Toward a Theory of Black, Rural Praxis

by

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Abstract

This study explores how outreach-oriented practitioners (OOPs) across the interdisciplinary field of higher education support Black, rural students and communities in Alabama. It asks two questions: (1) How do practitioners' experiences and reflections about working in Black, rural communities in Alabama advance conceptions of rurality? (2) What processes and strategies support construction of a model for Black, rural student success? This dialectical critical realist grounded theory (CRGT) study centers 22 OOPs who work in and throughout various contexts. Some of the institutional types included in this study are 2- and 4-year public institutions, 4-year private institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), predominantly white institutions (PWIs), research universities, land-grant institutions, and K-12 institutions. Organizational types included in this study are non-profit organizations, government and policy organizations, and religious organizations. CRGT methods required iterative cycles of deskwork and fieldwork, which included two sets of virtual interviews, journey mapping, and reflective memoing. Findings offer a set of Black, rural logics that help practitioners enact their work and offer a point of departure for development of a grounded theory of Black, Rural Praxis.

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List of Abbreviations

CRGT	Critical realist grounded theory
HBCU	Historically Black College or University
OOP	Outreach-oriented practitioner
PWI	Predominantly white institution
US	United States

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Context

The 2023 edition of the "Why Rural Matters" report published by the National Rural Education Association outlined the status and gravity of rural education across the United States (U.S.). Researchers found that approximately 89.8% of rural students graduated high school, compared to 87.2% of non-rural students, indicating a national rural high school graduation rate advantage of 2.6% (Showalter et al., 2023). Undergirding such statistics were academic, socioeconomic, and socio-political factors that circumscribed rural students' educational trajectories, beginning in early childhood. For example, 34.1% of rural children were enrolled in public preschool, 13.4% of rural households did not have broadband, and 6.7% of rural school-aged children were uninsured (Showalter et al., 2023). Further, "although only 1 in 234 rural school communities ha[d] an average income below the poverty line, 1 in 7 ha[d] an average income below 185% of the poverty line (the federal cutoff for reduced price meals)" (Showalter et al., 2023, p. 29). Since the 1940s, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), a federally assisted meal program, has offered reduced and free meal options to students at participating schools and childcare facilities. Notwithstanding federal support, rural students across the nation consistently and overwhelmingly navigate high poverty contexts while simultaneously thriving academically to persist toward graduation.

State-level data presented in the report reiterated, and at times, intensified educational conditions and climates in rural communities. Alabama co-ranked as second on a list of top ten highest priority states in rural education, with some of its most glaring statistics concerning poverty, educational policy, and educational outcomes. Its rural communities constituted some of the highest concentrations of people who lived with incomes below the federal poverty line (only

2.41 times the poverty level compared to a national average of 2.91 times the poverty level), and 17% percent of its rural school-aged children experienced poverty, which was more than double the national average (Showalter et al., 2023). Moreover, "nearly half of the state's [public K-12] schools [were] rural, and only three states [Idaho, Mississippi, and Florida] spen[t] less to educate rural students," (Showalter et al, 2023, p. 20). Also, Alabama's rural high school graduation rate advantage was lower than the national comparable rate, meaning that the gap between graduation rates at rural and non-rural high schools was not as striking at the state level (Showalter et al., 2023). Interestingly, however, was the geospatial configuration of Alabama's rural school districts, as they were fairly large and only 2% were considered small (Showalter et al., 2023). That fact helped to nuance and extend conceptual and physical boundaries of rural places, disrupting notions that they solely comprised small schools and/or school communities.

Beyond K-12 rural education landscapes across the state, postsecondary workforce and education contexts present their own set of challenges. Researchers at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas identified Alabama as the state with the highest rate of young people, aged 18-24, who were neither in school nor employed (Crockett & Zhang, 2023). However, laborers who entered the workforce, particularly as hourly employees, reported issues with transportation. A whopping 57% of them did not have access to public transportation, nearly 60% of them had missed work because their car broke down, and a third of them had lost or quit their jobs due to transportation complications (Alabama Workforce Council, 2023). Though rural laborers often felt the brunt of such issues, they continued to seek employment opportunities while relying on on-the-job training and trade school as top mechanisms for facilitating their postsecondary trajectories (Alabama Workforce Council, 2023). Trends in college-going and college access in Alabama were also noteworthy. In Fall 2022, 68% of Alabama's first-time degree/certificate-seeking

undergraduate applicants to postsecondary institutions were granted admission to enroll (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). However, in that same year, only 21.4% of Alabama's first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate admitted students actually enrolled (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). When considering Alabama's rural students, they were granted admission to enroll at a higher rate (72.9%) than the statewide average, yet they enrolled at a lower rate (19.6%) than the statewide average (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). In sum, these statistics illuminate key successes and barriers surrounding rural students, schools, and communities and offer a foundation for understanding rural postsecondary education through national and state lenses.

The focus of this inquiry, however, explicitly centers Black, rural students and communities in Alabama. Means et al. (2022) recommended that the field of higher education rethink recruitment and outreach efforts to center racial equity for Black, rural students. In response to that recommendation, I identified Alabama as a state with a robust outreach landscape. It has three land-grant institutions— Tuskegee University, Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical (A&M) University, and Auburn University— and three corresponding sets of extension, or community outreach, networks across all those institutions. The state is also home to the Alabama Cooperative Extension System with offices in each county. Additionally, Alabama has more Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) than any other state in the country, and as an institutional type, HBCUs have commitments to recruit and support all students, especially Black students (Saunders & Nagle, 2018), and they engage in outreach efforts across their communities. Alabama's community college system is also robust, comprising dozens of main and satellite campuses that appeal to various rural communities across the state. Cain (2021) offered a different, yet related, recommendation for grappling with

race and place with Black, rural students in mind, which was to conduct a grounded theory study. Such a model would add value to statistical and theoretical literature and offer an identity-based framework for Black, rural students (Cain, 2021). In subsequent sections and chapters, I acknowledge my colleagues' recommendations and assert my expertise as a Black, rural scholar and practitioner to extend, nuance, challenge, and reflect on research and practice in Black, rural communities.

