (1968) in my understanding of individual identity and view identity as a socially constructed phenomenon, constituted by place but also by history, community, relationships, interactions, and experiences.

Erikson (1968) argued that the task of identity development begins in childhood when we begin to question who we are and how we relate to others and the world around us. As individuals grow and develop, they are tasked with determining how to integrate various aspects of the world and society with their individual sense of self. According to his lifespan theory of identity development, as individuals reach adolescence and young adulthood, they begin to see themselves as members of a larger group or society as they gain more independence and start to imagine possible futures. A critical “task” of adolescence is the seamless integration of multiple identities or multiple aspects of oneself.

But identity is not simply a property of individuals but a multi-sited, intergenerational project that youth are the agents of and have the capacity to construct and reconstruct across settings and contexts (Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Merrill & Fivush, 2016). This study views identity as evolving by individuals in response to the different cultural forces of different contexts or

settings, in which individuals adjust their actions and behaviors to align with different “figured worlds,” resulting in varying degrees of belonging, engagement and participation across settings (Holland et al., 1998). In other words, individuals position themselves differently across different environments as they construct and reconstruct identities. Holland (1998) views identity as emergent – a function of what “takes hold” as individuals move across these contextual boundaries (Gutiérrez & Larson, 2007; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014). This cultural-historical perspective sees identity as a phenomenon constituted by place, history, community and cultural norms and values, and social relationships in addition to the contributions and experiences of individuals.

Individual identity is partly informed by stories shared within families, passed down from one generation to the next. These intergenerational narratives play a key role in individual identity construction as well (Merrill & Fivush, 2016). Young people whose personal narratives show a connection with those of their elders exhibit a greater sense of well-being (Merrill & Fivish, 2016). But for many rural youth, their future trajectories cannot replicate those of their families and those who came before them due to changes in economies and industries in many rural communities that are forcing rural youth to imagine other possibilities. Simply by going to college, a first-generation college student is diverging from the life trajectory of their family. Thus, the intergenerational dimension of identity is a particular area of focus in this study and how young people wrestle with different models of identity.

Much of the literature on identity is focused on the individual and construes identity formation as an individual and largely cognitive process. But this study takes a different approach and views personal identity as being inextricably linked to context and culture, understanding that identity development is a “process ‘located’ in the core of the individual and

yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities” (Erikson, 1968, p. 22). Erikson tried to understand patterns of self-presentation and how they aligned with the historical moment people were living in. But he did not have the tools we have today. This study is inspired by his original ideas but adopts a master narrative framework, introduced below, and expanded upon in Chapter 3, to bridge this gap, connecting individuals with broad social and cultural messages and trying to understand how these messages influence individual identity development specifically among rural, first-generation college students. I am particularly interested in how young people navigate broad cultural messages about what should do with one’s life with potentially competing messages from home, family, and community.

### **Master Narratives as Identity Resources**

Research on identity development has traditionally focused on the role of individual agency and culture as separate influences on identity. But a “master narrative” framework allows for an understanding of the influence of culture on our personal biographies (McLean & Syed, 2015). In particular, the master narrative framework is a promising approach for understanding how individuals’ life trajectories develop in relation to culturally normative ideals (Arnett, 2016; Hammack, 2006; Hammack & Toolis, 2015; McLean et al., 2017).

Humans are storytellers, we have always told stories throughout history. Stories hold our culture, community, and family. They give our lives meaning and provide a way for us to connect to each other. Our personal values and commitments are conveyed through the stories we tell. Stories are how we understand ourselves and how we communicate about ourselves to

others, how we connect to other people. In this sense, stories define us, they are how we convey who we are – our identity.

Stories have a beginning, middle and end, a plot, characters. They are usually told in order, and they make sense. In this way, stories help us make sense of ourselves and the path of our lives. They help us make meaning of our lives, through the telling of the story of our lives, we're crafting that story as we tell it. We seek cohesion in the stories of our lives, to make the past make sense, to make the present actions make sense in the context of their story.

Personal stories are individual and unique, but they're not crafted in isolation, our narratives are connected to culture and society, to the time and place we're living in, the moment in history. There are dominant cultural stories or narratives in which we craft our personal stories in conversation with, through which we negotiate our personal stories, these are master narratives, the dominant, culturally shared stories that guide individuals in how to live their lives, how to act, what to do and how to behave, which decisions to make, even when one should experience major milestones in life (McLean & Syed, 2015). Master narratives are ubiquitous and sometimes experienced implicitly, providing normative pressure or "guidance on how to be a 'good' member of a culture" (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 320). They are ideological, prescriptive, and provide information about how people should behave and think and how they should understand themselves in relation to society. Individuals use existing these cultural narratives – which convey identity-salient messages that inform youth identity development – to inform their personal stories.

Master narratives are ubiquitous and invisible, they provide a means "to understand how to live a good life" (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 320). In this sense they are also ideological. They are prescriptive and provide information about how people should behave and think and how

they should understand themselves in relation to society. Master narratives embody the shared understandings of a culture of people, they are “a kind of cultural glue that holds societies together” (Abbott, 2008, p. 47) master narratives constitute “the mythological structure of a society from which we derive comfort, and which it may be uncomfortable to dispute” (Kermode as cited in Abbott, 2008, pp. 47-48).

But the individual is still the engine of the master narrative, they maintain their relevance only by repeatedly being taken up by individuals across time and place, giving them “staying power” (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 328). They are invisible, taken for granted, and define what a culture believes is “normal.” They are powerful in the sense that they function to normalize certain behaviors or actions as routine, “with the consequence that the more we as subjects become engaged in these routines, the more we become subjected to them” (Bamberg, 2004, p. 360). But they do not exist on their own, they are resources that individuals can choose to adopt, reject, or hybridize to align with their own experiences and life trajectories more closely. Master narratives are “like the lenses in a pair of glasses...they are not the things people see when they look at the world, they are the things they see with” (Bennett, 1980, p. 167). In this sense, they act as resources for emerging adults who are making critical decisions about their futures, people understand themselves and their actions in conjunction with or in contrast to these narratives. People’s personal narratives are developed in conversation or negotiation with master narratives, although this process of internalization happens unconsciously (McLean & Syed, 2015). Still, the master narrative would cease to exist if individuals did not choose to adopt it. In other words, people understand themselves and develop their identity through negotiation with these cultural narratives and expectations, and master narratives are strengthened by repeated individual internalization. As such, the concept of a master narrative can be helpful in understanding how

society and culture influence the identity construction of young people (McLean & Syed, 2015) and vice versa.

Master narratives can be understood by looking at both the content and process. Content refers to the “what” of master narratives. What are narratives about? How are they defined? This is a static aspect of master narratives. Process refers to the ways people relate to master narratives. Individuals may internalize, resist or in some cases hybridize master narratives. This process of negotiation is individual and dynamic. Research should not focus on only one aspect of master narratives but should seek to understand both content and process (Syed & McLean, 2021).

Much less is known about the experience of conformity to master narratives is experienced than about resistance and rejection of dominant narratives (Syed & McLean, 2021, 2015). Alignment with master narratives may be an understudied phenomenon because of the idea embedded in master narratives, which is that it is the “right” pathway. Aligning with a dominant life course narrative should lead to a positive experience and optimal outcomes in people’s lives, but we cannot know for sure if this is the case.

A sense of ambivalence – or worse – anxiety, around aligning with master narratives may be especially relevant in contexts or communities that are experiencing rapid change, as is the case in many rural areas. In these moments of transition, individuals may have more than one master narrative to choose from. However, choosing between two options often demands concession and compromise. What is compromised when aligning with a master narrative? If questioning one’s life path is not required because it aligns with the master narrative, do people necessarily feel happy with the outcome?

This study will explore these questions and the experience of alignment, examining both the content and process of master narratives among RFGC students. Using *engagement with master narratives* as a core unit of analysis, this study unites biography and cultural history to understand the challenges faced by RFGC students and rural communities today (Corbett & Forsey, 2017). This approach can help understand how individuals position themselves relative to cultural values and institutional norms (Wortham, 2011) while avoiding the individual emphasis common in identity research (McLean & Syed, 2015).

My perspective on RFGC students' identity processes adopts a framework that centers not only individual agency but also culture, history, and ideology as a critical aspects of identity development. This study adopts a "master narrative" framework, an approach for understanding how individuals' life trajectories develop in tandem with culturally normative ideals (Arnett, 2016; Hammack, 2008; Hammack & Toolis, 2015; McLean et al., 2017).

### **The Present Study**

There is a deficit thread embedded in many aspects of the rural, first-generation college student experience. This study looks at these intersecting characteristics from an anti-deficit perspective and explores how these individuals make sense of themselves and their life choices in relation or opposition to dominant cultural forces in the form of master narratives. This project will explore rural youths' efforts to understand themselves and their future possibilities in coordination with or in opposition to available narrative models.

The master narrative framework, detailed by McLean and Syed (2015), provides a way to understand how people develop their own personal narratives in alignment with or opposition to cultural norms and expectations. Individuals construct personal narratives, influenced by many

factors including family, community, and education as well as the specific sociocultural and historical moment in time. Culture also influences our personal narratives, in the form of master narratives which circulate in the media, community, schools and society, our personal narratives are inevitably constructed in negotiation with cultural norms or prescribed scripts that encourage individuals to live their lives in a certain way, they suggest ways of behaving and acting and crafting one's life.

In telling their own personal stories, individuals will position themselves in alignment with or counter to master narratives (Bamberg, 2004), a process of internalization that happens tacitly (Syed & McLean, 2011, p. 2). Master narratives provide the “material” or content that individuals engage with in understanding what a good life looks like in a society. For some individuals, their personal narratives align with the master narrative. But for many people, the master narrative does not fit who they are, their personal goals, interests and commitments and they must construct a different narrative, “the theoretical proposition is that those who deviate from the master narrative are tasked with finding or constructing an alternative narrative.” (2015, p. 9)”

We know that alternative narratives are defined by their contrast or opposition to the master narrative, and considerable research has been done on populations who reject master narratives in favor of an alternative (McLean & Syed, 2015). However, much less is understood about experience of alignment with master narratives and the process of hybridization of personal, master and alternative narratives. The present study explores these experiences among rural, first-generation college students. *The specific research questions that guided this study are,*



1. What are the ideological resources (e.g., master narratives) that RFGC students and their families are engaging with as they plan for college?
  
2. What are the different modes of engagement with dominant life course expectations, in the form of master narratives, that RFGC students are experiencing?
  
3. What kinds of experiences seem to relate to the different modes of engagement among RFGC students?
  
4. What is the psychological experience of fitting oneself to a master narrative prescription among RFGC students?

### Chapter 3: Methodology

This study was designed to permit interview-based insights on how rural, first-generation college (RFGC) students understand their past, present, and future selves in relation to normative life course expectations, how they balance potentially competing identities, and how they imagine their futures past college. This study views identity as contextually grounded and sought to explore the ways in which rural youth understand and navigate identity across settings and contend with competing master narratives of success. To understand how identity is constructed and reconstructed across different social and cultural borders, a multi-sited design was used. Multi-sited research seeks to uncover the contrasts and synergies among settings and is well-suited for studies that seek to understand relationships and interactions among people in different contexts (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014). This aligns with a view of individuals as inhabiting multiple, socially constructed, “figured worlds” (Holland, 1998) and it is this interaction among different cultural forces which shapes our identity. A multi-sited, narrative design permitted examining these dimensions of experience across different aspects of their lives.

Multi-sited research is also appropriate for studying a phenomenon that is difficult to “see” observationally in single settings, such as identity, and the ways it moves and changes and is experienced differently by individuals across settings. As argued in previous chapters, identity is “figured” by individuals in response to the varying cultural forces of different contexts or settings, with individuals adjusting their actions and behaviors to align with different “figured worlds,” resulting in varying degrees of belonging and engagement and participation across settings. In other words, individuals position themselves differently across different environments as they construct and reconstruct identities. The design of this study allowed

exploration of these processes and a focus on the ways in which cultural practices and resources are leveraged across settings.

## Participants and Communities

Participants in this study were 15 juniors and seniors at a research-intensive public university in New England who were first-generation college students (FGCS) and from rural or small towns. Participants also included students' family members. Information about participants can be found in the table below. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the document to protect the identity of participants.

**Table 1**

### *Participants and Select Demographic Information*

Name	Gender	Year	Age	Mother's Level of Schooling	Mother's occupation	Father's Level of Schooling	Father's occupation	Household Income*
Hailey	F	Sr.	20	Some college	Education, labor	Some college	Carpenter	25-50k
Martin	M	Jr.	20	Some college	Labor, retail	Some college	Butcher, caterer	25-50k
Antonio	M	Sr.	21	Technical school	Healthcare	High school	Construction	50-75k
Greg	M	Sr.	20	Some college	Nurse	Some college	Unknown	25-50k
Amber	F	Jr.	20	Some college	Sales	High school	Construction	25-50k
Alice	F	Jr.	19	Some college	Teacher	Some college	Adv. Manufacturer	100k
Marcy	F	Sr.	20	High school	Retail	High school	Business owner	75-100k
Julia	F	Sr.	21	Some college	Healthcare admin.	Technical school	Mechanic	75-100k
Kelly	F	Sr.	19	Some college	Homesteader	High school	HVAC	25-50k
Amanda	F	Jr.	20	High school	Healthcare admin.	High school	Postal worker	Unknown
Linda	F	Jr.	23	High school	Deceased	Middle school	Disabled veteran	<25k
Jessica	F	Jr.	20	High school	Travel agent	High school	Sales	50-75k
Shannon	F	Sr.	20	High school	Deceased	Some college	Accountant	100-150k
Kim	F	Jr.	19	High school	Accountant	Bachelor's degree**	Teacher	100-150k

Hunter	M	Sr.	21	Technical school	Educator	Some college	Labor	75-100k
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*\*Reported by youth participants*

*\*\*Recruitment error*

Fifteen participants were recruited for the study, but one participant was not factored into analysis after I learned that she was not a first-generation college student (\*recruitment error). Of the 14 participants, there were 10 women and 4 men, and they ranged in age from 19-23 years old. They were all FGC students, which means that neither parent has a four-year degree. Mothers of 9 participants had some college in the form of a two-year program or community college and 5 participants' mothers had a high school diploma only. Fathers of 7 participants attended some college, fathers of 6 participants had a high school diploma, and 1 father did not go to high school. Curiously, several participants had grandparents with 4-year or graduate degrees. Several participants also had older siblings with a 4-year degree or more, making the traditional "first generation" definition more complicated than might be assumed at a glance.

In the sections below, the primary characteristics of this group of students are described, defined, and justified: Year in college, first-generation status, and home community.

### ***Participants' Level of College Education***

This study focused on juniors and seniors, excluding students who would have been first-year students or sophomores in fall 2021. There were several reasons for this sampling decision. One area of inquiry was on future aspirations. Older students are starting to think about their next steps so questions about the future may be especially pressing as they near the end of their college career. Sophomores were also excluded because their first year of college was during the Covid pandemic, when many students were attending school from home. Overall, I believed that juniors and seniors would have had a wider breadth of experiences at college to draw from

relative to the core concepts in this study – home, college, identity and belonging. They have been in college for longer so they have had to negotiate the home/school dichotomies socially and relationally for several years and have had more experiences and are thinking about the future in a way that younger students may not yet be.

### ***First-Generation College Students***

This study used the TRIO definition of a first-generation college student. TRIO is a federal student service program designed to support low income, first-generation, and disabled students graduate from college. Their definition of a first-generation college student is a student neither of whose natural or adoptive parents received a baccalaureate degree; a student who, prior to the age of 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent and whose supporting parent did not receive a baccalaureate degree; or an individual who, prior to the age of 18, did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or an adoptive parent. First-generation is a self-identified status, so for a variety of reasons, not all first-generation students will necessarily identify as such.

### ***Defining Rural***

Rural America is incredibly vast, encompassing between 75% (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, OMB) and 97% (U.S. Census) of the landmass of the country, depending on which definition is used. Unsurprisingly, given the different geographies, histories and cultural experiences of these places, an appropriate single definition has eluded policymakers and researchers. Different programs, organizations and researchers use different definitions of rural to fit various needs and objectives. Most researchers and policymakers use

one of two common definitions of rural: that of the US Census Bureau or the Office of Budget and Management. But these two definitions differ greatly, and each defines rural by what it is not (Wells et al., 2019). The US Census definition classifies as “rural” anything that isn’t urban or included in an “urban core” area, based primarily on population density, any community with population under 2500 people is considered “rural.” The OMB on the other hand, classifies areas as metropolitan, nonmetropolitan, and everything else. Everything else is thus considered rural. To make matters more confusing, especially for those interested in educational research, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has “changed the definition of rurality used in each iterative dataset over the last few decades, casting doubt on the consistency of what is meant by the term rural” (Wells et al., 2019).

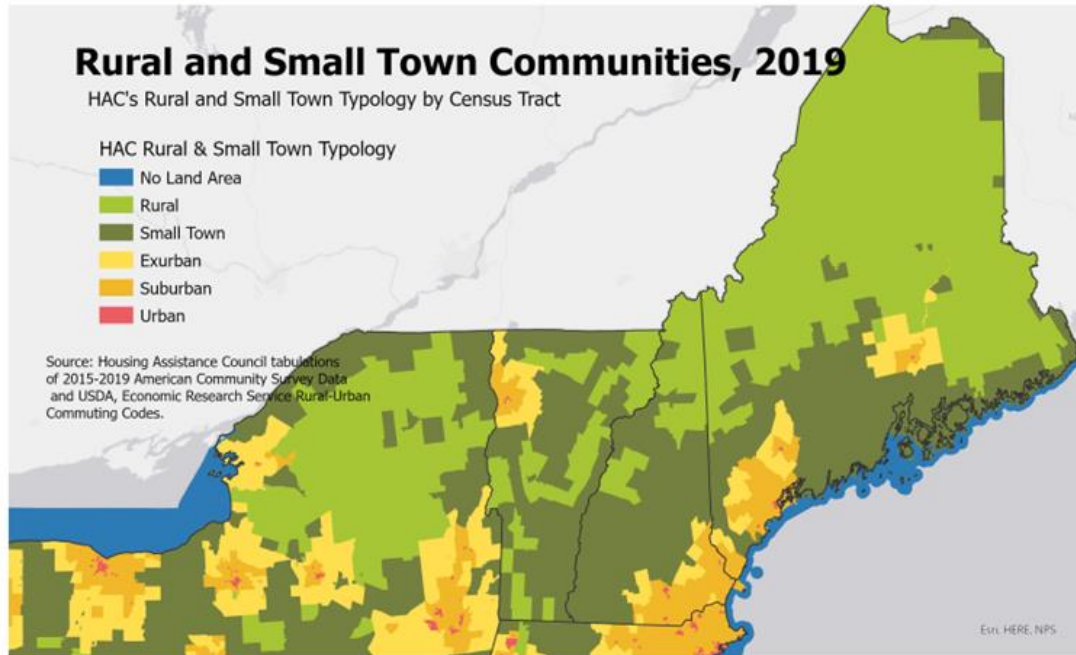
For the purposes of this study, I used the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) classification of “rural” and “small town” tracts across one New England state to identify rural communities and participants. The HAC argues for a more nuanced definition of rural, stating that “rurality, like most other things in society, exists along a continuum and varies extensively based on proximity to a central place, community size, population density, total population, and various social and economic factors” (U.S. Housing Assistance Council, 2011, p. 3). To develop a more precise definition of “rural,” they developed a six-tiered classification system that organizes areas or “tracts” based on several different measures including population, density, housing density and commuting distance (U.S. Housing Assistance Council, 2014, p. 2). This aligns with Isserman’s (2005) call for a definition of rural that goes deeper than the county level. The HAC definition does not account for town or county boundaries but instead classifies areas at a sub county “tract” level, and “identifies important development patterns of suburban and exurban communities, which most major rural/urban definitions omit” (Housing Assistance

Council, 2011, p. 3). In other words, only considering population, or population density, is limiting, so the HAC considers proximity to urban areas in their classification system, among other measures. The number of categories that the HAC uses in their classification system is not only useful in identifying rural towns, but also goes further than many other measures to account for the different realities and ways of life in rural communities across the country. Finally, the traditional categories of rural or urban illustrate a binary view which I am seeking to depart from, and the HAC offered a more nuanced way of identifying rural areas.