The Socio-Politics of Historical Education Policies

The nexus of higher education, rurality, and college access is undergirded by a set of socio-political relations related to race, class, and progress. This has much to do with historical and contemporary litigation and legislation. Take, for example, the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, which provided land to institutions committed to expanding college access to teach students applied trades in agriculture and mechanical arts—a departure from institutional priorities in classical education like science and math. The Morrill Acts upheld racial contracts through the reallocation of Indigenous land and the maintenance of segregated and differentially funded educational pathways, which undermined service to the public good in the interest of white, western advancement (Fanshel, 2021).

Consider, also, key landmark cases. In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned "separate but equal" policies and practices by ruling the unconstitutionality of segregation in public schools. Though renowned for igniting desegregation efforts across education and society—a plight affiliated with helping Black people—in practice and at its onset, it weaponized against predominantly and HBCUs to surveil and propel admission of white students at those institutions (Patton Davis, 2021). In this case, white people's social disdain, distaste, and downright resistance to Black welfare decelerated and curtailed its implementation.

Also, consider the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which, at face value, prohibited employment discrimination based on race and national origin. After its passing, Black educators critiqued its slow execution by arguing that federal spending practices and ambiguous language in federal and state polices ignored and rewarded racist practices (Walker, 2015). While it continues to have direct implications on admissions and hiring practices that link place to value and utility, it also marked the end of major legislation and financial support for Black farmers and rural communities in over a 50-year span (Reiley, 2021). These explicit efforts are evidence of the contention involved in improving the livelihood of Black people, specifically the educational experiences and pathways of Black students.

The Socio-Politics of Contemporary Education Policies

In 2015, The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. It included an unprecedented provision that required all students be taught to high academic standards that prepare them for college and careers. It also made space for place-based interventions created by community members to help promote secondary and postsecondary success. Since its inception, though, districts still haphazardly contend with inequitable resource allocation and segregation that negatively impacts students (Knight, 2019). More recently, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act allotted nearly $14 billion to the Office of Postsecondary Education as the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF). The funds were intended to provide emergency financial aid grants to students as they navigated the Covid-19 public health crisis. According to the U.S. Department of Education, institutions were responsible for "determining how grants [were] distributed to students, how the amount of each student grant [was] calculated, and the development of any instructions or directions that [were] provided to students about the grant"

[n.d.]. Moreover, the policy provided little guidance to institutions about how to implement relief rollout programs, leaving large equity gaps for Black students across institutional types. For example, each student at Meharry Medical College, an HBCU in Tennessee, received $10,000 from HEERF funds, while students who completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) at the University of Alabama, a predominantly white institution (PWI), received between $500 and $4,000 from HEERF funds based on Estimated Family Contribution (EFC). Other institutions like Auburn University, another PWI, remained ambiguous in how they dispersed funds by stating that grant amounts "vary by student and are unique to each student's circumstances" [n.d.]. Though direct funding amounts were notable, they reflected differences between how institutions translated federal funds to student support. Clear, explicit, and transparent communication to students about need formulas articulated how institutions viewed students. In these instances, Black students attending institutions that lacked explicit commitments to racial equity saw fewer, direct financial benefits from the policy. Inversely, Black students at HBCUs saw greater direct benefits, a dynamic that reinforced a culture of community and support (Lockett et al., 2018; Williams & Taylor, 2022) and underscored familial ties between administrators and stakeholders (Commodore et al., 2020) within those organizational environments.

Throughout decades, Black people have been forced to circumvent inaccurate social stigmas that charade them as welfare subjects, when in fact, they seldom fare well because of policy, alone. Even the concept of welfare has become racialized. In 1974, the term "welfare queen" stemmed from an exaggerated *Chicago Tribune* article about a multi-racial woman, Linda Taylor, who committed fraud on social programs. Political leaders proceeded to exploit her story and narrate "ghetto mythology" (Cashin, 2021, p. 78), which is convenient, racist

mythmaking. Such myths fueled presidential marketing campaigns and racist, coded politics aimed to prevent Black people from beating and benefiting from the system. Though these policy landscapes have had an indelible impact on the post-secondary terrain, they illuminated tradeoffs between what was social and political; discretionary and intentional; and they framed how Black people from various communities existed among place and policy.

The Socio-politics of Education in Alabama

Alabama is home to some of the most pinnacle places and events that have reckoned and reconciled racialized harm. For example, Tuskegee in Macon County, AL has an engrossing history. The U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee remains an extremist act of racism and domestic genocide, as researchers knowingly harmed Black men and their families by withholding syphilis treatment. The federal government's malicious malpractice toward Black people and their health continues to justify commitments to the responsible conduct of research, especially involving humans. Another example is Montgomery, AL, the state's capital. Prominent civil rights leaders and activists led the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March from Selma to Montgomery, which brought attention to civil unrest in the South and catapulted civil rights policies across the country. The state's educational terrain is also distinctive. During the 2022-23 reporting year, Alabama boasted an 88.2% high school graduation rate overall but a lower graduation rate of 85.2% for its Black students (Alabama State Department of Education, 2024). Further, Black students make up about 32% of the student population, as most students are white and make up about 60% of the student population (Alabama State Department of Education, 2024).

The state of Alabama poses as a unique backdrop for interrogating place, racialized policies and practices, and social class in relation to college access. Colorblind public health laws

(Carrera & Flowers, 2018), forced-choice voter registration forms with no multiracial category (Sanchez et al., 2020), and shifting stances on anti-immigration legislation and advocacy among Black elites (Williams & Hannon, 2016)—just to name a few—set the stage for understanding and unearthing inequities in Alabama and how they appear in policies. Regarding education, specifically, Alabama's policies discriminate against Black students. Schools in Alabama and the Deep South continue to report on using corporal punishment (CP) at rates comparable to lynching counts (Ward et al., 2021). Corporal punishment in Black spaces has always been state and policy sanctioned violence against Black bodies. Contention about "… what constitutes 'deviant youth' has roots in Jim Crow-era convict labor and carceral techniques that emerged as the testing ground for white supremacist political power in its formation of a racialized class of subjugated human capital" (Capps, 2022, p. 383). Hence, CP is a policy outcome normalized as an acceptable form of violence. Ward et al. (2021) went on to note that the practice of CP was more pervasive in rural communities and Black counties, and toward students who were impoverished. CP in schools has also been correlated to juvenile crime and arrests (Gershoff et al., 2015), which directly implicates how students with criminal records enter and engage with postsecondary institutions (McTier et al., 2020; McTier, 2022).

Other policies further disenfranchise students with little to no financial or social capital by creating loopholes within public education systems. Several of these policies tout "parent choice" as the guiding force for sustaining and expanding them, which suggests parents as a primary stakeholder in Alabama education. The Alabama Accountability Act (AAA) establishes a tax credit scholarship program and reimburses parents of students attending a failing K-12 public school who transfer to a better performing school. Though lawmakers and other proponents market the policy as one aimed toward low-income families seeking quality

education, most beneficiaries are not from failing schools (Johnson, 2018). Parent choice, then, allows more wealthy, socially connected, and white people to co-opt the benefits and hoard resources. One explanation offered for this dilemma is the lack of private school options located near failing public schools, which places a burden on parents to transport students to better performing schools (Johnson, 2018). Therefore, rural-located families do not get as equitable an opportunity to take advantage of AAA. For that reason, the policy was designed to be inaccessible to marginalized people and communities.

In 2020, Alabama House Bill 12 addressed the issue of annexation. Thought the bill eventually died, it aimed to streamline and accelerate the process of annexing property into neighboring jurisdictions. Like parent choice, this policy authorizes what I consider to be "landowners' choice." Residents who own their own land would have the power and agency to choose where and how their property is configured. It gives landowners the power and agency to defy city and town limits to determine if/how their homes and communities are annexed and adopted under other boundary lines. Through this vantage, land—as a physical/natural entity—is turned into real estate— the commodification of land—then politicized based on the state's regulatory policy and socially reconstructed to not be so "fixed" of an entity. This is problematic when considering that Black people in Alabama and rural communities tend to rely on heirs property (i.e., less legally secure property) more than titled property (Baba et al., 2018). As such, access to real estate decisions become racialized, as policies are instituted that disproportionately advantage non-Black landowners who have titled property. Without deeds to property, as with heirs property, people can use land, but they have little to no legal authority over the land. Consequently, the possibility of heirs property owners annexing into jurisdictions with better schools decreases as stakes for educational mobility increase, considering heirs property owners

cannot leverage annexation as advantageously as title property owners. Further, in 2021, Alabama toyed with the practice of adopting open enrollment across district lines. Though it did not pass, Senate Bill 365, called the Open Enrollment Act, would have allowed students to enroll in a school district of their choice for a fee that could exceed several thousand dollars. High costs of attendance and educational "pay to play" policies like these at the K-12 level have bearing on postsecondary access. High performing public, charter, and private schools have continuously been associated with prestigious postsecondary trajectories (Onuma et al., 2022) and increased college and career readiness (Austin & Pardo, 2021).

Considering connections between postsecondary institutions and stakeholders further contextualizes its student success landscape in Alabama. Some relationships are strained. For example, political nonprofits and higher education institutions form unethical social pacts that influence allotments for funding and resources (Baser, 2022). Also, racial zoning laws, urban renewal planning, and transportation practices in Birmingham, AL have led to decreases in the Black population, particularly those with college degrees (Lafrombois & Park, 2021). Some relationships, however, are thriving. Tuskegee University, for example, has worked to amplify the contributions of its students, alumni, and community members by digitizing its archives to make them more accessible (Chandler, 2018). Practices and policies like these undergird the present study, which centers socio-political landscapes that practitioners navigate as they support Black, rural student success in Alabama.

Statement of the Problem

Fusing Socio-political, Discursive, and Geospatial Phenomena

Black rural communities in Alabama are constructed and constrained by discursive, geospatial, and socio-political phenomena, which in turn, have implications for Black rural

students' post-secondary trajectories. Discursively, rurality is deployed in associative ways, meaning markers of rurality are coupled to terms and phrases. For example, many higher education institutions have degree programs in rural education, rural sociology, and rural medicine. While these linguistic pairings help to signify the unique and contextual focus of these programs, they also insinuate that some fields of study focus on rurality and some do not, which has implications for specific postsecondary and career pathways (Wheat & Leeper, 2021). In addition to degree programs that explicitly name rurality, other discourses implicitly associate rurality with agrarian practices. Programs of study in agricultural business and economics, poultry science, horticulture, and forestry and wildlife sciences are often associated with rurality or invoke stereotypical rural aesthetics, which reflect narrow conceptions of rural living. Though these associative discourses vary in how directly or explicitly they appeal to prospective students, they still reflect commitments to advancing education in rural communities.

Geospatial phenomena shape rural discourses. For example, one of the most prevalent rural geospatial phenomena in the state of Alabama is the Black Belt region. While the Black Belt has been used as a broad contextual parameter for research studies (see Crumb & Chambers, 2022), the Black Belt as a rural, geospatial, and discursive phenomenon reflects and invokes racialized and classed notions of rurality. Geographically, the Alabama Black Belt represents the location of some of the darkest, richest, and most fertile soil across the state. Socio-economically, it also represents some of the most financially disadvantaged and impoverished counties in the country. Further, the Black Belt consists of counties with high concentrations of Black residents. Through this lens, rural places are predetermined by relationships between land and labor. Though descriptions of land quality in the Black Belt suggest economic thriving, the material realities of impoverished Black communities stand in opposition to those suggestions.

Moreover, contemporary manifestations of anti-Blackness and plantation politics inform these rural geospatial phenomena (Williams et al., 2021). For example, research about Black placemaking (Hunter et al., 2016; Tichavakunda, 2020) and Black imaginaries and geographies (Chambliss, 2019; Daché et al., 2022) highlight how, beyond physical boundaries, Black people are socialized to navigate and negotiate space. Discourses about the Black Belt, particularly within K-12 classrooms, may acknowledge the history of racism, oppression, and segregation in the region (Mann & Rogers, 2021), but fall short in troubling how these social maladies have been made permanent through rural geospatial formations.

The hypervisibility of the Black Belt in research and policy, for better or for worse, has left other Black rural communities in the state ignored. Therefore, my study focuses on areas in and out of the Black Belt to highlight the nuanced work that occurs across places within the same statewide context to promote post-secondary pathways for Black, rural students. Further, predominantly Black K-12 schools in Alabama tend to reflect predominantly Black neighborhoods and rural communities from which students come, rather than the larger towns and cities wherein they are situated. So, to more accurately study race, place, and policy, my research centers Black student success efforts at localized, small-scaled levels where Black people are prioritized. Without close examination, understandings of the educational progresses, successes, and mundanities of Black students' lives are distorted by surrounding place-based policies and structures. My study provides space for practitioners to discuss the complexities of supporting students' post-secondary pursuits in Black, rural neighborhoods and communities. My research does not conform solely to existing data assemblages and the dearth of insights they provide about racialized and rural educational landscapes. Instead, it relies on practitioner knowledge and community configurations as data sources.