To operationalize the HAC definition, I began with the HAC website, which identifies rural/small town areas at the county level depending on the percent of the county that is considered rural/small town by their standards. According to the HAC, of the 10 counties in the New England state where this study took place, half (5) are 100% rural/small town. Three (3) counties were eliminated from consideration as they had little to no percentage of the population living in rural/small towns. Two (2) counties were close to 90% rural/small town (89% and 88%, respectively). This means that these counties are majority rural/small town except for a small concentration of population clustered around one or more bigger towns. I contacted the HAC for regional maps showing county/census-level data on rural/small town, exurban, etc. across New England (Figure 1). I used their maps and overlaid them with county and town maps to identify the specific zip codes to remove from eligibility. I ended up with a list of zip codes in one New England state from which to recruit participants.

### **Figure 1**

*Rural and small towns in New England*



## Study Procedures

As a preview, four, semi-structured narrative interviews, conducted over approximately six months, were designed to understand participants' experiences across different places and among different people where they have varying histories, connections, and experiences. Two interviews were held in the student participant's home community, one with family members present. Two subsequent interviews were conducted on or near the university campus. Participants also participated in one introductory Zoom meeting and completed a Qualtrics survey which asked questions about their residential, educational, occupational, and family backgrounds.

## Recruitment

I contacted the university's TRIO/Student Support Services (SSS) and asked them to reach out to all first-generation juniors and seniors whose hometown zip codes were on the list generated from the HAC maps. This was done in coordination with the Registrar and the



university's Data Services. TRIO/SSS emailed students who fit these criteria with an invitation to participate in the study. In coordination with TRIO/SSS, we did three rounds of outreach starting with an initial email to everyone on the eligibility list before the end of the spring semester where most participants responded. We followed this up with two additional outreach emails in the summer.

After receiving an email from TRIO/SSS, students emailed me if they were interested in participating. The first step was a Zoom meeting to give them an overview of the study and ensure they understood the level of commitment, to review consent and photo instructions. Below is an overview of what participation in this study entailed. This information was given to students during the initial Zoom meeting. The following list outlines what participants did step-by-step.

- Respond to CFAR outreach email
- Zoom meeting, 30 minutes
- Reply to follow-up email with signed consent form, availability, and location for Interview #1
- Take 4-5 photos, upload to BOX
- Interview #1, 60-90 minutes
- Reply to follow-up email with availability, location, and family for Interview #2
- Interview #2, 60-90 minutes
- Reply to follow-up email with availability and location for Interview #3
- Take 4-5 photos, upload to BOX
- Interview #3, 60-90 minutes
- Reply to follow-up email with availability and location for Interview #4
- Interview #4, 60-90 minutes
- Complete Qualtrics survey

### ***Interviews***

The multi-phase and multi-sited nature of this project required the inclusion of a variety of protocols that allowed each interview to have a slightly different purpose and to elicit rich narrative data from each. Interviews focus on exploring individual and collective experiences in

depth within the context of their communities. I included elements of these different frameworks to inform the development of the interview protocol but did not strictly adhere to any one model. Interview protocols should not be rigid but should be “organic, authentic and conversational” (Hammack, 2021).

Student participants were interviewed four times over approximately six months. Initial meetings (to confirm eligibility and explain the full scope of the project and their involvement) were held on Zoom but all 60 interviews were conducted in person. Two interviews took place in student participants’ home communities, with family members or other significant adults invited to participate. Two subsequent interviews were conducted on campus in a comfortable, public environment. Interviews were scheduled at a time and location which was convenient for participants and their families, ensuring they not only felt comfortable but also felt a sense of control over the interview. Many interviews took place outside, at parks, in baseball fields, on beaches and docks. I also met with participants in their homes, in living rooms and kitchens. Parents and grandparents offered me tea, beers, and food. The most formal interview location was my office on campus, which many times was the most convenient for participants. In these cases, I wanted to make sure the interview didn’t feel like “office hours” so I sat facing them (instead of behind my desk) and maintained the friendly rapport I had developed with all participants.

Interviews were semi-structured and designed to generate rich narratives. Each interview protocol consisted of several key questions or areas of questions with “pocket questions” reserved for follow up (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Each interview built on the previous one, resulting in a cumulative format which allowed me to gather deeper and more rich data than I could in one or two interviews. Interview protocols evolved throughout the data collection

process and refined as I moved through the early stages of participant interviews. Interview protocols were designed to be “flexible and adaptable” because “as we learn more, we sharpen our focus” (Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p. 23) so if a question or sequence did not seem to be working, I changed it between interviews.

Given widespread deficit views of rural communities, interviews were explicitly designed to avoid perpetuating deficit assumptions in meta-communicative features of the questions or conversational organization (Harper, 2010):

- Instead of focusing on forms of cultural capital that RFGC students lack, interviews seek to understand the resources and relationships – both on campus and at home – that support students’ educational experience and allow them to envision positive futures.
- Instead of exploring areas of disconnection, interviews focus on the ways in which RFGC students position themselves across contexts often experienced as incommensurate in ways that allow for meaningful engagement and connection.
- Instead of focusing on barriers to achievement, interviews focus on how RFGC students take initiative to find success academically, personally, and relationally at home and on campus.

The interview sequence described below, as well as individual interview protocols and questions, were created from the ground up for this study to elicit rich, detailed narratives, drawing some features from Seidman (2001, 2006), McAdams (1995), and Weisner (2002). Seidman’s (2006) protocol is cumulative, with each interview building on the prior one. This was important because four interviews were conducted over a span of six months, so it was helpful to start each conversation with a summary of what we talked about at the previous interview and how that related to what the present conversation would entail. McAdams (1995) provided a

generative way to ask about different aspects of participants' experiences and to focus on specific parts of their lives in their home community and at university such as high and low points, conflicts, or tensions and significant people involved. Finally, Weisner (2002) was especially useful in the design of the family interview (interview #2), highlighting family routines and activities. Weisner's approach is especially important in this study because I am trying to understand how young people experience being connected to multiple worlds simultaneously. Rural, first-generation college students may draw from a varied set of experiences and networks and the EFI can help understand how people experience and understand the different messages and expectations circulating within the different communities to which they belong.

While interviews constituted the primary data for this study, I adopted an "ethnographic perspective" (Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 30), meaning that although this study was not a traditional ethnography in which the researcher is embedded in one setting or context for a long period of time, I spent considerable time in the field, visiting students' home communities and exploring the area before and after conducting interviews one and two, giving me some exposure to the local context within which the first two interviews were situated.

## **Interview Protocols**

### ***Interview #1***

Interview #1 was conducted in the participants' home community and focused on various aspects of their experience in the community, in schools and with family. Before the interview, participants took 4-5 photos of meaningful places in their home community and uploaded them to BOX, a secure online file sharing platform. For the purposes of this study, the photos

functioned as conversational prompts to help establish rapport, make participants more comfortable and allow them to control the content of the interview (Sibeoni et al., 2017). The goals of this interview were to understand how students relate to their home communities and relationships back home; to understand how students story their own place (historically, geographically, socially, etc.) in relation to their home communities; to give students an opportunity to give autobiographical information and insight; and to build rapport with students before the family interview.

Questions focused on participants' experiences in and out of schools, work history, and what they value most about their home community. I also asked participants to talk about how they feel about their community now, in light of their college experience. Specific topics and example questions are listed below.

*Background/community*

- What can you tell me about yourself and your history in this community?
- Are there moments that stand out as high points or low points for you?
- What was growing up in this community like for you?
- What kinds of things do you value about this place or being here?
- What kinds of relationships do you have with people in the community?

*School experience*

- What was high school like for you?
- Do you have particular memories or stories from high school that would do a good job of describing your experiences then? (high points, low points, conflicts, chapters)

*Thinking about your home community in the context of your college experience*

- What do you miss when you're away?
- What parts of home stay with you when you're gone?
- Do you ever decide not to tell someone about your community or your earlier experiences?
- What parts about this place do you think should change?
- Have these views changed over time? Did you think this way before you left for college?

***Interview #2***

Interview 2 was a multi-party interview conducted in the participants' home community. Given the centrality of intergenerational narratives to individual identity and acknowledging the importance of the stories, experiences, and values passed down through families (Merrill & Fivish, 2016), this was a group interview with the student participant as well as one or more family members chosen and invited by the participant. The goals of this interview were to elicit collective family and community stories; identify continuities and discontinuities between family and children's values, experiences, and lives; and elicit reflection on different kinds of community and family transitions and opportunities. I asked participants to talk about community history and the family's place in it as well as family work history in the community. I also asked about how the decision to attend college was made; family expectations for children post-college; and parents' own educational and professional and community backgrounds. Specific topics and example questions are listed below.

*Family background in the community*

What is day-to-day life like here for you all?

Can you tell me the story of how your family came to live here?

Who are you connected to in this community? Are there groups of friends, neighbors, or other people here that you all are close with?

What are the best parts about living here?

Is there good work in this community?

What is your work history in the community? Have you ever thought about moving away to get a different job?

How has community changed over the years? How have those changes impacted your family?

*Post-secondary decision-making*

How was the decision to attend college made? How and when did the conversation begin? What kinds of conversations do you remember having?

Were there any tensions or disagreements?

In what ways were other family members involved in this process?

Describe the 'routine' of college planning in your experience including applications, housing, financial aid, campus visits, etc.

*College experience (from the family perspective)*

How have your relationships together changed since [student participant] first started college?

How has the home routine changed? Is there a regular contact plan?

What about when the child comes home? What are the biggest differences to the routine now that the child is gone?

*Looking ahead*

What type of future have you imagined for [the student] over the years? Were there times when this vision changed?

Is this future different from what you [adult] were imagining for yourself at this age?

If so, how?

In New England communities, many people are discussing “youth retention” or “outmigration” and there are differing opinions about it. Is this a conversation you all have together?

***Interview #3***

Interview 3 was held on campus. The goal of this interview was to dig deeper into participants’ experiences around the decision to attend college, how that decision was made, messages received about college during high school, experiences of connection and disconnection on campus and at home, high/low points in college experience, and relationships with family and friends at home and at school. This interview also adopted a modified life-story approach (McAdams, 1995) asking participants to narrate specific parts of their lives. This interview was also supplemented by photo elicitation.

Like interview #1, for which participants took photos of meaningful places in their home community, this interview began with a discussion of significant places on campus using photos as a starting point. I asked participants to talk about differences between home and school, times when they feel most “in-sync” and “out-of-sync” on campus, and what aspects of college have been easier and more challenging than they anticipated. I also asked participants to talk about the extent to which they identify with being a “first-generation college student.” Specific topics and example questions are listed below.

*Broad questions about experiences since starting college*

What are some of the usual activities that structure your week? What activities do you look forward to? What do you not look forward to?

There are many differences between life at home and life when you're at school. Are there specific times or experiences when these differences are most apparent or obvious?

When do you feel most in-sync with who you want to be? In contrast, what sends you out of sync?

Who are some of the most prominent people in your life since you've started college? Can you talk about any high points in your experiences since starting college? Low points?

What's been difficult about college for you? How have you overcome these challenges?

What's been easier than you thought it would be? What made it easy?

*More focused questions about college experience (relationships, work, housing, free time)*

Do you have a job? [follow up questions about people and the work]

A lot of people like to offer advice to college students, have you gotten any life advice from older co-workers [at place of employment]?

What is your current housing/living situation? What has your housing experience been like?

What do you do in your free time? Where do you go? Do you go there/do this with friends or alone?

Can you talk about an academic goal that you set out to achieve and were happy with the outcome?

Do you ever feel the need to disconnect from your schoolwork or campus? Why do you feel compelled to disconnect [if you do]?

*Structured autobiographical questions*

On campus, you're classified as a first-generation college student. This is defined as a student whose parents do not have a 4-year degree. Have you heard this term before?

Does this mean anything to you?

Are there times when you've felt like a first-generation student on campus? Times when your experiences felt different from peers whose parents went to college?

***Interview #4***

Interview 4 also took place on campus and was intended to encourage participants to reflect on the arc and meaning of conversations we had over the past several months. "The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now and describing the concrete details of their present experience establishes conditions for reflecting on what they're doing with their lives" (Seidman, 2006, p. 19).



Questions focused on participants' thoughts about the future and future plans as well as uncertainties, regrets, unresolved issues and concerns moving forward. I also asked them about messages they receive about what they should be doing with their lives. Specific topics and example questions are listed below.

*Reflection*

Given everything we've talked about, how does this all fit together for you, what does finishing college mean to you? For your family or friends?

*Thinking about the future*

How do you imagine the next 10 years?

Imagine the positive aspects of a life that's feels good to you in the future, what are they? Are there downsides to this life you're imagining?

What are some of your questions, whether curiosities or anxieties, about what's in store for you in the future?

What will your challenges/opportunities be going forward?

*Messages, expectations, life course models*

What messages do you get about what you should be doing with your life in the future? Where do these messages come from? How do you experience these messages? (e.g., Welcome expectations? Pressures?)

Sometimes our stories and life paths don't completely match the storyline that others (society, culture, family, friends, etc.) expect us to have, or what is considered appropriate, normal, or accepted. In what ways does your story align with what you feel is expected of you? In what ways does your story diverge from what you feel is expected?

*Thinking about the past*

Think back to your first semester, the transition to college. What details stand out about that time?

What was the biggest adjustment after leaving home?

Are there any experiences (e.g., social, work, academic, personal) that stand out as turning points? After which you experienced a shift in thinking?

*Lifestyle values & priorities*

What kinds of experiences are you drawn to now compared to when you started college?

What are the lifestyle priorities and goals of yours that inform decisions about you currently spend your working and non-work time?

*Wrap up*

You're approaching the end of college, a major accomplishment and a benchmark in the lives of many people. Does it feel like things are coming together? Or do things feel more unsettled? Or something in between?

### *Incentives*

Student participants received \$400 for their involvement in the study. This level of compensation was commensurate with the magnitude of the commitment requested from student participants. This study was done at a time in history of great income equality, where many college students work part- to full-time jobs to cover tuition and basic expenses. Rural communities and first-generation students are often lower income and have still greater financial constraints. Taking part in research may also have been disincentivized by COVID, as people's extra time was at a premium.

The time commitment was extensive, ultimately consisting of six separate activities over the course of six months, not including driving, planning and dozens of email exchanges. Interview #1 used a photo elicitation, requiring participants to do approximately 1 hour of photo taking prior to the interview. Interview #1 also took place in students' home communities, in some cases requiring significant travel to rural areas. Interview #2 took place with important family and/or community members and the student. This required the student to recruit people and arrange a comfortable venue for the interview. Interview #3 took place on campus, but again required an additional photo elicitation component. Interview #4 was a standard semi-structured interview on campus. The final two interviews took place during the semester when students were balancing classes, lab work, homework, social activities, employment (for several participants) as well as other demands on their time.

### *Narrative Inquiry*

One of the many advantages of taking a narrative approach is that it is at once a conceptual framework, a way to collect data, and a way to analyze data. Narrative identity is also an effective method for uncovering identity development as it considers past, present, and imagined futures (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Further, a narrative approach to identity research using interactional text as an analytical tool can reveal how young people position themselves across potentially inconsistent settings, how they define themselves and their futures across settings and how they have found the agency to create new identities and roles and as such new master narratives for rural youth.

Wortham (2003) articulates how “speech events” such as group and individual interviews reveal identity, arguing that one’s identity “become stabilized through events in which a participant both gets represented as and enacts a particular identity” (Wortham, 2003, p. 193). In other words, people construct and reinforce identity commitments in the way they talk about themselves and their experiences in relation to different people, settings, and institutions. This “interactional text” is a particularly useful tool for exploring and analyzing identity through narrative data (Wortham et al., 2011).

Narrative identity as a research tool can also contribute to our understanding of how people experience important transitions – such as going to college and planning their futures after college – by analyzing the types of stories told and their subject or focus (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Identity construction is often an implicit process, but narrative evidence permits “seeing” identity work through analysis of the language that people use to position themselves relative to life experiences (McAdams, 2013). Narrative identity also allows for the evolving and dynamic nature of identity development to be better understood through people’s personal

narratives. I adopted a master narrative framework which allowed me to “broaden that lens” and show the cultural influence on identity development through the ways people negotiate and interact with broader society. A master narrative framework allows for analysis of identity at the cultural level instead of only looking at the individual level and can reveal the ways culture influences identity development, how culture is “internalized” and how it connects to personal identity development. Master narratives are cultural “scripts” with which we subconsciously align the stories of our lives, and therefore our identities. In other words, our personal narratives do not develop in isolation but in conversation and through negotiation with broad, widely circulating master narratives. We can understand the cultural influences on individuals through an exploration of the stories they tell about themselves and their experiences.

### ***Data Analysis: Process***

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to NVivo for organization of interview data (not for identification of themes). Analysis focused on the whole person, understanding the individual instead of only looking for patterns across several people, deeply person-centered at every level of data collection and analysis. The focus of analysis is on induction and interpretation. Informed by the Listening Guide method, which encourages researchers to “pay attention to the unexpected, to notice what they did not anticipate or what surprises them” (Gilligan & Eddy, 2021, p. 142). I tried to tune into these moments, and to listen (and read) with an open mind.

A narrative approach to identity research can reveal how young people position themselves across potentially inconsistent settings, how rural students understand the experience of being connected to multiple places at the same time, how they define themselves and their

futures across settings and how they have found the agency to create new identities and roles and as such new master narratives for rural youth. Attention in analysis was given to the ways that participants narrate events and experiences, and how they position themselves in relation to these stories of different people, places, and institutions. I sought to draw conclusions about RFGC students as individuals as well as about identity resources as cultural artifacts – thus, I examined the data using two units of analysis. One unit of analysis is looking for cultural artifacts in the form of resources or master narratives; another unit of analysis examines individuals, and the identity moves and trajectories they discuss.