Fusing Black, Rural, and Postsecondary Educational Landscapes

Students' postsecondary possibilities in the State of Alabama are shaped by realities that (1) Black rural discourses are constrained and contained to discussions of the Black Belt, as mentioned above; (2) towns, cities, and counties are constructed to suppress the power of Black residents, communities, and schools; and (3) data availability about Black, rural education is limited at local, state, and national levels. In Sheryll Cashin's 2021 book, *White Space, Black Hood*, she explicated how histories of racial injustice resulted in socio-political negligence toward Black communities. Her theory of American caste reflects how "geography reifies power and opportunity for those in a few rich neighborhoods and contributes to powerlessness of poverty for descendants" (Cashin, 2021, p. 111). Though her work focused primarily on urban geographies, it underscored how political leaders overtly and covertly created unwarranted narratives about Blackness; how funding models for public schools disproportionately cater to white space; and how classed issues inextricable became Black issues, despite whiteness being front of mind. In doing so, she also reinforced a need to detach the term, "ghetto" from its racialized, adopted roots and reduce it to a sole class designation. Similarly, postsecondary education scholars grapple with rurality, teetering between the existence and proliferation of race and class while conceptualizing it.

In *College Aspirations and Access in Working Class Rural Communities: The Mixed Signals, Challenges, and New Language First-Generation Students Encounter*, Ardoin (2017) associated rurality with socio-economic status. She centered and contextualized rural students as being from rural areas and first-generation college students. Such a framing positions rurality to be a function of place and class—not a standalone descriptive. Though marrying multiple demographic identifiers is important when viewing rurality through an intersectional lens,

limiting rurality to two core variables can be potentially harmful to students who do not check off of those boxes and who occupy the margins and cusps of other marginalized identities. Further, *Straddling Class in the Academy: 26 Stories of Students, Administrators, and Faculty from Poor and Working Class Backgrounds and Their Compelling Lessons for Higher Education Policy and Practice* added nuance about class (Ardoin & martinez, 2019). Gleaning from rural and urban backgrounds, they presented multiple snapshots of the impact of classed upbringings on higher education, reflections on slighted rural educational experiences, and considerations of labor in relation to rural career pathways (Ardoin & martinez, 2019). Though both works highlighted the importance of support systems in rural communities and added granularity about classed experiences, they fell short in meaningfully addressing race.

Means et al.'s (2022) book chapter, "Rethinking Postsecondary Education Access and Success to Advance Racial Equity for Rural Black Students," on the other hand, clearly intersected and distinguished between race, class, and rurality. They offered a set of recommendations for promoting racial equity for Black, rural students. They also included ways to reconceptualize recruitment and outreach efforts, challenge and rethink admissions standards, address college cost concerns, implement asset-based, equity centered programs and policies, and rethink how to support institutions that serve Black, rural students (Means et al., 2022). There are, however, two areas of opportunity to expound upon their work. First, they do not focus explicitly on practices or practitioners. Taylor (2020) noted the malignment between both, and although Means et al. (2022) discussed the equitable implementation of programs and policies, they did not fully attend to who enacts them, how they are enacted, or their enabling conditions (Taylor, 2021). Second, their recommendations were nearly exclusively geared toward postsecondary education institutions. When discussing topics like recruitment and

outreach, multiple stakeholders tend to be involved, including K-12 institutions and local nonprofit organizations. Each categorical entity deserves a set of recommendations to legitimize them as student success partners and explicate their roles in promoting college access and success.

Post-secondary data landscapes are already normed on and narrowed toward white, upper middle-class notions of college going and employment centered conceptions of success (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018; Taylor, 2020). Data-driven decision-making and predictive analytics, as data practices, marginalize and exclude students as they purport to support student success efforts (Xing & Wang, 2021). When researchers attempt to critically approach data, their efforts sometimes collide with deficit-oriented framings of communities. For example, Dache-Gerbino (2018) introduced college deserts and college oases as terms to describe geographic areas comprised of few or many institutions, respectively. By describing a postsecondary terrain as desert-like, it diminishes the livelihood of people, places, and practices that exist within areas—a detriment to rural communities.

Additionally, data from the U.S. Census Bureau (census) and The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) fail to accurately portray or consistently define rurality. To combat the shortcomings of these data hubs, researchers have leaned on the U.S. Department of Education's Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs (DAPIP) to consider a range of rural-serving institutions, but the database only includes formal, accredited institutions (Hillman et al., 2021). They completed a project mapping rural colleges, educational locales, and community demographics. Outside of higher education institutions and branch campuses, they found a higher percentage of postsecondary opportunities and services being offered in rural administrative and extension offices; corrections facilities; inter-

institutional programs; and K-12 settings as opposed to non-rural locations (Hillman et al., 2021). This finding not only legitimizes non-traditional institutional and organizational contexts that facilitate college access, but it also suggests differing practices rural communities rely on to supplement, complement, and compensate for differently resourced landscapes than geographic peers. It pushes me to contend with geospatial relations as an important but understudied phenomena in higher education and the relationship between place, college access, and student success.

Rationale

Framing Postsecondary Praxis in Black, Rural Communities

At the intersection (and tension) of discursive, geospatial, and socio-political complexities lie a constellation of practitioners working to promote post-secondary pathways for Black, rural students. With this in mind, I reflect on Giroux's 2020 book, *On Critical Pedagogy*, including several of its chapters. Broadly, critical pedagogy seeks to promote sentiments of knowledge creation, transformation, and critique while building an awareness of social justice and agency through historical, political, and contextual vantages. In the second edition of the book, Giroux expounded upon institutional boundaries by including higher education in addition to elementary and secondary education. Coupled to this expansion was a discursive shift from "teachers" to "educators" to accommodate the varied roles actors assumed in enacting and promoting critical pedagogy. What follows is a reframe of how to imagine Black, rural student success efforts as a practice of critical pedagogy. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks (1994) wrote, "… within revolutionary black liberation struggles, we must continually claim theory as necessary practice within a holistic framework of liberatory activism" (p. 69). Complementing the sentiment of resistance, reclamation, and restoration is the

understanding that racialized rurality feeds off of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) in pursuit of higher education (Boettcher et al., 2022). Adopting the same structure, language, and ideologies offered by Giroux (2020), I illuminate how this specific racialized context is a political act of teaching, learning, and activism.