Operationally, I followed Josselson & Hammack's (2021) approach to narrative analysis, key features of which include starting with broad questions focused on exploring experience of a particular phenomenon. Josselson & Hammack (2021) suggest 5 separate reads of each interview, the transcription served as my "first read" in which I listened and read the interview at the same time. This was a slow first step. Initial transcription was done using an online transcription service (Otter.ai) after which I did a careful review, adding relevant details from my field notes such as body language, changes in tone, and how certain words or phrases were emphasized which would not be apparent in a transcript. For example, one participant talked about how she felt different at home and on campus, she described feeling more like an adult on campus, but when she said the word "adult," she used air quotes. This is significant, so I noted it in the transcript.

During the initial readthroughs, I wrote memos on the overall "gestalt" or theme of each interview, writing about the main idea, the overall purpose or project of each participant. Through several subsequent reads of the transcripts, my memos became more specific. I noticed recurring stories or themes within everyone's interviews as well as repetitions and

contradictions. I also looked for specific events, experiences and situations that were influential; instances where students felt a sense of belonging to campus, academically and socially as well as instances where students felt out of place, academically or socially; common factors participants expressed as being critically important or salient to their college experience. I also focused analysis on reflection on the post-secondary decision-making process as well as feelings about future expectations and plans. I looked at differences between what people said and how they said it and how this varies across contexts. I also noticed moments in the transcripts that my initial read had placed in relief, and I started to consider why those statements made me pause. I asked myself questions such as, *What is this a story of? What are this individual's values, goals and commitments?* These questions helped me “orient to the narrative arc, the overall plot of the story” (Josselson & Hammack, p. 28). I started to pull key quotes that stuck out because they seemed significant, or they were connected in some way to the research questions. I tried to understand each person and their story, focusing on school, family, and community experiences as they're related to my central questions and also looking for “beneath the surface topics”, going beyond the explicit statements and looking for implicit meaning.

The process of reading and re-reading interviews was a time-consuming recursive process of looking at one person's interview sequence, then looking at other participants. I was trying to understand individual stories, but also looking at multiple people's stories which allowed me to leverage contrasts and similarities across participants. For example, something I notice in one person's story might make me go back and look at how someone else described a similar experience, which doesn't mean I was comparing the two experiences, but leveraging the fact that I had several participants and when one person spoke about something that was significant, that was a cue to me to go back and see how others dealt with something similar.

Narrative analysis is “a recursive process in which the whole illuminates the parts, which in turn offer a fuller and more complex picture of the whole, which then leads to a better understanding of the parts” (Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p. 10), a common interpretative dialectic often referred to as the hermeneutic circle.

Eventually, I started to notice aspects of participants’ experiences which appeared to be similar, which caught my attention. This is where the process shifted “from a more inductive mode, in which ideas are generated from the text to a more dialogic mode between data and theory” (Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p. 60).

One of the main goals of analysis was to articulate the experience of being an insider in two different worlds. Adopting a biographical, person-centered approach to data analysis, I came to realize that this was a study of alignment with master narratives (which will be discussed in the next chapter). The characterization of this alignment was inductive, based on my interpretation of the subjective experience of alignment, rather than an imposed characterization. In other words, participants did not tell me they aligned with a master narrative, but they gave me the evidence that revealed that this was their experience. I then went back to the literature, and back to my data. I read both theoretical and empirical work and considered how this study fit within that research. I began looking at the similarities and differences as it related to this experience specifically and developed categories of experience based on these experiences. This is where my findings began to become clearer.

### ***Data Analysis: Applying a Master Narrative Framework***

As an analytic tool, master narratives allow researchers to explore the ways that culture and individual identity are connected. Master narratives can help researchers make sense of

individual experiences because they “function as cultural standards against which community members feel compelled to position their personal experience” (Thorne & McLean, 2003, p. 171). Since master narratives are so dominant and suggest what is normative or expected behavior in a society, people feel compelled to describe their experiences in relation to the master narrative. In other words, people understand themselves and develop their identity through negotiation with multiple cultural narratives and expectations. As such, a master narrative framework is useful for examining the relationship between culturally normative models of the life course – and individual life stories that both support and provide a justification for life choices.

Adopting a master narrative framework gave me a way to categorize participants’ differing experiences of identity development and negotiation as they experience being an “insider” in two different worlds and how they imagine their futures after college. Categories were developed based on individual experiences which appear to be similar. Some people align with the master narrative (which reinforces the narrative). Others may align with an alternative narrative, which also highlights the dominance of the master narrative in that the alternative exists in contrast to the master narrative. There are master, personal, and alternative narratives. All influence each other as people draw on master and alternative narratives to in the construction of their own personal stories. People’s personal narratives are drawn from master narratives as well as potential alternative narratives which may differ or directly counter the dominant, master narrative. Personal narratives are “largely informed by the degree to which she or he aligns with the master narrative or alternative narrative(s)” (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 324).



Analysis first identified the presence and usefulness of master narratives as identity resources and explored the various ways they are adopted, resisted, or hybridized by RFGC students to create new narratives. Kerrick and Henry (2017) suggest several ways to identify the presence of master narratives. For example, when individuals engage in a “terse telling” of an experience, there is no need to explain that experience in detail because it is perceived as common and shared by many others. This indicates that they are adopting or taking up an existing narrative. On the other hand, individuals describing counter or hybrid narratives must include more explanation and description because the experience is not as widely understood. This is one way to identify master narratives, both those being taken up and those which are being resisted.

A master narrative can also be identified by asking participants about ways in which they align with what they believe is expected of them, and ways they diverge (McLean & Syed, 2015). This question is asked in Interview #3. A mismatch between a participant’s expectations and their experience is also evidence of a master narrative (Kerrick & Henry, 2017). Individuals use master narratives to inform their identity, to tell them what they “should” do, in this way, master narratives are prescriptive and ideological (McLean & Syed, 2015). When someone is experiencing a difference in their personal experience and what they believe they should be doing or feeling, this indicates that they are navigating conflicting master narratives.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The study goal was to understand how rural, first-generation college (RFGC) students position themselves in relation to dominant cultural master narratives and potentially competing alternative narratives related to community and family processes, norms, life pathways, and choices after college.

Participants shared many characteristics – they all attended the same university, they were all juniors and seniors from rural communities or small towns, and they all self-identified as first-generation college students. As reviewed in prior chapters, literature on rural people and places often obscures the variability between rural communities and people, supplanting this variability with a dominant deficit narrative of a single rural community experience in the United States (and other parts of the world).

However, this study found both commonalities and important differences among RFGC students' family, school, and community experiences. Although this study was designed to explore young people's experience with the "same" phenomena of post-secondary decision-making and related identity processes, I did not assume they had a lot in common simply because they all made the decision to attend college. Both their commonalities and variations are of empirical interest. I identified shared experiences among participants while also highlighting variability among them.

I present findings from interviews with 14 RFGC students. The findings and stories presented here are those of individuals, not composites or averages. My goal in analysis was to identify archetypes of narrative engagement and highlight predominant themes that cut across participants' reports.

Overarching findings build on a distinction in the literature on master narratives between *content* and *process*. Finding #1 is related to the *content* of master narratives that this population is engaging with, specifically a CFA master narrative is identified. This finding is foundational and sets up the rest of the chapter which focuses on the *process* of negotiating among master narratives. Findings #2 and #3 focus on this process. Little is known about the lived experience of aligning or internalizing master narratives. This is the focus of Finding #2 in which I discuss three different types of alignment experience that I identified in the stories of participants: *faithful alignment*, *hybrid alignment*, and *utilitarian alignment*. Finding #3 takes this a step further and leverages the unique and in-depth methods of this study to understand engagement with master narratives in a larger and longer biographical arc.

### **Finding #1: Evidence of a CFA master narrative among RFGC students**

All participants in this study attended university. However, the way that many students talked about the decision to attend college reveals evidence of engagement with a variety of normative cultural expectations, or master narratives, suggesting what they ought to be doing at this stage in their lives. Several participants in this study talked about the decision to attend college in a way that suggests they are engaged with a CFA master narrative.

Yeah, I'm doing what I'm supposed to, I'm at college. I'm doing the college thing. What's expected of a 20-year-old is to be at college, which is fine 'cuz that's what I wanted to do. And outside of that, I don't think there's really much expectation between the time that you're like, 18 and 21. I don't think there's much expectation, anything other than the fact that you go to college. Whenever I say I don't want to be in college, to anybody outside of like, my family, my friends, like it's almost looked down upon, depending on who you're talking to. Right now, I think between the time you're 18 and 21, the only expectation on you is that you're in school, learning and getting a degree. (Amber, junior)

Amber's quote indicates the compulsory nature of master narratives; they compel you to do something. She talks about how she's doing what she's "supposed to" by going to college.

Her quote is also connected to the utility of master narratives; they help people make decisions; they make decisions easy because they are presented as the right choice. She says that when she says she doesn't want to be in college, that idea is "looked down upon." This quote is also related to the rigidity of master narratives, the alternative is presented as negative. Not going to college is questioned, but going is not.

These three characteristics of master narratives – compulsory, utility, and rigidity – are drawn from McLean & Syed (2015) who argue that master narratives have five characteristics: utility, ubiquity, compulsory, invisibility, and rigidity. The presence of these qualities can help identify a master narrative. In the quote above, we can see the presence of these characteristics in the way Amber talks about the decision to go to college.

As discussed in Chapter 3, master narratives can also be identified by the way people narrate their experiences. For example, when someone is engaged with a master narrative, not a lot of detail is usually offered when describing a phenomenon that is assumed to be widely understood. In other words, when people provide a "terse telling" of an experience, this may indicate they are engaged with the more tacit, "common sense" features – ubiquity, invisibility – of a master narrative (Kerrick & Henry, 2017). Master narratives can also be identified by asking an individual how they feel they align with expectations (McLean & Syed, 2015). When people describe their life pathways or decision making as being in line with expectations, this can be evidence of engagement with a master narrative. For example,

I graduated from high school; I went to college. I'm just following like, that line. (Annie, junior)

I always like had A's and stuff. So, it just made sense for me to go to college. (Amanda, junior)

I don't know. I felt like I was just always gonna go to college... I feel like I've just I've been on like, a normal track, like, I don't know, I went to high school, I graduated high

school, I went straight to college, it's been four years of college, I've gone straight through. I don't think anything's like really been super, like different than expected. (Marcy, senior)

I don't think we [family] ever really had a conversation. I think it was always just like, I'm going to college. Like it was- wasn't like a decision I needed to make. (Shannon, senior)

I didn't not want to go- I wanted to go. It was never really talked about. I mean, it wasn't really talked about because I've never thought of it. (Amber, junior)

I guess I had always been told to kind of go to school. Or at least I felt like I was like, my dad always wanted better. My mom always wanted better. Cecilia, Steve [siblings], all wanted better for me than kind of what they had. So, I always knew I was gonna go to school. I didn't know what for. (Linda, senior)

I know that like coming to college was good, because otherwise I was just going to be back home, working in some factory, which- don't want to do that. (Kelly, junior)

In this study, many participants and their family members could not pinpoint exactly where the idea of going to college came from but spoke about how they implicitly knew that would be part of their plan. “Go to college” was described as a message that doesn’t come from any specific person or place – it’s invisible, something that’s just “in the air.” These characterizations of “invisibility” and “ubiquity” support the claim that CFA may be a dominant master narrative among this population of individuals (McLean & Syed, 2015).

In the final quote above, Kelly presents the alternative, or the non-college choice, as negative. It’s college or work, and bad work at that, “some factory.” This makes college the easy and better choice and provides further evidence for how the master narrative’s structure works to delimit choices in powerful ways as good or bad, with alternatives to mainstream narrative expectations cast as negative in comparison to the preferred model. This relates to the rigidity of master narratives, which is another key feature. Master narratives get their strength and their authority from their staying power; violating the master narrative is risky and seen as negative.

Not all participants engaged in a *terse* telling of their experiences. Yet the presence of the master narrative was apparent in the way they discussed the decision of what to do after high school. Consider the following conversation between Hailey and her mother,

Hailey: I don't think we really even talked about it. I'm not really sure what led me personally to just kind of assume that I was going to college. I don't remember any conversations or anything.

Mom: I always assumed you're going to college, there was never any discussion about you not going to get a bachelor's degree.

Hailey: Which I just never even- I don't know if I just assumed that that was the option- that was the only option or anything. I just think that that's just kind of the path that happened for me.

Mom: I just assumed that I knew that- that was the right thing for her to get a bachelor's degree to be financially independent, which is a big thing for me, for all of my family, most of my family have always been, you know, the wives would, you know, didn't- didn't go to college didn't have high paying jobs, always relied on their husbands for financial support. And I wanted to make sure that that didn't happen to her that she was financially independent her entire life.

Hailey: Which I think if I had an interest in a trade or an interest in another path, then this conversation would have happened, but I never even never questioned it. I never doubted that I wouldn't be going to college.

In this exchange, Hailey and her mother are quite reflective about just how automatic the process was. They are very explicit about how implicit the decision was. They use the word “assume” several times and talk about how the decision to go to college just “happened.” There may never have been a conversation about it, but everyone got the message.

Also present in this conversation is the gendered and intergenerational aspect of the mother wanting her daughter to be financially independent, indicating a common phenomenon where values and normative messages are coordinated across content domains. This conversation shows how master narratives are socially and culturally distributed – both Hailey and her mother take part in CFA, though occupying different positions. If master narratives are about articulating

norms around a “good life” then CFA may also entail prescriptions for what it means to be a “good parent,” just as it does for what it means to be a “good, ambitious young person.” The focus of this study is on the normative pressures RFGC students experience from a range of sources: society, school, family, etc. This conversation suggests that parents’ alignment with CFA may influence the messages they give to their children.

This overarching finding provides strong evidence to suggest the relevance of a CFA master narrative in the lives of these students and their families.

### **Finding #2: Different Types of Engagement with a CFA Master Narrative**

Finding #1 provides evidence that young people and their families are engaging with a dominant life course narrative. Because they all ultimately decided to attend college, this is a study of the lived experience of alignment with a CFA master narrative. But there is no single experience of alignment – participants do not align in the same way or for the same reasons.

Despite their varying individual circumstances, I identified three types of alignment among participants. *Faithful alignment* is defined as aligning a personal narrative with a master narrative primarily because of faith in the “good life” that the master narrative promises.

“Faithful” in this study is used in a sense similar to an “article of faith” or a sense of trust in something bigger, unknowable, and not questioned. In this study, faith is used to describe a strong belief in the promise of the narrative of *College for All* and the rewards that come with this pathway, mainly financial and career success.

Hybrid alignment is also identified among some participants in this study. Hybrid alignment is defined as constructing a narrative which includes aspects of personal, alternative, and master narratives in a way that aims to coordinate differing goals, interests, and

circumstances of the individual. The definition of hybridity used in this study is similar to the concept of syncretism, which I adopt from Gutiérrez (2014) who uses this term to describe “the combination of different forms of belief or practice” (p. 49). Finally, I identified a *utilitarian alignment* among some participants.

Utilitarian alignment means aligning a personal and master narrative for a specific purpose. This could be a specific career goal but does not need to be limited to a job. It’s the idea that college is a tool or is useful for a specific purpose, a view of college as a way to achieve or do something specific. For some, college could be a way to leave home and become more independent. For others, college is a means to a specific career or a way to continue playing a sport at a higher level. Utilitarian may mean different things to different individuals, but it is the use of college as a means to achieve a very specific goal or outcome.

In the following sections, I describe these different types of alignment in depth and give examples of each using the stories of the individuals in this study. The purpose is to allow personal biographies to illuminate different types of alignment. This does not mean the categories I’ve identified are impermeable, no one completely embodies *faithful*, *hybrid*, or *utilitarian* alignment 100% of the time. If someone is said to align because they have faith in the promise of the master narrative, that does not necessarily mean they’re doing so without any career goals, or that they’re not hybridizing in any way. And someone who hybridizes multiple narratives cannot be said to have no faith, they ostensibly have faith in multiple narratives. My goal was to understand the experiences of individual participants biographically more than it was to come up with a universal definition of the different categories that I identified.



***Faithful Alignment: Marcy, Hunter, Shannon and Hailey***

For many individuals in this study, their strongest reasons for going to college reflect a faithful alignment with a CFA master narrative. Many express a sense of ease about the decision, and trust in messages received from family, school, and community. I define *faithful alignment* as those who talk about the decision to attend college primarily because of an article-of-faith belief in the “good life” that the master narrative promises. They made the decision to attend college not because they wanted to pursue a specific career or major or attend this specific university, but because they believe college is “foundational” and the “bare minimum” needed to be successful in life. They have high aspirations and believe that college is an important and so they made the decision to attend for this reason.

Many participants fell into this category. They talk about the post-secondary decision-making process and the decision to go to college because of faith in the promise that college is the key first step to positive outcomes in the future. Because of this, the decision to attend seemed easy. Parents, schools, and the community were all reported to all encourage college and support the decision and participant reports indicate that they seldom question this choice.

Faithful alignment is expressed slightly differently by some participants, and this is a reflection on the way that master narratives “circulate” within communities, families, and cultures. Some express this as their own personal faith in the promise of college, but it is also expressed as faith in the promise of college on the part of families, schools and communities. Each is a variation on faithful alignment, faith that college will result in positive outcomes, including but not limited to financial ascendency. College is seen as a means to a promised end, a good life.

### *Marcy*

Marcy and I met on a small, private town beach by a lake, one of the best parts of her community, according to Marcy. We sat at a picnic table with our feet in the sand while families settled in, and children played around us. Marcy and her sister are incredibly close, and she alluded to following in her sister's footsteps for most of their lives. Her mother has a job in retail and always wanted better for her daughters while her father owns a small diner a few towns away. Both Marcy and her sister always knew they did not want to take over the family business, which factored into both of their decisions to attend college.

Marcy aligned with a CFA master narrative based on a faith in this pathway which is informed by her own experiences as well as her older sister and the school community. Marcy remembers someone coming into her middle school classroom to talk about going to college. Her sister shared a similar memory. Neither remembered exactly who he was but they both identified this experience as planting a seed that ultimately contributed to both sisters going to college. "In fifth grade, a man came into my class, and he was like, 'Hey, guys, college is a thing if you want to start thinking about it', and I was like- fifth grade me was like, 'Okay, I'll go to college'. ... I'm like, that's a little soon. But he was like, 'do things for college'. I was like 'okay, whatever you say.'"

Her sister, who participated in the second interview, which also took place at the same local beach, told the same story of a guest speaker in middle school who planted the seed of going to college in her mind at an early age. She, like Marcy, reports knowing at that point that college would be her pathway. She indicated not recalling that the school discussed any other options with students. Marcy's experience is informed by her school and trust in her school, whose message was clear, start planning now. Marcy had faith in the promise of college that her

early school experience ingrained in her which prevented other decisions from ever entering her mind. She said she never even considered another option after that. She went to college because she believed it would work out because her school presented it, encouraged it. In fact, they didn't present her with any other options,

My guidance counselor, [who] told me to go to [university name]- and that was the only option she gave me.

This is evidence not only of Marcy's faith in the master narrative but evidence that this narrative has been institutionalized by schools. Marcy's faith might not only be in the master narrative but also in the school and the messages they convey through practices like these. Marcy describes her pathway to college as aligning with what is expected. The decision to attend college was made at a young age through her middle-school experience and nothing after that changed her mind.

I feel like I've just I've been on a like, normal track, like, I don't know, I went to high school, I graduated high school, I went straight to college, it's been four years of college, I've gone straight through. I don't think anything's like really been super, like different than expected.... I got my financial aid package from [university]. And I was like, I'm going to [university]. See you there.

She was also seeking a specific type of college experience, the "D1" experience. This is part of the CFA narrative, which suggests that there is a "right" way to do college and specific experiences that are associated with doing college the right way,

When I was applying, I wanted, D1 sports. Because I think that like, I don't know, it's just fun. I wanted them [the college] to have research opportunities.

It is significant that Marcy doesn't play sports or engage in research. She was seeking a specific kind of experience and an institution that would provide that experience. CFA paints a picture of what college should look like, a particular kind of aesthetic which Marcy and other participants are seeking. Her faith is not blind, there is faith in the pathway and the possible

rewards of that pathway, but those rewards might be different depending on how true to the “right” way people engage. There is an aspect of selection and discrimination among the various ways one could engage with CFA, such as going to a 2-year or community college. But this isn’t the traditional experience that many are seeking. There is faith in the overall direction of one’s pathway, but also faith that this route will be more rewarding.

Marcy’s story demonstrates how faithful alignment starts early and how it can be messaged through school experiences. Her story also illustrates the coordination of faithful alignment with a normative expectation with aspects of her personal interests and personal narrative. The master narrative is sometimes consistent with individual choices and preferences, and sometimes it’s not.

### *Hunter*

Hunter is the second son of teenage parents. He and his brother were raised by his grandparents because his parents were too young to care for them. He often talked about how the odds were stacked against him because of this. He holds a great respect for his grandparents as well as his parents, who are still together and still in his life. Like Marcy, Hunter has an older brother close in age who he looks up to and in many ways, has followed in his footsteps. Both brothers are star athletes. They shared friends throughout high school, went to the same college and majored in the same discipline. He talks about his admiration for his brother as well as his desire to be seen as his own person, not just Tom’s younger brother. We met on his grandparents’ back porch on a house with a lakeview that his grandfather built.

Two key points of difference in faithful alignment between Marcy and Hunter are the fact that Hunter did consider other post-secondary options, whereas Marcy did not. Hunter was also

looking for a D1 school, but not for the experience or aesthetic – he is an athlete and wanted to run competitively. Marcy’s faith is in college as the plan, but Hunter believes that college is one part of a long-term plan. He has an idea of the kind of life he wants, and college is the first step in that picture of a perfect life. In this way, college plays a different role for each of them.

Hunter’s alignment also reflects the role his family background played in the decision. He has a strong desire for financial security which motivates him and informs his decision making, he believes college is essential for financial success.

I think, just like coming from, I don't want to say like, low income cuz we weren't low income necessarily, but just like yeah, like, my family had to, like, be cautious about certain things, like, you know, like, financials or just like maybe like not being college educated, or certain things... because my parents, you know, were teenage parents and whatnot. Like, I can still be really successful. And I wanted to prove to myself that I could be, because, like statistics, say otherwise.

Hunter wants to “prove” he can be successful, and he views college as a way to do that. He positions himself against what he views as the non-college alternative, working in construction. In the quote below, Hunter starts to say that he was never interested in other pathways, but he stops himself,

I was never interested in- I mean, I worked for my grandfather back in the summers, and I always hated construction. I can't even like, handle a power tool or anything, you know, barely a power toothbrush, so that was always out of the question. Anything like that, like electrical. So yeah, I always wanted to go to college.

It could be that he tried construction because of his respect for his grandfather who raised him. He talks about how he worked in construction but then he qualifies this when he talks about how he “can’t even handle a power tool.” He’s not saying that he hated construction, he’s saying that he can’t do it. He is reluctant to say anything bad about the choices his grandfather made and instead, puts it on himself as someone who can’t do that work.

And I think even just like the small things, like, I would always, like, I still even like, work with my grandfather and his construction workers. And some of them like, like,

don't get me wrong, like, They're great guys. Like, they're just not smart. And like, I don't want to live the lifestyle. I don't want to be like smoking cigarettes every 20 minutes or living paycheck to paycheck, or whatnot, or getting drunk every day. So, like, like, kinda like, keeps me grounded. And like, wow like, take advantage of these opportunities that are given to you, you know?

Although he wasn't interested in construction, it was something he experienced and saw as a career pathway for his grandfather. But he positions himself against that type of work and what he views is the associated lifestyle. He seeks a life in which he is financially secure and successful, not "living paycheck to paycheck" which is how he views the alternative to college.

Hunter, like Marcy, was interested in attending a D1 school. But not for the atmosphere and experience, he wanted to go to a school where he could run at a high level.

So yeah, I always wanted to go to college. I think I wanted to have the opportunity to just network with people and, you know, take my running to a different level. I was only gonna go to a school where I could run- and that would be Division one. I only wanted to run Division one.

I didn't really care about like majors. Because I wasn't- I was very unsure what I wanted to do. I was thinking, like, just along the lines of business, but I didn't really care. I think it was solely based on running, which is kind of an immature decision, you know, looking back on it... I honestly thought [the college decision] was pretty smooth process... I think we all knew I was basically gonna go to [university], but I just had to make that decision on my own. And I did.

He wasn't concerned with what he would major in, there were no specific goals for after college. He describes the decision-making process in the same way as do others who faithfully align, as being easy and without conflict or question.

Marcy and Hunter present two variations on faithful alignment. Marcy's faith largely stems from her experiences in school, and Hunter made the decision to attend college with faith that this decision would lead to positive long-term career and financial outcomes. Unlike Marcy who never considered anything different, Hunter worked in construction, so he did consider alternatives. But even without knowing exactly what he wanted to do, he equated college with

non-construction and believed college would lead to better outcomes. This is foundational to the kind of life he's seeking.

The ease with which Hunter reports making the decision to go to college, as a "smooth process" is similar to how Marcy talks about it. She says, "I got my financial aid package from [university]. And I was like, I'm going to [university]. See you there." They both express faith in the institution of college but the role of college is different in their lives. For Hunter, college is the necessary first step in a long-term plan. But for Marcy, college is the plan. For both, once the decision was made and the commitment to go to college was in place, it was like they had stepped on a conveyor belt. Once you're on it, the hard work is done. But often there is little information on how it all works or on alternatives or how to navigate the end of college when opportunities may or may not be available or accessible.

### *Shannon*

Shannon is from a small town not far from the large university campus where she goes to school. She returns home often to be with her large, tight-knit family. Brothers, sisters, in-laws and friends gather often for vacations, holidays and other celebrations, as is evidenced by the pictures covering the walls of the small living room where we met. I sat on the floor with her cat and geriatric dog while she curled up on the couch and told me the story of every photo on the wall, going one by one around the room. Many stories feature her mother, who died when Shannon was 18 years old, just before she started college. As the youngest sibling, and the only one still living at home, Shannon has taken over a bigger role in her family. She talks about cooking big Sunday night dinners for everyone using her mom's recipes, making her dad's lunches during the week and keeping up the house. It's clear before the first question is asked

that Shannon's commitment is to her family, home, and the community that she has no plans on leaving.

Shannon also went to college with the expectation that it would lead to positive outcomes. Similar to Marcy and Hunter, this faith in an unspecified but positive reward made the college decision easy for her. Going to college was not a decision that required much discussion or debate in her family. She always knew she would go to college, and no one ever questioned the decision,

I don't think we ever really had a conversation. I think it was always just like, I'm going to college. Like it was- wasn't like a decision I needed to make.

Like Hunter and Marcy, Shannon went to college with no specific major or career in mind. She talked about how she always liked liking school and always knew that college was her goal, even as far back as elementary school. She described planning for college as a "profession."

Education has always been big for me. Even in elementary school, I was always like, buying extra math books. Like, that was just a profession. And even in like high school, I did, like, all the extra activities and like, worked extra hard, like, honor society, because college was the goal.

This is an interesting contrast; the decision to go to college was easy and required barely any discussion, but the planning process was thorough and something she was very engaged in. She referred to "all the extra activities," that the school provided and that she engaged in as a means to get into college. For Shannon, like Marcy, college was the goal. It is not reported as a means to an end. She talks about how planning for college was a "profession" which suggests that she is developing an identity as a college student and organizing the activities in her life in a cohesive way toward this goal. Shannon was also searching for a certain kind of college experience, something she could not find at a two-year college,



I wanted to be on campus because I want to get that experience. I know a lot of people around here will go [to the local technical college] for a couple of years first and then go to- finish out school, but I wanted to be on campus. So that was important.

This similar to what Marcy said about wanting to go to a college that had sports and research, despite not being an athlete or engaging in research, further evidence suggesting that the strength of the faith that people have in CFA is tied to their alignment with an ideal college archetype. College is not only a dominant life course pathway with which people align their personal narratives because of the positive outcomes it promises, but also for the promised experience of college and the sense that if college is experienced in the right way or traditional way, it will lead to better outcomes. This is not to say their alignment with College for All is not without agency and deliberation, college aligns with who they want to be and the lives they imagine for themselves.

### *Hailey*

Hailey lives in a small town with her mother who she is very close to. Her mother works multiple jobs and takes pride in the fact that she has been able to support Hailey and send her to college. But she clearly wants better for Hailey and firmly believes that it's especially important for a woman to become financially independent and that college is the way to guarantee that. They moved to this state together from Hartford, Connecticut when Hailey was in elementary school. It's a place they had family and visited on vacations so made sense when they wanted to leave Hartford. But Hailey recalls the culture shock she experienced when she first arrived,

I remember walking in, and it was just, everyone was white. And I was confused. I didn't know if that was the whole group, or if everyone was there, and then they, you know, started talking and said, you know, Alright, everyone, we're ready. And I realized that this was everyone in my class and just, just, there's no diversity at all. It was just- it was shocking to me.

Hailey's experience in her community was largely marked by her experiences with friends and family, at school and with cheerleading, which she describes as "like a rollercoaster... a lot of high-low emotions." We met for our interviews at a park in her hometown where she and her friends spent their free time in high school.

Hailey describes making the decision to go to college to ensure her financial independence. She decided to go to college because of faith in that outcome, and this faith is shared and was possibly messaged to her by her mother, who talks about how getting a college degree is the first step. The goal is to "... get the degree and then see what happens after that." She continues,

I just assumed that I knew that- that was the right thing for her to get a bachelor's degree to be financially independent.

Hailey thinks of college as the "bare minimum" that she needs to ensure positive outcomes, despite conceding the possibility that it isn't necessarily a fit for everyone, including her,

I do believe that there are some people that are meant to go to school, meant to go to college and those that are not- and I don't know if I was really meant to just because the academics is not something I excel in. So, no goals or anything, just kind of getting through and graduating and that's kind of- my family's behind me, like my mom is kind of, you know, like, I know, you struggle with this, and you made it to your senior year. That's, that's for you- that's an accomplishment. And so that is my goal to just graduate and just make it through... It doesn't really feel like an accomplishment though, just because it does feel like you know, when you go to college, it's, that's kind of the bare minimum.

This is another variation in faithful alignment. Hailey's mother seems to be nudging her in a direction that she may or may not have gone herself. Her mother may believe that what she's doing as a parent is the right thing because she believes the right thing for Hailey to do is go to college. Hailey is the recipient or audience to her mother's faith in CFA. Hailey may believe that because her mother is an authority, if she believes in this pathway so strongly, then she must be

right. This is similar to Marcy's faith in the school that presented college to her as the preferred pathway before she could ever consider an alternative.

Hailey considers college to be foundational to succeed in life, even though she has always struggled academically and believes college isn't for everyone - maybe not even for her. This reveals another twist on the idea of faithful alignment. She has faith that, by going to college, she can be something more than she thinks she is now. She believes that if she fits herself into this mold, she will be successful. She's aligning personal and master narratives by talking about how some people aren't meant for college, and she may be one of those people, but she went anyway. She leans on faith and the support of her family and others. Her decision informed by her mother's faith and her own faith in the outcomes that college promises.

### ***Faithful Alignment: Summary***

Several participants and their families describe the decision to attend college with a sense of faith in the promise of the master narrative, or a *faithful alignment* with the CFA master narrative. Their interviews reflect a strong faith or trust in the idea that college, despite the expense and the difficulty, is a necessary first step to achieve success in life. This message is internalized by individuals but also reinforced by family, school, and community. A common theme among these participants and their families that college is the foundation of a successful life. This reflects a "rational optimism" of college (Ovink, 2016). It also casts the alternative as negative, if you don't go to college, you're "starting closer to the bottom."

Faith in the promise of college came from several different sources. For Marcy, it came from her early experiences in school. For Hailey, it came from her mother. For others, it just seemed to be in the air and was barely discussed, as was the case for Shannon. We know master

narratives circulate in communities, but this language is vague in the literature on master narratives. This study provides evidence to add to this literature because these participants are talking about different sources of the same message. The stories of these individuals also show variation on the role of college in the lives of young people. For Hunter, college is the first step in a long-term plan that he has for his life. But for others, college is the goal.

Another aspect of the college-going decision that several individuals talked about is the type of experience they're seeking. Several participants mentioned that they were seeking a "D1", or Division 1-type of experience in college. Marcy cited this as a reason she chose to attend this university. Yet Marcy doesn't play sports or participate in research. Antonio, a senior, also talked about wanting a "D1 experience" but he doesn't play sports or engage in research either. Hunter talks about wanting to run at a D1 school. And Shalya talks about wanting a "traditional" campus experience which included going to a 4-year school and living on campus. This shows how CFA as a master narrative is more than a career path, it's a value and an ideology, an aesthetic. Many young people have a picture of what college will be like; big sporting events, dorm life, going to classes with your friends, late nights cramming for tests, parties, pizza boxes strewn on the floor. The image of college life is engrained in American culture, a familiar scene in TV, movies and other media.

Engagement with a CFA master narrative is not described the same by everyone. But that doesn't mean other types of alignment don't involve faith or trust. Other participants had to navigate the post-secondary decision space differently, with different considerations and based on varying and often competing messages leading them – or requiring them to navigate (and create) different post-secondary pathways.

### ***Hybrid Alignment: Alice and Linda***

*Faithful alignment* was defined as aligning one's personal narrative with the life-course pathway that is prescribed by the CFA master narrative because of a belief in the rewards that this pathway promises. These individuals chose to attend college not primarily because they wanted to pursue a specific career or major but because they believe that college is "foundational", and the "bare minimum" needed to be successful in life.

I define *hybrid alignment* as individuals constructing a unique narrative which combines different aspects of personal, alternative, and master narratives in a way that best coordinates their goals, interests, and circumstances. Hybridity in literature is used to describe a style of writing that blends two or more genres such as fiction and non-fiction, poetry and prose. These hybrid forms of writing and expression cannot be categorized as one or another, they are fusions of multiple forms. Hybrid genres cross boundaries and categories, blending genres to create something unique and different.

For the purposes of this study, as it pertains to understanding the processes by which individuals craft a unique life course pathway which cannot be characterized as strictly aligning with a master or alternative narrative, we can say that they have *hybridized* the CFA master narrative to craft a unique pathway. These individuals cannot be categorized as aligning faithfully with one narrative. They talk about the decision to attend college differently than faithful aligners. They do not assume success or deem college to be foundational or necessary for success in life. Although they may believe this is true, they did not give this as a reason to go to college. Hybridity also describes someone who aligns with a CFA master narrative, but not perfectly, or in the "right" way or in the expected or "normal" timeframe. There is no single

archetype for hybrid alignment. I will present the stories of two participants who I characterize as hybridizing post-secondary pathways.

### *Alice*

Alice grew up in a small town in the northwest part of the state bordering Vermont. Her family moved from Connecticut when Alice was young. They were looking for a smaller, safer community which shared their Christian values. Alice grew up in a very close community and close family. She attended a small Christian school where her mother taught. We met at her home and sat on her back deck overlooking a large red barn, acres of farmland and a newly constructed greenhouse. Alice knew that she wanted to go to college for as long as she can remember. She is extremely driven and started taking courses towards her associate degree before enrolling in the 4-year university because she wanted to get a head start on her requirements. She has a younger brother who she is close to and wants to be a role model for. She regularly comes home from college to attend his sporting events. Staying close to home was a major factor in Alice's post-secondary decision, which made the state school, less than two hours away, an easy choice,

College was definitely from- probably from like, third grade on college was like my life goal. I really wanted to get into a good college, and I wanted to just like- I've always loved studying, I was like, I was really excited that like I'd have a lifestyle like, based off of like, like learning things where like your lifestyle is sort of like going to class like that's all society expects of you. So I was like, super excited.

Although faithful aligners also want to go to college, their reasons are more focused on the outcome, the results, they view college as a foundation for life which should result in jobs and other opportunities. But for Alice, she dreamed of college for the sake of college. She views

college as a place she wants to be in, not college for the job it provides or life outcomes it promises *after* it's over.

I guess it was just a genuine like, I just wanted to learn things. And most of the people I admire in my life, they're super well versed, and they can like pull random references out of like, extensive literature that I could only dream of. And so I was like, I want to be like them, like most of my, like, role models. And like heroes, I guess were just like, really well read and I want it to be like that. And I just, I guess I just want to like, I want to get to a point where I could like, come up with like witty things. I was like- college is the place to go.

But another thread pulling at her which she is committed to in her immediate and long-term life course is that of family and community, which amount to commitment to place in both geographic- and identity-salient ways. Many people in her community get married and start families young. This is the normative pathway for her and her peers. She was interested in college from a young age but is also committed to community and her own desire to start a family. She was engaged to be married before she started college. She is planning a wedding and building a home in this community. She talks about navigating these competing tensions,

You have the like- you're going to college, and you're getting out of [town]. And now it's like, not to like talk about like, getting married. But now it's like, you're getting married, and you're like staying in [town]. And there's like, a big pressure, [town]'s, like, a little bit- it's, like, less traditional than its surroundings. But it's definitely I get like, settle down, and have kids and like, I'm fine with that. I'm, like, happy with that. But there's a very strong pressure to and I've seen friends like leave, because they didn't like that pressure of, find the husband, settle down, have babies. They aren't as into that... they kind of fled the complex.

Although others have “fled the complex” and rejected the pressure to “settle down,” Alice has hybridized these competing interests so that to her, they're not competing, *it's one road*. Alice is hybridizing personal commitments with a master narrative of CFA. She is both staying and leaving. For her, there is no identity dilemma because she is satisfying different interests which may appear to be competing but to her, they are not. She is aligning with both to

create a pathway which is part master narrative, part alternative and part personal – a unique hybrid narrative.