Part 1: Reframing Pedagogy as Cultural Politics. Racialized student success work symbolizes racialized cultures. The erasure of data (and people omitted from data) delegitimizes culture to suppress it. As practitioners recognize this, they reject positivist notions of identity and existence. Hence, they can begin to take responsibility for upholding, navigating, and reimagining structures. In the chapter, "The Promise of Critical Pedagogy in the Age of Globalization," Giroux (2020) explored the idea of educators being "public intellectuals" (p. 83). He positioned educators as a group of stakeholders challenged with concerns of democracy. In doing so, he grappled with tensions between resistance and reduction. He purported that educators must resist confines that limit their roles to rigid tasks and duties to fully enact critical pedagogy. Likewise, practitioners in Black, rural communities must resist the geographies and policies that encapsulate them so they can support students.

Part 2: Reframing Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Youth. In the chapter, "Higher Education and The Politics and Pedagogy of Educated Hope," Giroux (2020) contended with the relationship between education and access. Accessibility, in this sense, meant reaping the rewards and consequences of educational structures. Recognizing how and when to sow educational fruits of labor required an intuitiveness about educated hope. Educated hope requires educators and students to critically consider the conditions upon which they exist and reimagine possibilities of what could/should be reformed (Giroux, 2020).

Part 3: Reframing Neoliberalism, Public Pedagogy, and the Legacy of Paulo Freire.

Black, rural student success efforts materialize as and at sites of public pedagogy. The chapter, "Rethinking Education as the Practice of Freedom" unpacks the roles of teachers and students in sustaining critical pedagogy, specifically about power shifts and transmittals between both stakeholders (Giroux, 2020). Codifying and transferring knowledge are essential in maintaining the existence and beneficence of power and information transfers (Chen & Dai, 2019).

Part 4: Reframing Critical Pedagogy Against the Plague of Fascism. In the chapter, "Rethinking Critical Pedagogy in the Post-Truth Age" Giroux (2020) argued that competing agendas, and not critical thinking, drives decision-making, which operates as a plague to the betterment of the country. Key to this idea was the notion of a pre-truth world where the truth has not come to fruition. This juncture of between truth and non-truth creates the space and conditions for critical pedagogy and the communities that adopt it in practice. The chapter, "Critical Pedagogy in Dark Times" focused on political attacks made to education, including decreases in budgetary allotments toward public education. Giroux (2020) calls for educators to leverage neoliberal discourses to reclaim and regain control of social justice issues. Doing so blurs the lines between the legacy of economics in education and the contemporary practice of business logics to achieve desired outcomes.

Significance

Most scholars now believe that research about rurality is outdated or outcast by urban life and thriving. Antiquated images of cotton fields, farmland, and plantation-style homes bombard conceptions of rural life. Fields like education, sociology, and anthropology that synonymize rurality to low socio-economic status and associate it with opiate epidemics and slow-paced living inadvertently paint stigmatizing profiles about rural communities. To exacerbate this issue, public education systems and policies often fail to prioritize rural livelihoods when addressing

equity. These conditions create a scholarly landscape about rurality that is race-evasive, conflated with or substituted for social class, and mistaken for other markers of regionality.

Racialized, socialized, and politicized environments sustain college access in rural areas. Beyond brick-and-mortar buildings, bureaucratic structures; (in)equity; and (mis)aligned interests and intentions comingle to inform access-oriented practices. This critical realist grounded theory study centers practitioners who support Black, rural student success. It addresses the following questions: (1) How do practitioners' experiences and reflections about working in Black, rural communities in Alabama advance conceptions of rurality? (2) What processes and strategies support construction of a model for Black, rural student success?

As a result of my study, I offer a reconceptualization of rurality that is sensitive to race, specifically Black students and communities, that is largely absent in scholarship and policy. Monolithic conceptions about rurality have led to generic and generalized approaches to supporting rural student success, which have been insufficient in meeting students' needs. As critique and counternarrative, my study takes an inductive approach to rurality, as a phenomenon, and nuances it. I make space for practitioners to define and describe rurality for themselves, imploring and empowering a race- and space- conscious model for rural student success to manifest.

Definitions of Key Terminology

Outreach-oriented Practitioners: Outreach-oriented practitioners (OOPs) refer to student success practitioners whose work requires them to engage in K-12 school- and community-based contexts. Engaging in these outreach efforts often requires OOPs to leave their day-to-day office settings in various institutions and organizations to interact with students and communities.

OOPs also support students by preparing them to transition from K-12 school contexts to postsecondary education contexts. I use OOPs and practitioners interchangeably.

Rurality: Chigbu (2013) warned against "erroneously associating rurality to poverty" (p. 813) and instead argued for rurality to be construed through five elements: rural place, rural people, rural livelihoods, rural governance and 'sociopsycho-rural' perception. I adopt those same elements to understand the holistic nature of rurality.

Summary

In the following chapter, Chapter 2, I present a review of literature. The purpose of that chapter is to illustrate thematic and conceptual gaps in Black, rural college access and student success discourses. It helps justify why the inquiry is needed, and it underscores how the research is situated within the broad field of higher education.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

Discourses that center the nexus between higher education, its commitment to college access, and place are sensitive to geospatial configurations. Early conversations centered institutions, specifically the spaces they occupied in relation to their political and economic histories. Land-grant institutions, for example, have an indirect but dependent relationship with government, as the "public good of land-grant institutions required the accumulation of lands through colonization, and a stable capitalist market on which those lands could be sold, and their profits used to continue to produce income" (Stein, 2020, p. 222). Other institutional types like community colleges and regional public institutions commit to serving students and communities near them. They subscribe to "public good" mentalities and appeal to adult and parent learners,

commuters, returning students who have previously dropped out, and students who prefer alternative credentials outside of formal degrees.