She still wants to remain part of her community, and in many ways, she does align with cultural norms in her community. She is engaged to be married and building a home with her fiancé. But in some ways, going to college makes her an outsider in her community. She talks about being teased, albeit lightheartedly, by her peers. But she also plays into the joke herself. In this way, she is both a part of and different from her community at the same time,

I got like one text from one of my friends Amanda. She got married and she said, like, how's the nerd stuff going at college? And I was like, and I like sent her like a Shakespeare quote. And she just said like, a confused like, but like it was all in jest and like, so they're definitely like, I was always like, but like the little weird, nerdy one. And so they're always like, how are you doing? Like how's Shakespeare- like that's the joke because I'm the English major. So they're like how Shakespeare and I'll send them a quote and they'll be like, thanks... There's this running joke that when you leave [the high school Alice attended], you don't actually leave because you're going to come back and teach... “I think it definitely, um. I chose to be an English teaching major because I want to teach in [town].

By characterizing how people view her as a “joke,” she’s making fun of herself. But by being part of the joke, she’s also remaining part of the group that’s doing the joking. This shows how Alice is putting different narratives to her own use to suit her personal goals and taking up only the parts of each narrative that suit her. This also shows how important the multi-sited aspect of this study is as Alice is able to look at herself from different perspectives and find humor in it. She is comfortable with the tensions that other individuals might find more difficult to navigate. Her story also shows how binary representations of life choices in the form of rigid master narratives do not always capture people’s experiences and are an insufficient way of characterizing people’s life choices.

Alice is hybridizing life course narratives and expectations of home and community and CFA by going to college while simultaneously building a home and planning a wedding. For



Alice, there doesn't need to be one path that she follows at the expense of an alternative. She wants to be part of both, and she has structured her life in such a way to allow her to engage in both narratives, to follow parallel pathways. This represents a clear case of hybridizing narratives to suit one's own goals and life project.

### *Linda*

Linda is from a rural community in the northeast that is in the middle of a lot of things but not close to anything. Even her high school was 45 minutes from her home. She felt disconnected from the community when she lived here and has been even more detached since she started college. "I was about probably 18, when I realized, like, in the community wise, that I didn't really have anywhere that I fit." Our first interview was in the parking lot of Dunkin Donuts. The second interview took place in a different parking lot in town with her sister who similarly feels detached and disconnected from the community, their collective memories are mostly negative here Linda and I set up camping chairs behind the open bed of a pickup truck where her sister sat, legs dangling over the back.

Linda's story is one of adversity and resilience. Her mother passed away when she was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and her father and brother both had serious illnesses. She was diagnosed with a chronic life-threatening illness as a teenager. Linda attended college, and in one sense aligned with faith in the outcomes assumed with CFA. Like others, she seeks a secure financial future and believes college is necessary to achieve that goal.

So I had known from ... like a really young age that I wanted to go to college. And I didn't know how to do it. Nobody in my immediate family had ever really gone... I watched my cousin go through college and become, I don't want to say successful, but more, more better off than we were. And I always thought that college was going to guarantee me kind of financial security, essentially.

Embedded in the CFA narrative is a right or traditional way to do college, going straight after high school, finishing in four years, living on campus. But Linda took an alternate route, going to community college first. This was partly due to finances, partly so she could figure out what she wanted to do first, and partly because she did not get accepted into university on her first or second attempt. Many participants who faithfully aligned with CFA report not knowing what they wanted to do in college, what to major in, what career to pursue, but they had faith that once there, they would figure it out. For Linda, an alternative route was in some ways imposed on her by the fact that she didn't get accepted on her first or second application,

I didn't get into [university] on the first try. And or the second one, for that matter. It took three tries to get there. So I chose a community college that I could afford.

But in some ways, this aligned with her desire to know what she wanted to do with her degree before going to university. Like Alice, Linda also faced competing messages about alternative pathways to college,

So like, pretty much every, like my siblings, and my parents were already married by now. So there's like a really big emphasis on, you know, why aren't you married? Why haven't you started a family yet? Why is your education so important?

Unlike Alice, Linda had to justify her decisions about going to college and her career aspirations of working in a museum as an anthropologist to her father,

... my dad is always constantly reassuring me that anthropology is not a real job. And that whatever I do, essentially isn't going to be a real job because I'm not doing a physical job. No physical labor means it's not a job... I kind of push back a little bit here and there, because I'm like, "well, you're the one that has always told me to use my brain and not my back." Because he is disabled because he was a construction worker. He used his back and he's always said that I wanted to go back and go to school. And but yet, my job will not be a real job.

She is aligning with CFA, and in some ways, it is *faithful* because she sees this as helping her have a better life than her siblings and securing financial security. In some ways, it's *utilitarian* because she sees a very specific career outcome. But unlike Alice who had access to

multiple and equally appealing pathways. Linda struggled for access to college while feeling pushed by her family towards a life – which prioritizes family and marriage over education – that she did not want. Linda experiences this tension different from Alice, who feels a similar pull toward an alternative pathway to college that values marriage and family over education but whose personal narrative aligns with alternative as well as the master narrative. To Alice, they're not contradictory messages.

Linda's pathway cannot be categorized as aligning faithfully with one narrative. She had to create a hybrid narrative. I have defined *hybrid alignment* for the purposes of this study as, "individuals constructing a unique hybrid narrative which combines or mixes different aspects of personal, alternative, and master narratives in a way that best coordinates individual goals, interests, and circumstances." Linda is hybridizing the CFA master narrative by mixing it with her personal narrative, which alters the master narrative significantly. Master narratives prescribe specific events happening in specific order. Linda's path to college has been dramatically different than what people imagine when they plan to go to college.

Alice is hybridizing alternate and master narratives through the development of a unique personal narrative. Linda is hybridizing, adapting or even *redefining* the dominant CFA master narrative to suit her personal goals and circumstances. Linda's story of hybridity highlights the rigidity of master narratives. CFA implies doing college a certain way which includes going directly after high school, finishing in four years and living on campus (Ovink, 2016), a linear pathway which she did not take. Her story also highlights the fact that master narratives, although they are dominant and expected, may not be accessible to everyone. Linda had to fight to get to college, the decision within her family was not easy, the pathway was not smooth. She's hybridizing the CFA narrative by starting late, going to community college first, not living on

campus, and being a different age than her peers. Her story is one of pushing against the rigidity and re-writing the master narrative.

### ***Hybrid Alignment: Summary***

Hybridizing is unique to the individual which is why we see different expressions of a hybrid narrative in the stories of Alice and Linda. They both aligned with a CFA master narrative to some degree, but their reasons for going to college were not primarily based in faith in the promise of a general outcome or belief that college is foundational for the rest of their lives. Both Alice and Linda faced competing expectations from family, peers and the communities in which they grew up, but they experienced these messages differently.

Alice aligns with CFA *as well as* family and community norms of marrying young and starting a family. She faced different pathways, but both were compatible with her life plans. Her hybrid is a combination or blend of different narratives with which she aligned simultaneously. Linda faced competing messages as well as barriers to college, highlighting the rigidity and inaccessibility of some master narratives and the fact that alignment is not always easy even if the narrative is dominant and expected.

These two stories also demonstrate the different ways that narrative hybridity can come about in the life course. In some cases, it can be the individual choosing to mix competing narratives, as is the case with Alice. Her hybridity is a win-win. For Linda, she didn't see a clear pathway in front of her and the dominant CFA narrative was difficult to access. Hers is a story of hybridizing to make the best of a lose-lose circumstance as she faced compounding negative life circumstances. Hybridity describes someone who aligns with a CFA master narrative, but not perfectly, or in the "right" way or in the expected or "normal" timeframe. When someone's

personal circumstances alter the original pathway and force it to veer in a different direction, even temporarily, this has implications, as seen in Linda's story. Hybridity is not only something individuals engage in when things are going well, and they have several options like Alice did. Hybridity can also be something that is imposed as a demand, as is the case with Linda.

### ***Utilitarian Alignment: Greg and Julia***

There are two students who do not align with a CFA master narrative primarily because of faith in positive outcomes or the belief in the anticipated opportunities that a college degree ideally leads to. Nor are they rewriting existing pathways or defining new ones. Participants in this category made the decision to attend college with a very clear goal and specific outcome that they expect college will lead to. These individuals knew what they wanted to study before they began college. They had an interest in something specific and chose college deliberately to reach a specific outcome, this is *utilitarian alignment*. They each chose a specific school for well-articulated reasons which largely correspond to academics. They chose a school for its major, classes and reputation in a certain field. This is not to say that they made this decision without any faith that pursuing this goal would lead to desired outcomes. And it's not to say that those who align with faith in the outcomes associated with college or those who hybridized pathways did so without a sense of direction or purpose. They most definitely did. But those who align with a utilitarian purpose were driven by a specific goal which guided their post-secondary decision making.

I met Greg at a local coffee shop in the center of town where he likes to study. He talked to the staff there by name and they all seemed to know him. He told me he prefers patronizing local businesses where he knows the owner rather than going to more corporate institutions like

Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts, and he draws distinctions between the people who get their coffee there, arguing that blue collar workers are more likely to go to Dunkin Donuts while white collar workers prefer Starbucks. He patronizes neither.

He explained that he never felt pressure to go to college because people in his family were largely successful without following this pathway. He talks about an uncle who was a truck driver, others who entered the military or did well working in the trades. One family member had his own construction company. His mother is a nurse. Because of his family background, the CFA master narrative did not exert the same kind of pressure or influence on him as it did many others,

I thought about [college] as an abstract concept, but not really, as a ‘Oh, hey, here's a plan that I could go and do.’ And that's not saying like, I thought I couldn't go to college, it was just something I really hadn't put thought in.

In fact, college was one of the only options that he *didn't* consider after high school because he didn't see people in his family follow that pathway. His mother is a nurse, and his father was in the military. Several family members were successful doing other things such as owning businesses, driving trucks or working as electricians or in other trades. College wasn't “shoved down his throat” according to his mother. Greg agrees,

I never saw like the college stuff. So I think that that was just kind of the only option that I wasn't normally exposed to.

But in high school, several teachers recognized that he had a strong aptitude for science, physics in particular. They curated this interest and skill and encouraged him that higher education was something he should consider. He loved physics and wanted to pursue this as his career. He chose to attend university after considerable deliberation and research that was driven by a specific area of study,

[University name] is very, very involved in undergraduate research. So that was a, you know, they were a state school so they're way cheaper. They offered me a lot of assistance. And they're also really good in their research, like one of the best in the country. So a huge driver for me wanting to go there.

Greg did not make the decision to go to college primarily because of faith in the idea that college would lead to positive outcomes later in his life. Nor did he hybridize multiple narratives or pathways. He chose college because he's looking at a specific goal and college is required to reach that goal. This is *utilitarian alignment*. This isn't rational optimism about college (Ovink, 2017), it's simply a rational approach to decision making. This may be how people imagine the college decision is made, but likely rarely is.

I met Julia in a park in the center of the small town she grew up in. Our on-campus interviews took place in the bleachers overlooking the track where she spent a lot of her time running for the [college] team. Julia has a long-term goal and college is a means to that end. She reported no difficult conversations, tensions, or conflicts about this decision or where to go, "I mean, luckily for me, I figured out junior in high school that I wanted to do nursing." For Julia, the decision to go to college was not made primarily because of a faith in a general outcome but with one specific goal in mind, becoming a nurse. Her mother works in health care so it's a field she is familiar with. Her father works in advanced auto mechanics. They both have 2-year degrees and successful careers. Like Greg, she did not believe college was foundational for success in life especially because of the experiences of her family and what she had been exposed to. She said, "It's cool that you can still see you don't necessarily need a four or five- or six-year degree to be successful." So CFA did not exert the same degree of influence. She went to college because she had a very specific career in mind which requires a college degree.

If those who align with a CFA narrative *faithfully* attend college with a general goal in mind, those who align with a *utilitarian* purpose go to college with a very specific goal in mind. Greg and Julia both made a college decision not based on rational optimism or because they sought general outcomes but for the purpose of studying something very specific, for a very rational reason.

***Finding 2 Summary: Three modes of engagement with a CFA master narrative***

All participants presented here align with a CFA master narrative but they each came to this decision differently, they engaged with the CFA master narrative in different ways and under different pressures and expectations. They expressed different types of alignment or engagement with a CFA master narrative and different reasons for aligning.

For those who align with a sense of faith in the promise of college, college is the goal. They are not looking past college. They have faith that by the time they get there, they will achieve positive, albeit unspecific outcomes, that getting a degree is what matters. They are seeking a certain kind of life outcome or experience and they believe college is a foundational part of that. Hybrid aligners are also deliberate, but their decision was more complex, they had more factors to consider, and more justification was required because CFA was not the dominant narrative in their family or community. As such, they blended or took pieces and parts from different narratives, or they aligned imperfectly, taking an alternate route to the same destination. For utilitarian aligners, college is the means to a very specific end. They are looking past college to a longer-term goal or purpose, and this goal is very specific. College will allow them to reach this goal.



The next section focuses on the college experience and future outlook relative to different types of alignment. *What are the different experiences associated with different types of alignment with master narratives? Does the college experience and future outlook differ among participants who engage with master narratives differently?* Finding #3 will address these questions.

### **Finding #3: Ambivalence and Autonomy: The College Experience and Future Outlook of Faithful, Hybrid and Utilitarian aligners.**

As stated in finding #2, I identified three different types of alignment with a CFA master narrative, *faithful, hybrid and utilitarian*. This finding focused on how the college decision was made, various factors, considerations and family and community context, and was presented biographically.

Finding #3 is presented thematically as it relates to participants' thoughts and feelings about their futures *after* college. Although there is some overlap, there are clear patterns. Some students were optimistic and expressed a sense of autonomy and agency regarding their future while others felt ambivalent or even anxious about their lives after college. Those who reported feeling more positive were hybrid and utilitarian aligners and those who expressed more anxiety about the future were those who aligned faithfully. Table 2 is a summary of finding #3,

**Table 2**

*Finding #3: Ambivalence and Autonomy*

Ambivalent and Anxious			Autonomous and Agentic		
Name	Alignment Type	Key Quote about the future	Name	Alignment Type	Key Quote about the future
Ashley	Faithful	"I don't want to say like impending doom.	Janet	Hybrid	"I think 30-year-old me is going to be completely

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		Almost like, like, it's happening.”			satisfied with the educational track that I went on.”
Kaci	Faithful	“I feel like I'm on a train that's just going to end in about five months, and I'm gonna fall into an ocean and then I don't know what to do.”	Lydia	Hybrid	“It's finally kind of kicking in that I'm going to reach the goal that I've worked so hard for, which makes me super excited.”
Shayla	Faithful	“I guess I was kind of expecting there to be like, all these opportunities, and then they're just like, wasn't. And that was kind of terrifying.”	Gavin	Utilitarian	“I guess, I guess a bit of like, nervous energy... I am hopeful for it”
Tyler	Faithful	“At the end of the day I just want what's best for me. And it's easier said than done...what is best for me. Right? But, you know, I wouldn't be able to, like, live with myself, in a way if I pass up on this opportunity.	Kaitlyn	Utilitarian	“I'm so like, excited for graduation... I feel prepared to be done with school and just move on... I've always kind of been, like, satisfied with my decision to do nursing school. So, that's been good for me.”

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### **Ambivalent and Anxious: Faithful Alignment**

Several participants reported feeling a sense of control over their lives because they made the decision to attend college. But when it came to the next step after college, they did not report the same sense of control over their lives. Of course, many college students are unsure of what they will do after college and this uncertainty can lead to feelings of anxiety as they approach graduation. But the in-depth, multi-sited design of this study allowed me to step back and make connections between individual interviews and see a larger story. There was a difference in the way that those who aligned faithfully with a CFA master narrative talked about the future compared to those who aligned in different ways.

Marcy, who aligned faithfully with CFA, had a positive college experience. Her sister went to the same university before her, so Marcy had considerable insight on what to expect. She started college with a high degree of familiarity with college in general and with this specific university,

I feel like a lot of people come to college, and they're, like, worried about a lot of things. But I was just like, good to go. Just ready to have a good time. I think it's mostly like my sister too like, just seeing her like, go through it. I'm like, okay, like, that's what I should expect. Like, that's how it works. That makes sense. (Marcy)

Marcy loved college, made friends easily and did well academically, but as the end of college approached, she began to panic. She reported feeling unprepared for this next phase,

I think I just, I feel like I needed college to do what I want to do. Like, I don't know, I always knew I was gonna go to college just like, I'm like, I don't know, cuz I'm stressing about what I want to do in the future. So you're just catching me at- a very confused time... I feel like I'm on a train that's just going to end in about five months, and I'm gonna fall into an ocean and then I don't know what to do.

Marcy is worried about the next steps after college. Her experience shows how the CFA master narrative is not a roadmap, nor a complete set of instructions. College is the end of the CFA story. So far, Marcy has aligned with expectations and had a positive experience. But that is changing now as she approaches the end of college. It's not only that she's terrified about finding a job, but she also feels like her story has no next chapter and that doesn't align with who she is, leaving her feeling like she's about to "fall into the ocean."

College was placed in front of Marcy as the preferred option by institutions and family members that she trusts. But now she has to make the next decision on her own without a clear pathway or model to follow. She is feeling the pressure of making her own decisions.

I feel like you have to do a lot for yourself if that makes sense. So like if you want to do something, you have to go out and find it and then do it. It's not just kind of like hey, you should do this and then you do it, so I feel like that's been harder is like finding the opportunities and the things to do, you have to like go out and like look for it, as opposed to it just being like, here you go.

It could be that faithful alignment leads to a sense of being on a road to nowhere. It could also be that this feels like false agency. College was presented to her by her middle school, and the decision was made. Now she has to make a decision with no pathway to follow. Her story doesn't have a next chapter which may create a crisis of identity that's much deeper than feeling like you're in the wrong major or can't find a job.

Similar to Marcy, Shannon is feeling a sense of panic and anxiety about her future and is questioning whether college was "worth it,"

I guess I was kind of expecting there to be like, all these opportunities, and then they're just like, wasn't. And that was kind of terrifying. Because it's like, I don't want to get out of school and not be able to find a job. Right? What do you do then like, waitress? Like, I just went to school for four years? You know what I mean? And that's, like, kind of terrifying to me.

I think I just feel unsettled because I'm so unsure of where I go after this. And I don't like that like uncertainty. Because my whole life has been like, okay, like, you go to high school next, and then you're gonna go to college and you're gonna get a degree and then I'm like, Okay, well, then they say you get a job, but like, I'm not seeing the whole job fairy. Like, I'm like, I know the next step is job, but I'm not really seeing one. So that's terrifying.

Both Marcy and Shannon talk about how they expected there to be opportunities after college in the same way that college was a positive and accessible option after high school. In this sense, aligning with CFA, a narrative with a promise that it cannot keep, may leave young people feeling a false sense of control or false agency over their lives. Unquestioningly aligning with the master narrative may have left them with a false sense of control which is now becoming apparent as they face the next decision point. This is one example of the lived experience of alignment with a master narrative.