Examples of place also show up through statewide and regional funding decisions. Georgia's Hope scholarships and grants are contingent upon residency. They require students to be state residents before they qualify for tuition waivers. When passed in 1993, then governor, Zell Miller, wanted to keep Georgians local, and invest in Georgia's economic future. Additionally, town and gown institutions have played critical roles in fostering community partnerships (Martin et al., 2005) and reconciling regional identities with institutions' economic engagement (O'Mara, 2012). Contemporary student success conversations have similar objectives, yet they place greater emphasis on social components of place and space. For example, in- and out-of-state tuition concepts and practices have implications on place. More specifically, fluctuating costs of attendance are a function of spatial variables like boundaries/borders, distance, and residency that vary based on location.

Noteworthy is that spatial considerations are just as important in international contexts as they are in U.S. contexts. Though *rural* and *urban* are terms familiar in the U.S., other nations use different language to refer to similar concepts. Ali et al. did not include either term in their linguistic repertoire, but instead described place in relation to distance to/from the capital city, as most students studying in top ranked private universities were from there (Ali et al., 2018). Other researchers are not as quick to abandon the terms completely, though. van Pang (2022) explored the challenges and barriers rural students encountered as they transitioned into higher education. Perhaps more pertinent to the U.S. regarding international conceptualizations of place and higher education are the students who navigate multiple geographic identities and environments. International students who attend higher education institutions in the U.S. experience its systemic

inequities differently than native U.S. students. They encounter more barriers seeking financial aid (Mihut & Helms, 2019) and carrying heavier credit hour loads than domestic students (Kuo, 2011). Regardless of region, place in higher education functions to penalize perceived outsiders, reward insiders, and gatekeep access to specific institutions.

When centering rurality as a feature of place, that narrative shifts. There is an inherent priority diverted away from gatekeeping places and redirected toward extending their boundaries. Practices that promote career pathways in rural communities (García-Casarejos & Sáez-Pérez, 2020) and reimagine how to admit rural students into postsecondary institutions (Jones & Cleaver, 2020) are just a couple of examples. Stalling the shifts in narratives are conflicting and conflating conceptions of rurality. The Census categorizes places into urban and rural dichotomies but fails to describe rural places. Instead, the Census views rural areas as ones that are not urban, meaning their entire existence is predicated on residuals. Researchers compound the issue by continuing to feed into the urban-rural (UR) divide. Topics like UR high school attainment gaps (Song & Tan, 2022) and UR digital literacy gaps (Lembani et al., 2020) infiltrate themselves into research about rurality. The practice and pattern of upholding the UR divide has resulted in unnecessary comparison and competition between both geospatial descriptors; so much so, that Azano and Biddle (2019) called for an end of perpetual deficit ideologies and false dichotomies that harm rural communities.

The overall (in)attention to rurality as a multi-dimensional, nuanced, and intersectional way of life grounds this study. I use college access and student success landscapes as a vessel to explore rurality, particularly as it comingles with Blackness. While doing so, I wrestle with social, political, and racial phenomena in and out of higher education that have bearing on rural livelihoods. I assert that beyond brick-and-mortar buildings called institutions, bureaucratic

structures; (in)equity; and (mis)aligned interests and intentions comingle to inform rural practitioners' practices.

There is an integral relationship between place and practitioners' work. Practitioners in higher education assume a myriad of roles within institutions. In student affairs arenas, they play critical roles in functional areas like admissions (Thornhill, 2019), student conduct (Klobassa & Laker, 2018), and career services (Donald et al., 2018). Many student affairs professionals operate under the goal of promoting student success, which scholars conceptualize and define differently. Practitioners must be responsive and responsible to students' needs based on their place-based needs (Viggiano et al., 2021), which alludes to them needing a keen sense of social and global awareness. They must also be equipped to revamp student support services and geographies to serve changing student populations (Alcantar et al., 2022), an issue that is attentive to campus access issues. Further, in the wake of public health crises, remote learning and virtual work sites also impact practitioners' work (Tesar, 2020). As a result, practitioners have inevitably been immersed into the digitization (Castañeda & Selwyn, 2018) and datafication (Selwyn & Gašević, 2020) of higher education, which shift how and how they do their work. Kinzie and Kuh (2017) offered nine propositions about student success– 3 of which are related to the context of college access practitioners and the nature of their work as it varies across institutional and organizational contexts. They are (1) student success is a process that begins long before students first enroll in postsecondary education; (2) The proverbial village is needed to help a student succeed. One's family, home community, K–12 teachers, as well as everyone on the college campus influence success in college, particularly in classroom experiences and challenging but supportive relations with faculty, staff, and peers; and (3) an institution's total learning environment—its context and culture—matter to how student success

is defined, addressed, and achieved (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017, p. 22). The first and second propositions acknowledge specific student success work that precedes the scope and boundaries of higher education institutions. The third proposition centers differing learning environments and attributes varying contexts to language and discourse utilized.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of literature about college access practitioners and their work in rural educational contexts. It begins with an overview of practitioners' presence and roles in contemporary college access and student success models. Building from the former, it continues by interrogating what the concept of an institution entails and who has constituted and qualified as institutional actors in college access landscapes. These models and concepts illustrate which practitioners have historically had power and voice to inform students about college. Finally, it concludes by analyzing the extent to which race is addressed and conceptualized at the intersections of college access, rurality, and Blackness.

Modeling Practitioners' Presence and Roles

Student success models provide insight into various components and considerations needed to facilitate student success but are inadequate in pinpointing specific actors and processes that cooperate throughout implementation. Additionally, and perhaps more discreetly, models shed light into how actors define, describe, and conceptualize student success. Weatherton and Schussler (2021), for example, noted how researchers described student success. Four categorical definitions they ascribed to student success discourses based on broad conceptualizations of it were about (1) measuring student success, (2) interpreting data, (3) recommending next steps for policy and practice; and (4) relating it to student outcomes (Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). Three of four of those tenets carried quantifiable underpinnings and undertones, insinuating that student success was numerically oriented. These and other

scholars (see Lord et al., 2019; Joseph et al., 2017; Barhoum, 2018) placed great emphasis on practices and policies that facilitate student success across educational pipelines.