But having a job and a plan for after graduation does not alleviate uncertainty about life after college. Hunter already had a job offer in New York City in the fall of his senior year, more

than six months before graduation. But he doesn't seem excited about his future, he seems ambivalent, like he's taking this job and leaving home because it's something he has to do. He has a picture of the kind of life he wants and a job in NYC aligns with that picture of a professional job and a stable financial life. Hunter also has a strong mobility imperative which influences his decision,

There was a family friend of ours who lives in [town]. And I think I'm drawn to like his professional background because I think it kind of identifies with what I want to do- kind of aligns with what I want to do and where I will be going like he, for example, worked in Wall Street for a number of years in the early 2000s- like financial district and it was very successful and is a good like successful family man today and I aspire to be of course be a family man... Like do my time in the city, be successful, I think that's where I'm going right now.

Hunter's job is in New York City, he talks about "doing his time" in the city. This prison metaphor suggests that he is not entirely excited about this next phase of his life. Even though he has a job, and a plan to move away, he's still reporting a sense of ambivalence about his next steps.

I guess I don't know, if like New York's a 12-month gig, six months, long term. You know, I think it's really up to me. But I guess I'm kind of worried about that, being away, and you know, not knowing anyone and not having any friends in New York.

Marcy and others express concern about finding a job, ranging from worry to outright panic. Not having a job could explain their anxiety about the future, but that doesn't explain everyone. Hunter has the outcome that everyone seems to want, a job in his field, but he is not optimistic that he will be there for long and is already thinking about coming home when he puts a possible limit on his time in the city. Instead of expressing excitement, it seems like he has to convince himself that this is what he wants to do, he talks as though he's forcing himself down this pathway,

But yeah, the thing- at the end of the day I just want what's best for me. And it's easier said than done, you know, like, I like- what is best for me. Right? But um, you know, I

thought, like, I wouldn't be able to, like, live with myself, in a way if I pass up on this opportunity. And I don't, I wouldn't say it was a risk at all. But it's like, clearly it's out of my comfort zone.

Hunter is driven by the idea that being successful, achieving in life, growing, means leaving his comfort zone. This could also be seen as another type of master narrative, the idea that you need to be uncomfortable, and this will lead to better outcomes. He loves his hometown but feels like he has to leave to grow,

I think, like a mantra that I have is like our discomfort leads to growth. So it's like, I just want to be able to grow and challenge myself.

Hunter's decisions are driven by a vision of a life he wants, but he believes he has to be uncomfortable, to make concessions, to leave his community in order to achieve his goals. It could be that he is conceding where he would like to live in order to achieve his goals. Moving to New York and working in finance represents an identity he aspires to. He's swallowing a pill, "doing his time." Hunter may be conceding part of who he is because he feels like he's doing what he should be doing, leaving him feeling ambivalent about his immediate future. His story suggests that having a job and a plan does not automatically put an end to concerns about the transition out of college.

### **Autonomous and Agentic: Hybrid & Utilitarian Alignment**

#### ***Alice and Linda: Hybrid Alignment***

Most young people in Alice's home community either stay home and start families young, or "flee the complex" because of cultural pressures. She is managing to do both, to align with two competing narratives. She is building a home in the community with her fiancé who is also from the same town, but she is also going to college and planning a career. She is the one in her community who is doing something different, aligning with an alternative,

With a lot of my high school friends, we are all really close knit. And actually, most of them are like married. So they all got married really young. And so most of the ones who have gotten married, we've kind of like lost connection. Just because they're like really busy. A lot of them have had kids too. So like, they just they got married and then they had kids which is, good for them. And then um, and so like they're like at like, completely different stages of life. And then I'm actually the only one out of my class who went to a secular college. That's just what like everyone at home calls it because most of the kids who went to the Christian school are supposed to go to Christian colleges.

For Alice, there are two pathways available but there doesn't need to be a "winner," she has structured her life in such a way to allow her to engage in both narratives, to follow parallel pathways. This is a hybrid narrative. And this pathway she's created has led her to feel a sense of satisfaction with her choices and optimism about her future.

I think 30-year-old me would be very happy that I did pursue education in college, like I think 30-year-old me is going to be completely satisfied with the educational track that I went on.

If I just continued straight from where I'm going now, I think that I probably could be in the [town] area. And then I would love to be teaching like middle school, high school, then like maybe starting like the Ph.D. application process, I'd like to have a couple of kids, I just like to be like really involved in the community, I want to get really involved in my church. It's kind of like that stereotypical, like I settled.

I feel like it's completely coming together like for the first time in my life, I'm like, this is the picture and I'm really excited because I've never like felt anything like that but it's also like too good to be true feeling so I'm trying to not like be wicked optimistic about it.

Alice has been able to weave together personal, alternative and master narratives into a life path in which she feels empowered, optimistic and agentic. In constructing a hybrid narrative, she's found a sense of empowerment, autonomy, and felt agency.

After struggling to get into college, Linda had a positive experience, despite feeling like she's in a different stage of life than her peers because of everything she's gone through. Like Alice, she also feels optimistic about her future. She wants to support others in the same way she felt supported,

I'm looking forward to- let's see, teaching others along the way. So I not only want to learn for myself, I want to learn and be able to convey that knowledge to other people to maybe make them feel like they're not alone.

She is optimistic about her future, her career, and the pathway she's on. She feels like things are opening up for her, "I'm looking at careers more now, rather than just an academic path." She trusts herself and her choices because they brought her to this place in her life. She is excited to finally be getting her degree after all it took for her to get there,

It's finally kind of kicking in that I'm going to reach the goal that I've worked so hard for, which makes me super excited. It makes me super appreciative that I've had the time and experiences that I've had- I definitely feel like this is a bigger like this is it- this is what I wanted- always wanted, kind of thing.

One of the defining features of hybrid alignment relates to agency, making choices and positioning moves intentionally. From Alice's perspective it may feel like she's writing a story for herself while Linda may feel like she's been dealt a difficult story and is making the best of it to suit her personal goals and aspirations. They're both hybridizing differently due to their life circumstances, and both have had to negotiate and imagine something different.

### ***Greg & Julia: Utilitarian Alignment***

Greg, who aligned with CFA for utilitarian purposes, is in a field in which graduate school is a common, if not necessary, next step. This is the biggest question he's facing as he looks to the end of college. But this is not an identity or existential crisis.

I guess, I guess a bit of like, nervous energy, I am hopeful for it. Um, but there's still a lot of unknown as to where my career is going to take me where I'm going to end up. Stuff like that. And so it's, it's I, I guess, a nervous excitement. .... If I look at, hey, here's all of my options for grad schools. Here's all the different places I could go go all the different things I could do. It feels like it's opening.



Julia, who like Greg, went to college to pursue a specific career, has a job in her field and is excited and eager to start the next phase of her life. College is part of a larger plan which is playing out as she'd hoped,

I'm ready to be done with school, I think I'm ready to kind of stop having to do work and study constantly. Get out into the real world... But yeah, I'm so like, excited for graduation... I feel prepared to be done with school and just move on...I've always kind of been, like, satisfied with my decision to do nursing school. So, that's been good for me, because I'm glad I never had that, like, 'Oh my god, what am I doing' moment?

Many young people who aligned with CFA with a sense of faith in promised outcomes are feeling ambivalent about the future after college, but hybrid aligners and utilitarian aligners are looking to the end of college not as an end, but the start of something else.

There is very little research on alignment with master narratives which could be because if someone is aligning, they are believed to be doing the "right" thing and should feel good about their lives. But this finding counters that idea, suggesting that aligning one's life course with dominant cultural master narratives may lead to a sense of false agency while curating one's own pathway may lead to a sense of control over one's life, and therefore, more autonomy and optimism about the future.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter focused on three areas of findings. Finding #1 demonstrates the ways in which participants are contending with and aligning with a CFA master narrative. Finding #2 identifies three different modes of engagement with master narratives, or three types of alignment, *faithful*, *hybrid* and *utilitarian*; Finding #3 discusses the different college experiences and future outlook associated with different types of engagement. Findings suggest that those who align with CFA for utilitarian purposes and those who construct hybrid narratives seem to

have a more positive and optimistic view of the path they are on now and their futures after college. Whether by choice or not, they have had to exert more control over their post-secondary pathways.

Among those who align with CFA with a belief in a certain kind of outcome, career or financial, they seem to experience college and their future with a sense of ambivalence at best, anxiety at worst. The decision to attend college may have been easier or made with less conflict or competing choices or options, but this may have removed a sense of control and agency from their lives which manifests upon the next decision point, the transition out of college.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This study examined the multisited and narratively organized experiences of engagement with master narratives among rural, first-generation college (RFGC) students. The study's methods and analytic approaches were biographic but not focused on life stories as an object of inquiry. Instead, biographical information was leveraged ethnographically, permitting nuanced contextual grounding across several conversations with participants.

Findings in chapter four indicated that College for All (CFA) was a predominant ideological and normative force in the lives of RFGC students and their families. I also identified several types of alignment with a CFA master narrative and related outcomes, attitudes, and feelings about the future. As the previous chapter discussed, findings suggest the presence of a dominant CFA master narrative and different modes of engagement. Some participants chose to attend college primarily based on a sense of faith in the promise of the CFA narrative. Others made the decision based on a strong desire to pursue a specific academic goal or career and others curated a unique pathway or stretched the boundaries and pushed against the rigidity of an existing narrative to better suit their personal aspirations and individual life circumstances, which I define as hybrid alignment.

Differences were also identified in the experiences of college and views of the future between the different modes of engagement. For example, those who aligned with CFA because of a sense of faith in its promised outcomes – mainly career and financial success – seem to experience college and their future planning with a sense of ambivalence at best, and anxiety at worst. For some, aligning one's life course with a dominant narrative seems to involve making concessions in terms of one's own preferences and values, which is a pattern that may be especially relevant to rural and other marginalized communities undergoing rapid economic and

cultural transitions. For others, alignment with dominant life course narratives is experienced as being on a road that, at its end, appears to have led to nowhere in particular. In this case, college graduation is approaching, and several participants are unsure what's next, leading to a sense of panic among some who fear an uncertain outcome after taking a pathway whose ideological strength would seem to all but guarantee success. Conversely, those individuals who aligned with CFA with a specific purpose or academic goal in mind feel more optimistic and certain about the path they're on. Similarly, those who hybridize, or craft post-secondary and life course pathways that span multiple and sometimes competing master narratives, may experience a sense of agency that is beneficial and talk about their future plans after college with a sense of independence and optimism.

In this chapter, I discuss these areas in detail, make connections to empirical and conceptual literature and discuss potential implications of these findings for schools, families, communities, and higher education. First, I review the original research questions and discuss how my findings address these questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. *What are the ideological resources (e.g., master narratives) that RFGC students and their families are engaging with as they plan for college?*

Findings suggest the presence of a strong CFA master narrative which is felt both by individuals and by their families. The roots of this message vary, coming from school, community, and family. It could be that aligning with CFA, a dominant master narrative, seems like an easy choice, not only because the path is institutionalized in the form of clear steps to take and the sense that one has made a "good choice" but also because participants did not feel as though they had adequate alternative options, or because the alternatives were construed as

negative. When presented with two options, individuals may align with what they perceive as the “better” pathway; however, what makes a particular pathway better than alternatives for a given person seems to have various explanations. The discrete types of alignment with the CFA master narrative in this study provide important evidence for what those explanations may be.

Alternatives to CFA were perceived to be limited by many participants and families that took part in this study, reduced to just two choices: college or work, a binary framework that many young people navigating the post-secondary decision-making space experience. Not going to college is an *alternative* narrative to the dominant CFA message but reports from RFGC students and families suggested that there is no clear pathway – logistical or normative. For some, entry into the workforce may be messaged as a choice to *not do something*. What does a “good life” look like that does not include college? Because there appear to be few clear success stories available as resources for those who don’t attend college, choosing this option requires justification and explanation. Several participants in this study talked about going to college explicitly to avoid the alternative pathway, or an uncertain pathway:

I know that like coming to college was good, because otherwise I was just going to be back home, working in some factory, which- don't want to do that. (Kelly)

Kelly didn’t know exactly what she wanted to do but believed that aligning with what was seen as the “better option” at least guaranteed a “non-factory” outcome. She equated not going to college with working in a factory. Similarly, Hunter equated not going to college with construction work,

I always hated construction. I can't even like, handle a power tool or anything, you know, barely a power toothbrush, so that was always out of the question. Anything like that, like electrical. So yeah, I always wanted to go to college... I still even like, work with my grandfather and his construction workers. And some of them like, like, don't get me wrong, like, they're great guys. Like, they're just not smart. And like, I don't want to live the lifestyle. I don't want to be like smoking cigarettes every 20 minutes or living paycheck to paycheck, or whatnot, or getting drunk every day.

Both Kelly and Hunter's statements may indicate more than simply a desire to avoid factory or construction work. In prior generations, factory work was commonplace in many rural communities but now, in many of these communities, this no longer exists as a widespread or even viable option. Similarly, the technology and building science sophistication involved in many construction trades is rapidly advancing, requiring workers and supervisors to innovate and master complex bodies of knowledge. Instead, these statements may indicate that messaging about modern workforce options in this state's rural communities is out of date with current realities and opportunities.

The strong normative force of the CFA master narrative may also function as an "othering" mechanism, in addition to obscuring accurate and updated messaging about post-secondary and life course alternatives. For example, Kelly's unspecified reference to "some factory" suggests that she, like Hunter, is rejecting more than just a possible career pathway. Said (1978) argues, originally in reference to *Orientalism*, that othered social groups are *made different* or even *made opposite* in the interest of (or having the effect of) creating and maintaining an asymmetrical balance of power in favor of dominant groups or normative patterns. Such *made differences* can, over time, construct a mythology of alternative pathways whose veracity is more normative and political than descriptive.

CFA may have been the most dominant, but it was not the only ideological resource that was identified among this group of RFGC students. As stated in the introduction, for many young people from rural communities, there is a strong "mobility imperative" or perceived need to leave rural areas in search of educational and career opportunities elsewhere. Several participants, including Hunter, subscribed to this belief,

I've always said to myself, whether I believed it or not, in the past, like, I'm gonna go wherever the best opportunity is, and now like I'm actually doing that, so I think that's, that's more like encouraged nowadays.

Hunter is speaking directly to the mobility imperative. But unlike Hunter, who believes that he needs to leave the small town he grew up in to achieve his career aspirations, Shannon plans on staying in her state, in her hometown, and in her actual home. She also aligned with CFA with a belief in the promise of unspecified but positive outcomes following college, but different from Hunter, she doesn't want to leave home to do so, yet she recognizes this as something she's *supposed* to want to do,

I have some friends that are very, like, they're very much like, I want to leave like to travel the world see all these things. And like when I say I just want like, I will never leave [this state] or like New England like, and they're just kind of like, well you're limiting yourself and like, all this stuff... we have different values. You know, like I will never leave my family. That's just not even an option for me. Like I do want to travel but it's not going to be something where I'll ever go, like live somewhere else.

Greg also acknowledges the expectation that he should want to leave his community but similarly positions himself against this assumption,

I do think there's a lot of expectations for young people to you know, want the city life or to want or to want stuff like that. When I'm actively- I want to get away from it.

Shannon, Greg, and Hunter are receiving and negotiating messages about what they should do with their lives but in different ways. Hunter confirms the prevalence of the mobility imperative. Shannon and Greg acknowledge that it exists but is not part of her plan.

Carr and Kefalas' (2009), who identified rural "achievers" and "stayers," viewed young people's post-secondary aspirations through a narrow binary lens, categorizing "achievers" as those with high career and educational aspirations but who believe that geographic mobility is the only way to reach their goals, contrasted with "stayers" who are said to have lower aspirational profiles. The current study's findings indicate that this framework may be both over-

simplified and may lack recognition of how “aspiration” can take shape outside of conventional pathways. My evidence suggests that individuals who choose to stay in their home communities have equally high aspirations as those who assume they have to leave home for better opportunities. *High achieving stayers* such as Shannon and Greg recognize that they should want to leave home, but they reject the idea that this is necessary.

Another dominant narrative that some participants reported which is more oppositional to CFA, is the suggestion that the preferred pathway after high school is to get married and start a family. This narrative is strongly felt by Alice and Linda, who experience this message differently.

There's, a very strong pressure to and I've seen friends like leave, because they didn't like that pressure of like, find the husband, settle down, have babies. (Alice)

There's like a really big emphasis on, you know, why aren't you married? Why haven't you started a family yet? Why is your education so important? (Linda)

For Alice, this aligned with her personal narrative. She left for college while simultaneously planning a wedding with her high school boyfriend (now fiancé) and building a home together in her community. Linda experiences the tension of competing narratives differently and reports feeling pulled in two directions. Hers is an experience of aligning with some expectations and diverging from others,

So when I go home, I feel like I'm a completely different person than I am [at school]. I'm quiet and I'm in my room, doing whatever I want- and [at school] I'm more in my- I call it my active role.

Findings suggest the presence of a strong CFA master narrative among RFGC students and their families. But this was not the only ideological resource participants were contending with. I also identified a strong mobility imperative on the part of several participants, although they experienced this differently, with some participants recognizing leaving home as something



they're supposed to want to do. Some participants also faced a strong, alternative to college narrative in which staying home and starting a family are more valued than higher education. All these messages were experienced differently based on individual's personal goals and circumstances.

**2. *What are the different modes of engagement with dominant life course expectations in the form of master narratives that RFGC students are experiencing?***

I identified three different modes of engagement with a CFA master narrative: *faithful alignment* or aligning a personal with a master narrative because of faith in the “good life” and successful outcomes that the master narrative promises; *hybrid alignment*, or constructing a unique hybrid narrative which includes aspects of personal, alternative, and master narratives in a way that best coordinates differing goals, interests, and circumstances of the individual; and *utilitarian alignment*, or aligning a personal and master narrative toward a clearly defined career goal.

For those who align with a sense of faith in the promise of college, college itself is the goal. They believe that going to college will result in a positive future, they have high aspirations even if they are not sure exactly what that will look like, and the specific outcomes are unclear. They are seeking a certain kind of life outcome or experience – perhaps best described as a *life course aesthetic* – and they believe college is a foundational part of that. Faith in the promise of college was reported to have come from several different sources, such as experiences at school, family members, or from more tacit messaging that, for some, just seemed to be “in the air.”

Conversely, college is a means to a very *specific* outcome among utilitarian aligners. They reported looking past college toward a specific longer-term goal, positioning a college degree as a means of obtaining that very specific end. For one student, the goal was to be a

quantum physics researcher, for another the goal was to become a nurse. College is a required step achieve to both outcomes.

For hybrid aligners, the college decision was more complex, they considered several potentially competing factors and had to explain and justify their decision because this may not have been the only or the dominant or preferred narrative in their family or community. Alice and Linda both faced competing expectations from family, peers, and their communities about what to do after high school but they internalized and experienced these messages differently. Alice agentically aligned with CFA *as well as* family and community norms of marrying young and starting a family. Her hybrid is a combination or blend of different narratives with which she aligned simultaneously. Linda, like Alice, faced competing messages to go to college but also to get married and start a family. Instead of creating a hybrid narrative which adapted parts of each narrative, Linda re-constructed the traditional college pathway to suit her goals and life circumstances.

Alice and Linda represent variations on hybrid alignment, and, in their stories, we can see how narrative hybridity can come about differently. The individual may choose to align with two narratives like Alice did. But Linda saw no clear, accessible path in front of her that aligned with her personal goals. She didn't get into college the first, or second time she applied. She did not want to get married and start a family, like her parents and siblings before her. She also faced traumatic personal events which altered her pathway. Hybridity describes someone who aligns with a CFA master narrative, but not perfectly, or in the "right" way or in the expected or "normal" timeframe. Hybridity is not only something individuals engage in when things are going well, and they have several options like Alice did. Hybridity can also be imposed as a demand, as was the case with Linda.

The in-depth, biographical nature of the project allowed me to explore the space between alignment and resistance. Alice and Linda's stories illuminated this space. They both hybridized personal and master narratives to better align with individual circumstances, aspirations, and interests. In this space, they found a sense of independence and autonomy. The concept of hybridizing personal, master, and alternative narratives is almost absent in the literature and is a contribution that this project makes.

This study views agency as not only aligning with one or another life course pathway but seeks to understand how young people may agentially modify, reject, or hybridize available options which that do not align with personal goals and commitments. This is seen in the stories of Alice and Linda. Alice hybridized two potentially competing narratives with her personal goals and commitments and created a novel pathway that she hopes others will follow. She talked about being a role model for other young women in her community, as well as her younger brother. This is evidence that she has created a new pathway and identity that others can aspire to. If this pathway existed in her community, she wouldn't need to be a role model for others. This new identity is also evident in the way she jokes with her peers about being an outsider, someone who went to college, while also remaining part of the insider group making jokes.

Linda's story provides further evidence of a young person acting agentially to create a hybrid when their personal narrative does not align with the master narrative. She wanted to go to college but for a variety of reasons, she could not access CFA. As a result, she had to reconstruct the traditional CFA narrative to make it fit for her. College success for first-generation college students may involve hybridizing multiple and potentially competing

narratives to define new identity possibilities (Stephens et al., 2012). This process is poorly understood empirically or theoretically, but this study offers evidence of how this process is experienced by RFGC students. Everyone coordinates personal and master narratives in the creation of life course pathways; however, for some individuals, hybridization creates a new space of self-determination, autonomy, and independence. There may be more agency required when hybridizing personal, master and alternative narratives leading to a sense of satisfaction, optimism and excitement about one's future, and a feeling of being in control of one's life, as is the case with Alice and Linda.

### ***3. What kinds of experiences seem to relate to the different modes of engagement among RFGC students?***

Findings suggest that those who align with CFA (CFA) with a utilitarian sense of going to college for a specific job or career goal as well as those who construct hybrid narratives and post-secondary pathways seem to have a more positive and optimistic view of the path they are on now and their future after college. Whether by choice or not, they appear to exert more control over their post-secondary trajectories relative to participants whose pathways can be characterized differently. The reports of individuals who craft hybrid pathways and those who go to college for a specific career goal suggest more perceived agency in decision making and more sense of control over both their current experience and their future plans. Alice, who curated a hybrid post-secondary pathway, feels like everything in her life is coming together,

I feel like it's completely coming together like for the first time in my life, I'm like, this is the picture and I'm really excited because I've never like felt anything like that but it's also like too good to be true feeling so I'm trying to not like be wicked optimistic about it.

Greg, who went to college in a utilitarian mode of alignment, choosing to go to college towards a specific outcome, is also satisfied and optimistic, “I guess, I guess a bit of like, nervous energy, I am hopeful for it.”

It could be that these individuals are finding meaning in another prominent narrative of post-secondary education and young adulthood in middle- and upper-middle-class communities: “finding your passion,” which is to say when you’re passionate about something, you’re doing it right. The utilitarian aligners may not be aligning with CFA in general, instead they may be aligned with the idea that you should be passionate about *something*. The idea that if you love your job, you’ll never work a day in your life is another potential master narrative that some individuals may be experiencing.

Conversely, those who align with CFA with a faithful belief in a promised career, financial, and/or identity outcome seem to experience college and imagine their futures with a sense of ambivalence and anxiety. The decision to attend college may have been made with less conflict or competing choices or options, but this may have removed a sense of control and agency, with consequences that are starting to manifest as they begin to plan for their lives after graduation. The promise of CFA is clear, positive outcomes and the realization of a “good life,” but the specific steps on how to get there are not clear. Possibly as a result, many students who align with a sense of faith in the promise of CFA express less excitement about the future than hybrid and utilitarian aligners who are considerably more positive and optimistic about their futures. Shalya talked about the stress she’s feeling as she faces graduation,

I guess I was kind of expecting there to be like, all these opportunities, and then they're just like, wasn't. And that was kind of terrifying... I think I just feel unsettled because I'm so unsure of where I go after this.

Similarly, Marcy reported feelings of uncertainty and stress about her next steps,

“I think I just, I feel like I needed college to do what I want to do. Like, I don't know, I always knew I was gonna go to college just like, I'm like, I don't know, cuz I'm stressing about what I want to do in the future.

But even among participants who aligned with a sense of faith in desired outcomes and who have secure employment after college, there is still a sense of ambivalence. Hunter, who had a job offer several months before graduation, talks about “doing his time” in the city where he’ll be working, before explaining that he’ll always come back to [his home state]. For Hunter, he has a sense that he must be uncomfortable to reach his goals, “I think, like a mantra that I have is like our discomfort leads to growth.” It could be that Hunter, and perhaps others, is doubling down on his commitments to the CFA ideology by construing feelings of ambivalence as natural features of a path that is trusted to lead to desirable outcomes.

#### ***4. What is the psychological experience of fitting oneself to a master narrative prescription among RFGC students?***

Master narratives are so dominant, ubiquitous, and invisible, that people seem to adopt them naturally (McLean & Syed, 2015). But this might not be the case for everyone as the findings of this study suggest. Master narrative adoption and alignment are neither scientifically a natural process, nor are they natural for everyone, specifically RFGC students, whose experiences are multi-sited and where those sites embody possible ideological and intergenerational conflicts. In particular, the patterns of ambivalence, anxiety, sense of difficult or conflicted compromise, and even motivations to hybridize all point to the possibility that, for RFGC students, alignment is not a natural or “autopilot” process at all.

McLean & Syed (2015) argue that “what is left unexamined is the potential psychological toll of being pressed to construct a personal narrative that aligns with the master narrative” (p. 336). Further research is needed to better understand master narrative alignment; however, this study’s findings provide important early steps toward this end as it may differ in important ways

across social groups and communities. For the RFGC students in this study, alignment was not as simple as doing what you believe you “should” do, it’s not only about aligning or not aligning, especially when the options presented are dichotomous. It’s often more about doing what you feel you must do. It could be that RFGC students may feel “pressed to align” because they feel like they have no other option or believe the alternative option isn’t right for them or won’t lead to the same positive outcomes that CFA promises. Many participants in the study are from lower income families, so they may feel extra pressure to make money in the shorter term and, more broadly, to bring themselves and their families out from under patterns of economic decline that have devastated many industries in the rural Northeast (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). RFGC students may experience greater anxiety about their futures after college because they may not have anything to fall back on and may need to start working right away. This could leave them feeling more pressure to have a job and a plan after college so that the sacrifice (time, cost, etc.) is not seen as a “waste.” In fact, several participants talked about choosing college or even a particular major purely for financial reasons.

Young people who align with CFA because of faith in the rewards that college promises may feel like they’re doing the “right” thing. Their pathways and decisions are legitimized because they are doing what’s expected, “but their narrative path has been relatively passive” (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 337), which “suggests a sense of false agency that can occur when questioning one’s life path is not required because it aligns with the master narrative.”

This is revealed in the way that Marcy talks about feeling like she’s about to “fall into the ocean” and how Hailey describes the “impending doom” of life after college, and the way that Shannon wonders where all the opportunities are, where the “job fairy” is, how she feels “terrified” and wonders whether college will have been “worth it” if she graduates and goes back

to her job as a waitress. These may also be expressions of false agency, a feeling of discouragement when you realize that despite doing what you were supposed to do, in this case go to college, you are left with no logical next step, a feeling of confusion.

The findings of this study suggest that the continued reliance on binary frames for understanding rural youth development prevents us from seeing variability in life experiences and biographies of rural youth and how they experience post-secondary decision making and future planning differently. The experience is more complex than staying or leaving rural communities or choosing college or work as the participants in this study demonstrate.

### ***Emerging Adulthood and Identity***

Adolescence and young adulthood is a critical time of identity development. Young people are making decisions about their lives and transitioning between different cultural worlds. Researchers have long been interested in questions of identity in adolescence and how young people navigate these transitions, but what we know about processes of transition and identity development during adolescence is insufficient for understanding these processes among rural students who are the first in their families to go to college, as this study explored.

As discussed in chapter 2, much prior research on identity focuses on the internal, individual construction of identity, generally disregarding the influence of context and environment. Alternatively, this study takes an Eriksonian view of identity situating personal identity as inextricably linked to context and culture (Erikson, 1968). Adopting a master narrative framework allows for seeing the connection between dominant cultural narratives and individual processes of identity.



Erikson's theory of development proposed that individuals go through eight stages of life, from infancy to death. His young adulthood stage covered the ages between 19 and 40, but by the end of the 20th century, the idea that the time between one's late teens and middle age was one single stage became insufficient to describe the life course of most people in Western, industrialized nations.

Arnett (2007) proposed a new stage to describe the transition from childhood to adulthood, emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood, the time between late teens and early 20's, is a time of dynamic identity development, often not without conflict, especially for rural, first-generation college students.

The view of rural adopted in this study is not only as a geographic location but also an ideological position which is a function of the rural situation across New England at a time when economies and industries in rural communities are changing, jobs in timber and manufacturing, for example, are no longer available, so young people have to imagine different futures than their families before them. Similarly, first-generation is also seen as a situation of cultural and family transition. Studying this population can reveal a lot about identity in transition because these young people are both in the middle of a biographical transition in their own lives, but they also embody broad cultural transitions as rural communities in many areas across New England are experiencing economic and ideological shifts.

Therefore, it is revealing to study this population of young people because it shines a light on the complexity of identity development, as identity exploration is a key feature of the emerging adolescence phase of life (Arnett, 2006). Erikson (1968) tried to understand patterns of self-presentation and identity and how they aligned with the historical moment people were living in. But he did not have the tools we have today. This study is true to his original ideas but

adopts a master narrative framework to bridge this gap, connecting individuals with broad social and cultural messages and trying to understand how these messages influences individual identity development specifically among rural, first-generation college students. In moments of cultural transition, which many rural communities are experiencing, choosing between multiple narratives, is not necessarily easier and does not allay identity questions, it may amplify them as choosing one narrative over another may require concession and compromise, as this study suggests.

### **RFGC Student Experiences Challenge the Promise of the CFA Narrative**

Although there has been considerable research on the experience of misalignment or rejection of master narratives and alignment with alternative or counter narratives, there has been scant research on the experience of alignment because it's seen as the "right" or desirable pathway. Master narratives provide "guidance on how to be a 'good' member of a culture" and a means "to understand how to live a good life" (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 320). But a good life for who? Master narratives such as CFA should be challenged because they may provide guidance on how to attain a "good life", but people have different ideas of what a "good life" is. The experiences of RFGC students in this study challenge several aspects of the CFA master narrative, that a positive outcome is guaranteed, and that alignment will lead to a positive experience. This study also highlights the fact that master narratives are not accessible to everyone, despite being presented as though everyone can participate.

For some young people, as this study demonstrated, aligning their choices with the normative prescription of a master narrative does not lead to the experience they anticipated. Alignment is usually not a "conscious process" (Syed & McLean, 2022), individuals do not

believe they are following an easy pathway or a “path of least resistance” (p. 2). They may believe that they are acting and making decisions agentically. Those who align with a master narrative believe they are in charge of their life story – and they may be. But this study reveals that tension often arises when individuals are pressed to make another life decision about their future after college.

### *Concessions in Aligning with Master Narratives*

Several participants who aligned with CFA with a belief in the promised outcomes of college seem to believe that their own personal interests, preferences, and goals should take a backseat to the pursuit of college and the outcomes they believe those lead to, such as a job and financial security. For example, Hunter, is very connected to his community and family. He left home for college and now has a job offer in New York City. This outcome aligns with who he wants to be, financially secure and with a successful career. But home is a core aspect of his identity, and he plans on returning, in as soon as six months. It could be that for Hunter, moving to New York is a concession for him to align with the expectations of going to college and getting a good job and being the person that he wants to be with a career that affords him the life he wants.

Those who align with CFA with a utilitarian sense and those who hybridize master, alternative and personal narratives may appear happier and more optimistic, but still may be making concessions, just to different degrees. For example, Alice is one of the participants who is most optimistic about her future, yet there is still a little bit of concession, just to a lesser degree. She uses the expression, “stuck... but” several times throughout her interviews to talk about her life.

I always kind of saw like, like [town] as like, I'm stuck in this like thing, but I didn't want to- but now I feel like, really happy about, like going back to [town] as a teacher and I feel like I can actually make a way better impact as a teacher in [town] than like some random rich engineer just strolling in like. Also like, on a more funny level I'm scared of the woods like they just freak me out and I don't like ticks, like ticks freak me out, and so we're building a house in the woods and so like I always say I'm stuck in the woods but like Nate's grandpa's an absolute champ, Nate's grandpa is subdividing his property and giving some of it to us, which is so sweet of him. I think it's because he like wants us to like be around or something so like the great grandkids won't be in like Nebraska.

Alice is *stuck* in her hometown *but* with an education she is proud of and a job she's excited about. She is becoming the person she wants to be while maintaining community and family commitments. For others, "stuck, but..." may be a useful way to describe a sense of ambivalence or concession mixed with hope that it will work out eventually and faith that they have done the right thing. Hunter is *stuck* going to New York City where he will "do his time," *but* this is in service of his personal goals of career and financial success. Hailey is *stuck* feeling a sense of impending doom about life after college *but* believes college is the bare minimum for a successful future and that she's done the right thing by attending.

When presented with two options, students may align with the "better" pathway if they do not feel strongly about other options and especially when alternatives to the master narrative are construed as negative. But in so doing, what are the concessions? What is the experience like? How do they imagine their future? This is understudied in the literature and is a contribution that this study makes. It may be that there is more agency and self-determination required in hybridizing personal and master narratives, leading to a sense of satisfaction, optimism and excitement about one's future, and a feeling of being in control of one's life.

### *College for All as a Road Without a Clear End*

Some participants may experience college as a road without a clear ending because they don't have a plan for the next step, and they may not have a plan for the next step because the current step was met with acceptance and encouragement. The choice to go to college was presented as the right choice by family, school, and community. But the pathway after college is less clear. What happens after CFA? When do the rewards come? CFA is not a complete set of instructions telling you what to do and how to do it. Going to college implies access to promised rewards, yet these rewards may be exaggerated, and many students are not sure how to access these rewards once college is over.

“Master narratives provide a template for how to tell a story, a good story about what it means to be a part of a particular cultural community; a story of one's life and how it fits with the cultural definition of success” (Syed et al., 2018, p. 3). Master narratives provide a template, but they are not an exact script. Most stories have a beginning, middle and end, but not all master narratives provide this level of detail. In fact, CFA has no ending, the ending is the vague notion of a “good life.” But the definition of a “good life” varies among individuals. And how does one transition from one point to the next? CFA is future-driven and aligning with CFA eventually requires an individual to take action beyond just going to college. But this isn't part of the narrative. Young people have to figure this out themselves. When people align, they may end up feeling like there should be a payout at the end, but this isn't always the case. Feeling stuck on a road without an end or in a story without a next chapter can create a sense of anxiety and feeling of one's path being incomplete. Many participants in this study feel like their story doesn't have a cohesive next step and are feeling anxious and unsettled, which has negative identity implications.

### *College is for Chumps*

Antonio aligned with CFA because of his faith in the narrative and the strong faith of his family, specifically his father, who began talking to his children about going to college, “as soon as they could understand.” In Antonio’s family there was no question whether he would go to college. His parents are first-generation Americans and believe strongly that college is the foundation for being successful in life,

People who go to college are smart you know, and you want to be smart, want to go to school, you want to finish school. So we started talking to him very, I mean, as young as they can understand. So there was never an option.

Antonio, like other participants, sought a certain kind of experience in going to college, a “D1 experience.” And in some ways, Antonio started college like Greg and Julia, taking a utilitarian approach and viewing college as a means to a specific end. He knew his major before starting college and envisioned a long-term career in the field of nutrition science. In the first interview he talked about going to graduate school. He began college excited and optimistic, but something changed, and he eventually began to view college as a waste of time. Despite having a major he is interested in and a career he thought he wanted to pursue, he now dreads going to all his classes, he hates “every single one,” and now feels like college is a waste of time,

I think about it's like, there, there's 50 people in a room for two hours. It's 100-man hours... was what we learned, right there, really worth 100 hours of time? Or could you record- pre-record the lecture in 35 minutes, and then we can have all this- do it at double speed, 18 minutes... I just feel like, whenever I'm in school, I'm doing busy work constantly. But like, over the summer, when I'm working on other things, like I'm doing things that like, actually matter.

Unlike other participants who aligned with CFA with a sense of faith in the outcomes that college would lead to and are now feeling ambivalent or anxious about their futures, Antonio is excited and optimistic and has a newfound focus on making money. His original major no longer appeals to him,

I want to get into real estate. When I graduate, I'm gonna like move to Colorado, buy a house and like, just build a portfolio... I feel like things are definitely opening up. I'm like very- I'm not anxious all about graduating. Like, I feel like I talk to a lot of people that are like... I'm not ready to graduate, but it's like, I can't wait to graduate like there's gonna be like, this is just the beginning.

Antonio realized somewhere along the way that a college degree does not guarantee anything. He is no longer thinking about working as a sports nutritionist or going to graduate school, now he's solely focused on "making his money work" for him. It could be that those who align with CFA faithfully and then express a sense of ambivalence about college and the future may be realizing a fracture in the CFA narrative, that the promised outcome may not be there, may not be guaranteed. Are they feeling ambivalent – or is it a sense that the rug has been pulled out from under them? It seems like Antonio feels that way and as a result has changed his course. For others, fractures may be experienced as ambivalence. They're no longer believing in the promise, they're no longer faithful.