In "Pipelines, Pathways, and Ecosystems: An Argument for Participation Paradigms," Lee (2019) highlighted how student success metaphors guided research and practice. Haphazardly (mis)using language held ramifications for academic support programs and the students served by them. In response to this dilemma, some scholars challenged the pipeline discourse as it related to higher education attainment. In its replacement, Pitcher and Shahjahan (2017) offered lemonade discourses instead. Their conceptual reframing consists of three terms: mixing, tasting, and digesting. Mixing refers to social locations and power structures that intermingle to create complex situations for college-going students, particularly amplifying inequity during preadmissions phases of enrollment. Pitcher and Shahjahan (2017) conceptualized tasting in different ways. Tasting referred to institutional actors, specifically admissions counselors, who use their power to evaluate the quality and utility of students' mixtures in relation to the institution (Pitcher & Shahjahan, 2017). It can also refer to institutions' (in)abilities to recognize and disrupt oppressive structures for marginalized student groups. The extent to which institutions attend to and achieve the former reinforces sweet and sour intentions, goals, and functions. Relatedly, tasting also describes the process students engage in as they experience the rewards and consequences of institutional (in)actions. Digesting refers to the evolutionary nature of students' social locations as they navigate the impact of institutional structures.

The extent to which scholars adopt loose or rigid definitions of student success is inherent in how they discuss student success models. Higher education scholars developed student success models with varying understandings of what students needed and how institutions could

support them as they matriculated through postsecondary experiences. Coupled to those conceptualizations were discursive assumptions that student success models had entry/exit points, checkpoints, and turning points that serves as markers/identifiers of students' success.

Student success conversations would be remiss if they did not acknowledge the significance and shortcomings of Vincent Tinto's work. In his article, "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research"— published in 1975— he offered a conceptual model for understanding drop out from college. He proposed that students' interactions with peers and faculty, their academic performance, and their intellectual development had implications on their commitments to stay or leave college (Tinto, 1975). This model included three pre-college determinants– family background, individual attributes, and schooling– which described biological or ecological factors outside the scope of students' or individual actors' control. Tinto's limited conceptions of stakeholders beyond family dynamics who impact college-going and college-staying behaviors weakened the credibility of his model.

Over a decade later, Tinto (1988) discussed threats to student success by explaining student stages of departure– separation, transition, and incorporation. He described separation as an emotional and physical process that students undergo as they prepare to abandon the comforts and identities of their home lives to enter the newness associated with collegiate experiences. Similarly, the transition stage focused on how successful students assimilate into and persist through college cultures. The last stage, incorporation, referred to students' abilities to network with institutional actors to build meaningful relationships that help them integrate into college. Though these stages were more process-oriented than Tinto's (1975) model, they still did not consider the range of experiences and circumstances that students circumvented while at institutions.

Critics of Tinto's models and broad scholarship, including himself, have challenged their shortcomings. Researchers noted that attrition occurred for a range of reasons, including those that were cultural (Out & Mkhize, 2018), socio-economic, and political. Zepke (2015) called for a more holistic view of student success that included considerations of student agency, community involvement, and well-being. Overall, Tinto's early work lacked consideration for multiple institutional types, especially those that typically serve marginalized students. He also did not explicate or acknowledge rich experiences and knowledges that marginalized students gleaned from to navigate postsecondary experiences. These and similar critiques continue to investigate and interrogate which populations student success models served best.

Wirth and Padilla (2008) developed a local student success model (LSSM) and an implementation model for student success (IMSS) at a community college. The LSSM stated that "successful students on any campus are successful because they are able to become expert students on their campus" (p. 703). Through this lens, students glean from previous and current collegiate experiences to overcome barriers they encounter. The IMSS, informed by the LSSM, offers direct implications for institutional actors, namely student services practitioners. It requires practitioners to recognize student barriers and intervene to provide them with appropriate information to redirect their course toward graduation (Wirth & Padilla, 2008). The extent to which students advance past obstacles indicates their likelihood to approach graduation or dropout beforehand (Wirth & Padilla, 2008).

Yang and Li (2020) researched how institutional stakeholders transformed accessible data to support student success efforts. The main groups of actors included in their study were students, faculty, professional/support staff, and employers. They used the salience model for stakeholders, which showed the relationship between power, urgency, and legitimacy in their

work as an indicator for their contribution to student success (Yang & Li, 2020). In their goal-oriented analysis of definitive stakeholders for student success, they portrayed practitioners' roles from three support perspectives: advising, career/employability, and extracurricular activities. Each of the three umbrella term re-classifications described practitioners' roles in providing supports from postsecondary entry to exit.

Some student success models materialize in less prescriptive ways, meaning they do not subscribe to a set of steps, stages, phases, or formulas. Through this lens, scholars, institutions, and institutional actors might not explicitly name their research or praxis as being, conforming to, or advancing a student success model, but they create discourses that uphold how to imagine student success work. For example, Davidson (2016) compared student affairs work at for-profit and not-for-profit institutions. On the surface, this work addressed how practitioners conceptualized their work, how their work socialized them to complete their work, and how they altered their practices to fit explicit and implicit scopes of their roles. More inherently, Davidson's (2016) study reified that student success work exists at varying higher education institutional types and those manifestations of the work differ depending on context.

Other scholarship has direct implications on student success practitioners' professional responsibilities. For example, Hoy et al. (2020) studied compassion fatigue and how it affected student affairs professionals who worked with undocumented students. Participants in their study noted being burdened and stressed when completing tasks outside of their job duties but continuing to engage in such work because they felt obligated to help students who needed it. Here, student success is not only associated with helping, but it runs perpendicular to faculty and staff success. It positions both stakeholders on opposite spectrums of student success, tasked with making tradeoffs and expending energy at the other's expense. Regan et al. (2014)

researched institutional actors'—namely faculty and practitioners— perceptions of the other group's contribution to student outcomes. Key noticings from them included an overall misunderstanding and underappreciation of institutional actors dissimilar to one's own and an awareness that disciplinary cultures and contexts affect how people's vantages of student success. Furthermore, findings showed that "professional staff undervalue their contribution to the student experience, and therefore to retention and success" (Regan et al., 2014, p. 542).

Not least of all are institutions' and institutional actors' contribution to this conversation. In their study of the perceptions of student affairs and services practitioners in Canadian higher education landscapes, Seifert and Burrow (2013) gleaned insights from participants in areas that included the following:

> Aboriginal student services, academic learning skills, accessibility/disability services, admissions and recruitment, athletics, counselling (personal, academic, and career), financial aid, health and wellness, international student services, leadership development, orientation, recreation, registrar, and residence life (p. 137).