### ***Implications for Supporting Rural, First-Generation College Students***

The literature suggests that FGCS may experience more stress when transitioning out of college (Roksa & Silver, 2019) in part because they often come from low-income backgrounds or may have less access to resources in their family and social networks and fewer models to look to as they navigate this transition. The experiences of these students highlight the importance of the transition out of college for FGCS, who need to have a plan for exiting college. A "find your passion" message might not be the most practical. Most colleges and universities offer career planning, resume review and job search workshops, but FGCS are less likely to take advantage of them (Roksa & Silver, 2019). So more creative outreach strategies need to be considered, such as making attendance in some type of career planning a mandatory

requirement for graduation, which is currently is not at most schools (Roksa & Silver, 2019).

Programs such as TRIO who work closely with first-generation college students, could oversee these activities since they likely have the most contact with FGCS.

One related lesson of this study may be to help students make post-secondary decisions with purpose, not to just choose what they perceive as the “right” choice because society says so, college is not for all nor should that be the goal, we’re pushed into this by society but it’s not right for everyone, stop presenting the choice as this or that, that’s on schools and communities as well as families. Institutions of higher education might put more effort into working with students on planning for the transition out of college with as much effort as they focus on a smooth transition into college, which traditionally receives much more attention. Students should be encouraged to consider lifestyle and personality preferences in terms of what kind of job they might want. Just because you’re interested in a class or major, does not mean you will be happy doing that for a career. Marcy’s story highlights this disconnect, “I liked biology, and I liked chemistry. So I was like, let's major in biochem. And here I am.” But later, she’s realized that the job that a biochemist would have does not align with who she is,

Honestly, I've been thinking about that more and more because like, everything biochem is very, like, technical, like work in a basement and I'm more of a people person than that.

For Marcy, this disconnect between her major and her personality may be contributing to her feelings of stress and discomfort as she looks toward graduation.

In addition, findings suggest that a greater awareness about alternative to college options on the part of schools, families and communities may benefit young people. Alternatives to college which may better align with young people’s interests and commitments ought to be part of the post-secondary decision-making space. What may be perceived as aligning with a CFA master narrative may be a reflection on the lack of options or the lack of awareness of



alternatives to CFA among this population of young people as well as their parents, schools, and community. They may have chosen to go to college because they viewed it as the only option to secure a positive future or to push a decision off for several more years. This finding reveals that much work needs to be done in making students and their families aware of the variety of post-secondary options, including but not limited to college.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

This was a study of rural, first-generation college students and their experiences navigating messages in the form of master narratives about college and their futures after high school. Future studies could explore what the “good life” looks like for individuals who do not choose to attend college. How are alternatives to college narrated? Where do these narratives originate? How do young people receive and experience these messages?

Future studies might also look at the experience of being first-generation. Several participants in the current study talk about being influenced by older siblings, friends or even grandparents who went to college, as well as receiving valuable information from their parents whose experiences may not be tied to a 4-year college experience but are nonetheless valuable. This suggests that the first-generation label and the deficit assumptions that go along with it need to be re-examined and different forms or types of first-generation status adopted.

We know that many rural youth report feeling torn between commitments to family and community relationships and ways of life and a desire for more economically promising educational and job opportunities elsewhere (Crockett et al., 2000; Ticken, 2016), which represents a critical identity dilemma for many rural youth (Crockett et al., 2000). In this study,

we see Alice resolve this identity dilemma by hybridizing. More research on young people negotiating different and potentially opposing master narratives would be valuable.

Another area of potential research which could build off the current study would be to examine the experiences of RFGC students who attend different types of institutions such as urban universities, elite universities, or community colleges. More exploration is also needed on the emerging idea of false agency, which this study potentially identified.

The participants in this study reflect the predominantly (92.8%) White racial demographics of rural New England and the state where students resided (2022 US Census, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts>). Neither Whiteness as a racial identity or race as a social and political process at work in individuals' personal and professional/academic lives were topics reported to be prominent, much less reported at all, during the interviews. Deemphasis or downplaying of race is a commonly reported pattern in studies of White racial experience (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; McDermott & Samson, 2005), which in this study may also explain the relative silence among participants on the topic.

However, bringing other (than race) aspects of participants' reported experiences into relief carries the potential of connecting the present study's findings with findings related to the experiences of individuals and families of differing racial, ethnic, and migratory backgrounds. For example, future research should examine the experiences of immigrant communities who are also experiencing similarly drastic kinds of cultural, historical, and sociological changes that are characterizing the lives of rural, first-generation students in New England. It is an open question whether, for example, immigrant communities moving to a different place and thus experiencing rapid cultural change might hybridize pathways and opportunities to suit their individual circumstances in ways similar to the rural, first-generation students in this study. This

study suggests that hybridization is an approach to change that links past and future together and that there may be both psychological and sociological benefits in this agentic blending of different narratives. We should continue to ask questions about identity and being the first in your family to go to college and moving between different cultural spaces with other populations of young people in different communities.

The study included families and individuals who experience society from positions of both privilege and disadvantage, and as such the findings are not just relevant to rural White people in New England. This study advances the conversation about cultural hybridity in ways that both draw on the insights of areas and populations where this has been studied already and contributed to those conversations as well. This was not a study of a specific demographic so much as a study of a form of life (Packer, 2018), which is not exclusive to middle class White people in New England.

In the US, rural is equated with Whiteness, and urban with diversity. But this is yet another binary that obscures the reality of rural America. The 2020 US census revealed that rural places are becoming more diverse ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)) and when we assume that rural America is all white, this essentially ignores the 24% of rural Americans that are people of color. Black Americans, Latino Americans, and Indigenous Americans are living in particularly diverse rural communities in the southern and western regions of the country, which continue to become more diverse ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). A similar study conducted in a more diverse region of the country may further work to disrupt rural binaries and deficit narratives.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The multisited design of this study gave me the opportunity to interview participants in various physical spaces but also different ideological spaces. I noticed some variation and

inconsistency in disclosure among participants depending on whether they were with their families or alone. For example, in the interview with her parents, Alice was extremely quiet, barely responding and letting her parents answer all questions. She only contributed a response when she was directly addressed or when a question asked for everyone's opinion. But in her individual interviews, she was very talkative. Alice is among the participants most committed to her hometown. So her silence in the family interview may have been deferential and intentional. She may have also known that this was her family's only opportunity to weigh in, so she stayed relatively quiet on purpose.

Kelly, who is extremely close with her mother, admitted that she was not honest in the family interview, at which her mother was present. She told me after this interview that she had not been honest with her mother about coming home for the summer when the topic came up. Kelly didn't talk about coming home but her mother did. Kelly just stayed quiet about it. Kelly's mother said that she wanted Kelly on the "5-year plan" meaning that she could go to graduate school, but she had to stay at the same school. Making it clear that she didn't want Kelly leaving though she supported her continuing on to graduate school. In subsequent interviews with Kelly alone, she talked about the possibility of leaving and how that was definitely something she was considering. The interviews did not coerce Kelly into talking about something she was not ready to discuss with her mother. Instead, this came up in a later interview.

My relationship with participants evolved over the course of the study. The four-interview sequence occurred over the course of several months, I met participants in their home communities, with their families, they shared stories and experiences of belonging and disconnection, of places and spaces that are meaningful to them, of challenges they have faced. These are personal questions, but not invasive. I understand that I am never only a researcher and

that my role in the field is not based exclusively on my own choosing. I worked to establish trust and maintain rapport while acknowledging that my relationship with participants is one-sided, the intention and purpose of the interviews are all mine, the process is driven by me, and I am shaping these relationships based on my primary goal of research. Consent was ongoing and participants could stop questioning at any time or decide not to answer any question.

Going into rural areas, into someone's home community and sometimes their home, presented several potential ethical issues. Since many of the participants were from low-income families, it's possible that in depth interviews such as the ones conducted for this study which included questions about work and housing could reveal painful memories or feelings of failure among participants. I reminded participants that all questions were voluntary, and they could choose not to respond at any time. Interviews were conducted a location chosen by the participants, and many invited me into their homes. Going into someone's home can present a potential ethical question around the invasion of privacy of people not included in the interview, but home at the time. This was the case with Hunter's family interview, which took place at his home with his grandmother participating. His grandfather did not participate in the interview but was home at the time. Some of the conversation centered around his role in Hunter's life, so it felt strange to see his grandfather the whole time and I wondered why he chose not to participate. I stayed focused on the interview and respected the choice that Hunter and his grandfather made.

### ***Limitations***

There are several potential limitations to the current study. First, this study was conducted on one small, largely rural state at one large university, thereby limiting generalizability. We may find different outcomes if the study were replicated at a community

college or at a university located within a rural area, removing geographic mobility as a consideration in the decision to attend college and the identity commitments students must negotiate.

Another limitation is the fact that this study takes place during one semester, representing a snapshot in time. A similar study on rural youth identity conducted longitudinally, following students throughout their college career may reveal important information about how RFGC students' college identity develops over time.

Although this study does include interviews in and about participants' home communities, the results do not include as much in-depth information about the community as an ethnography conducted with similar research questions which may reveal more about rural life and rural identity than this study. It may be informative to spend considerable time with youth in their communities. For example, researchers could ask for a tour of the community by participants or could observe a common or shared local activity or tradition and have participants narrate that experience.

This study takes place in one small state in the US, but there are rural areas across the country experiencing similar socioeconomic changes and youth facing similar identity dilemmas. Another study conducted in a different rural region of the country would add to this work and may contribute to an anti-deficit view of rural communities and people.

The small size is a potential limitation. When we look this close at individuals, we cannot make claims about how widespread these patterns may be. However, a similar study might include following up with a survey or shorter interviews with more people which may generate potentially significant findings. But we wouldn't know what to ask about and in what areas to

explore if it weren't for this study which allowed me to explore young people's experiences in depth.

Kelly's story highlights limitations of this study in several areas, limitations in the concept of a single home community, limitations in the notion of the ubiquity of master narratives or the idea that there is a dominant master narrative that applies to everyone in the same way. This is the reality of qualitative research. I presented findings in a semi-structured way for clarity, but Kelly's story doesn't fit into the structure of findings I established. This is not a problem with Kelly, it just reveals limitations of the study. No one fits perfectly into the categories I've identified. No individual is just one thing, all the time. Participants are all faithful and purposeful in some ways, to different degrees. Some participants may also be hybridizing different narratives which was not revealed in the interviews.

Throughout analysis, I struggled to figure out where Kelly fit, her story illustrates the ways in which individuals may engage with multiple narratives in different ways. Kelly expresses faith in a CFA narrative in the way she talks about the common pathways that young people in her community follow after high school, the binary way she talks about the options she faced, and the way she opts for college instead of the 'factory' or 'marriage' option, revealing that she believes going to college will result in a different, preferred type of work or lifestyle. This is a variation on faithful alignment, the idea that college is the best choice and making other choices seem negative in comparison,

I know that like coming to college was good, because otherwise I was just going to be back home, working in some factory, which- don't want to do that."

"In the area I grew up, you know, you had like the two groups, you had the kids that went off to college, you had the kids who got married. And so like, for me, you know, I always said, Yes, I was going to go off to college.

Kelly could also be seen as aligning with an alternative narrative because in her community, CFA is not the dominant narrative. She does align with CFA, but to her, this is not the only narrative she's contending with nor is it the only option she considered. Her story shows the complexity of navigating multiple dominant narratives,

I think for the longest time, I was like, Yeah, I want to be married like young and like, that's, like, kind of the life path I had, like, expected for myself, and everyone else kind of expected of myself based on like, where we grew up. Because I mean, one of my friends, she just got engaged, getting married this summer. She's like, the last one. And so like, you know, that life path, you know, was very clear cut for all of them. And I think for the longest time, like, that's what I wanted, because I remember, I would plan my future so much with like my high school boyfriend, I was like, we're going to be married by this age, we'll have kids this age, and he'd always just go along... And then like, you know, I think everything was like, my planning, like perfectly until I got to college. And then it was like, okay, like, maybe not, maybe, maybe I don't want to get married young. Like maybe that's like, different from like, the way like my family would expect.

In her community, going to college is not the dominant pathway, more people, her friends and her family, have stayed in the community and started families young, gone into trade work. In some ways, by going to college she aligned with an alternative narrative. This shows how master narratives aren't true everywhere and there is great variability between communities and cultures. This also shows how one person can be negotiating multiple competing narratives simultaneously.

Like several others, Kelly felt a strong mobility imperative and wanted to leave home after high school, which is also part of the CFA narrative. So, despite getting a full scholarship to another university very close to home, she turned it down and decided to go somewhere else,

I always like- I never planned on going like very far away. Because obviously [college], and [other college] are pretty- well, within my realm, so I was like, Oh, I'm gonna go to one of those colleges, I'm gonna live at home... And then, you know, I had a moment where I was like, Well, I'm gonna change that path a little bit, you know, I am going to go like away a little bit.



To her, she's hybridizing narratives in some ways, "changing the [expected] path a little bit" of going to college while living at home. She's leaving for school, which to her, is not the expected pathway. Kelly is not one thing. In some ways she has faith that college will lead to a non-factory career, in some ways she's aligning faithfully with an alternative narrative given the currents in her community away from college toward trade work and staying home, starting a family. And yet in some ways, she's purposeful, looking at college as a means to an end and being very deliberate about her college choices. In this space, she has found a sense of independence. And although many people, regardless of mode of engagement, describe college as its own chapter, Kelly views college as the start of something,

I've always been that girl that like loves home and loves her family and wants to be back there but I also especially you know, being away from home now I kind of have that like you know, I'm ready to just be on my own... so I think that this year you know, having my place and it's definitely starting a new chapter for me. And so yeah, I don't really know when it's gonna end I think maybe like it'll probably- this chapter will probably continue past graduation.

Kelly aligns with a CFA narrative faithfully. But this alignment could also be seen as aligning with an alternative narrative if you consider what most people in her community choose after high school. She aligns with CFA in a utilitarian sense, viewing college not as a means to an end but as the beginning. She is confident in her next steps, even if she's not certain what they are.

### ***Conclusion***

The rural, first-generation participants in this study are all contenting with many of the same master narratives as it relates to the future, college, career/financial success and geographic mobility. But they are negotiating in individual, complex and often contradictory ways.

A strong current running through all aspects of these findings is the notion that binaries and dichotomous ways of describing people, their communities, and life choices is limiting and

rarely, if ever, accurate. Binaries such as rural/urban, stay at home/leave for college, first-generation/continuing-generation, go to work/go to school confine what we see or imagine for individuals. Furthermore, labels are often deficit-laden and restrict our views to deficiencies not strengths. A first-generation college student may not have a parent who earned a four-year degree, but it cannot be assumed that this is a deficit. Their parent may be a resource in other ways. They have had different but potentially equally informative experiences with school and work. Several participants in this study viewed their parents as successful despite not graduating from a four-year university. Parents of first-generation college students may have had experience with a wider array of careers or more non-traditional career pathways. They also provide valuable emotional support for their children. The first-generation college student may also have an older sibling or a close friend or other family member who went to college and can offer support, as several participants in this study reported.

This study contributes to an understanding of the experience of alignment with master narratives among rural, first-generation college students. This work overlaps with the literature in one sense, in that there are standard relational archetypes of resistance and alignment. But what is missing in the literature is the adoption of a person-centered approach and shifting master narratives. This study also reveals that people are not only one thing as it relates to master narratives, either aligning or resisting them. And aligning with dominant life course expectations which is assumed to lead to positive outcomes may be experienced differently in the short term.

I identified a dominant CFA master narrative that RFGC students and their families were engaging in and identified three different modes of engagement. Taking a part-biographical and part-thematic approach to analysis, I explored their experiences at college and feelings and expectations about the future and found that those who align with master narratives *faithfully*

may experience a sense of frustration or false agency when the next major decision such as choosing a major or planning for life after college approaches. Those who aligned with CFA in a more utilitarian way, with a specific career goal in mind, as well as those young people who hybridized master, alternative and personal narratives reported more optimism, excitement, and agency over their futures.

A dichotomous framework for understanding life choices of rural young people is insufficient. RFGC students are in a good position to disrupt this idea because they are presented with conflicting and inaccurate post-secondary options – stay/leave, home/school, workforce/college – as it pertains to post-secondary decision making. These are insufficient ways to explain their options and describes no participant's experience well.

Master narratives are strong cultural scripts, but they present life choices as black or white, they don't allow for grey area, though there is potential for autonomy and agency in this space as Alice and Linda's stories suggest. Because alternatives to the master narrative are often not well-articulated, Alice's story is considered unique, she's created a middle ground that works for her, but this is not common. Aligning with dominant narratives does not always lead to desired experiences and outcomes while resistance does not always lead to negative experiences. There is potential for autonomy and agency when hybridizing personal and master narratives.

The transition to college represents potential contradictions across both culture and social relations. As students move across different contexts physically, they also engage with different people and networks. At this moment of transition, everything is a compromise. If you get a 4-year degree and move out of your house that may be feeling in some ways just as stuck in a set of normative expectations, so is feeling both stuck and ok in a set of expectations and the

contradictions complicate that. Amanda's quote at the beginning of chapter one speaks to this final point.

I don't know what I would do if I didn't [go to college]. But it was never like a question growing up, either. My parents were just like, I was kind of just going to college and then, like doing more with my college education. And like, I don't know, I definitely feel like just the world as a whole, you're put into this thing where you're going to work and you're going to go to school, and then you're going to make money and live this life. And like, when really you're a grown human and can do absolutely anything you want to do. But then you, you can acknowledge that and still be doing exactly what they want you to be doing anyway.

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# University of New Hampshire

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12-Apr-2021

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Hamilton Smith Hall 330 C  
Durham, NH 03824

**IRB #:** 8503

**Study:** Rural First-Generation College Students: Transcending the Home-School Divide

**Approval Date:** 12-Apr-2021

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 104(d). Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects*. (This document is also available at <http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources>.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

Note: IRB approval is separate from UNH Purchasing approval of any proposed methods of paying study participants. Before making any payments to study participants, researchers should consult with their BSC or UNH Purchasing to ensure they are complying with institutional requirements. If such institutional requirements are not consistent with the confidentiality or anonymity assurances in the IRB-approved protocol and consent documents, the researcher may need to request a modification from the IRB.

Upon completion of your study, please complete the enclosed Exempt Study Final Report form and return it to this office along with a report of your findings.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact Melissa McGee at 603-862-2005 or [melissa.mcgee@unh.edu](mailto:melissa.mcgee@unh.edu). Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,



Julie F. Simpson  
Director

cc: File

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**Anticipated Study End Date:** March 2023

## Exempt Study Final Report

Upon completion of your Exempt study, please provide the information requested below and submit to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) **along with a report of findings for this study**, for audit purposes. Copies of abstracts, articles, and/or publications specific to the project are acceptable. Send to the IRB at the address shown at the top of this form.

1. Please give date of termination date of study. \_\_\_\_\_
2. How many months did you actually perform the proposed investigation or activity? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How many subjects were studied or involved? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Did you conduct the research in accordance with the procedures reviewed and approved by the IRB? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Did any problems emerge or were any serious unexpected adverse subject experiences observed? If YES, please describe on a separate sheet. Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

Principal Investigator or  
Advisor Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

cc: File