Practitioners noted how changes in their day-to-day roles informed their understandings and commitments to student success. For example, they renounced their identities as educators and gravitated toward service provider identities because they found value in providing high-quality experiences to students, responding quickly to requests for help, and collaborating outside of the classroom, particularly to promote programs. They also realized how their roles evolved to accommodate shifting institutional goals and priorities. Their increased associations with service provider identities paralleled increased college access to non-traditional students. Hence, practitioners' service quality depended on how well they understood and adjusted to changing institutions.

At the institutional level, commitments to student success are communicated through scaled programs, practices, and policies. For example, ideologies that mirror those in Guided Pathways— a student success framework aimed at removing barriers and streamlining processes for students (Jenkins & Cho, 2013)— are adopted and adapted at rates that demonstrate their conceptions of transformation, change, and equity in higher education. Some of its key features like program mapping and intrusive advising address broader goals to ensure students graduate in a timely manner and receive intensive, collaborative support from institutional actors. Similarly, institutional improvement plans and strategic plans demonstrate what constitutes a quality education (Romero et al., 2021), steps and paces toward innovation (Hall & Lulich, 2021), and trajectories and justification for implementation strategies (James & Derrick, 2020).

Student success models have served as reference points to describe the evolution of student success throughout history. As noted, most student success models have been constrained to higher education discourses. Furthermore, dialogue about college access practitioners largely alternates between secondary and higher education contexts. Organizations' and respective actors' contributions to college access are limited and delimited to their own contexts. Considerations of regionality and regional culture add even greater nuance by supporting the power of geography and location in promoting related efforts. By situating student success models, college access practitioners, and rurality in conversation with each other, the present study fills a gap in the literature that fails to thoroughly pinpoint *who* is responsible for igniting students' success, *where* their work is situated, and *how* they engage in work.

Institutions, Institutional Types, and Institutional Actors

Undefined and loosely defined definitions of place shape approaches to practice. In a 2022 report titled "Introducing Our Nation's Rural-Serving Postsecondary Institutions Moving

Toward Greater Visibility and Appreciation," researchers at The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) introduced an evidence-based metric for identifying rural-serving institutions (RSIs). A key distinction they made was between rural located and rural serving institutions. They claimed that "…by focusing only on where the institution is located, this approach ignores institutions that serve rural communities and students but are not located in places formally classified as rural" (Koricich et al., 2022, p. 7). Though researchers acknowledged the complexity involved to categorize postsecondary institutions, they did not consider rural serving institutions outside of those educational contexts. By neglecting to include a broader range of rural serving institutions, researchers part of the ARRC consequently omitted practitioners who work outside of postsecondary education. This serves as evidence of the erasure of rural students and their experiences and generally uncomplicated definitions of rurality and rural student success.

College access practitioners' work in higher education is well documented. For example, Berumen (2015) researched how students interacted with student support services and their corresponding officers. Practitioners provided mentorship and guidance to students at various junctures of them accessing collegiate experiences. One recommendation Berumen (2015) offered was to look past *access* to reach higher education goals– an argument other proprietors of student success discourses (see Williams, 2017; Watt & Louie, 2020) made and supported. Though their claims were reasonable and warranted, they lacked consideration for other practitioners' work that has the potential and power to fulfill and exceed the goals that higher education promises.

Wang (2018) showed how student support workers' roles stretched into advocacy outside of higher education institutions. Participants in the study included advising and financial aid

practitioners who worked in California. They used their power to drive and inform policy that impacted undocumented students' access to college, a role framed as front-line work. Strategies they leaned on to support them included self-educating through research, staying cognizant of relevant policies, and making meaningful connections with students and colleagues impacted by the work. Like her, Kanagala & Oliver (2019) highlighted experiences of queer people of color student affairs professionals as they supported queer students of color. They identified participants who started identity-based groups on campus due to lack of specificity in diverse spaces. Themes that rose from their study included: vulnerability of queer students of color, healing spaces for queer student affairs professionals of color, coming out is still a challenge, and lack of inclusivity within LGBTQ spaces. Queer student affairs professionals also noted the connectedness they felt serving students they identified with and called for more extensive framings of intersectionality, specifically between racism and sexuality, and professional development at higher education institutions. Such labor is not new to the field of higher education. Practitioners assume advocacy roles in national associations like Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Aho and Quaye (2018) noted that professional organizations take on plights to centering racial equity and decolonizing the field. College access practitioners exist in and across an array of institutional and organizational types. In formal academic settings, actors perform access work in secondary and higher education institutions. Beyond that, and often omitted, actors enact access-related missions and plights in contexts that include nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, intermediary organizations, and think tanks.

Secondary Schools

Student success has broadened which sectors and sectoral actors have legitimacy in higher education. Goldrick-Rab and Mazzeo (2005) examined how No Child Left Behind connects to college access. Their research helped to leverage K-12 policies and data to inform student success after high school. Byproducts of these insights help to legitimize bridge programming and early college access efforts beginning as early as elementary school. Workers in these contexts, like teachers, principals, and counselors, have also risen to be informants and potential partners to help guide the trajectory of student success work in higher education. Secondary schools are hubs for college access and student success efforts. One reason is because they employ dreamkeepers— "teachers, counselors, and other school personnel who inspire student success" (Chambers et al., 2019, p. 7) and institutional agents who connect students to postsecondary educational opportunities (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Knight-Manuel et al. (2019) researched college-going cultures at high schools, specifically for Black and Latino male students. Actors presented in this study included teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff. Their findings indicated that actors' views of how to cultivate college-going cultures shifted throughout the duration of the study. By becoming more culturally relevant themselves, they were better able to model and reimagine what college-going should like for their students. Another finding centered on reframing accountability among stakeholders. Participants reexamined their institutional practices to promote college-going behavior by creating action plans, revamping instructional activities, and reorienting their framings of students' success away from deficit-mindsets.

Hammack (2016) studied institutional characteristics at charter schools that exemplify schooling cultures conducive for enhancing upward and social mobility. One component of this

structure required students, teachers, and parents to agree to formal and social contracts to support one another. This practice mimicked Dowd et al.'s (2013) study used attachment theory to demonstrate how institutional actors build relationships with students as they support them through the college transfer process. Other strategic student success interventions school actors took in Hammack's (2016) study included expanding curricular thresholds to include requirements beyond state level standards; extending school days, weeks, and years; and refining entry requirements to onboard stakeholders into academic settings and cultures.

Teachers. Teachers are an important practitioner group who often accept the charge to facilitate college access conversations in secondary schools. Brooks (2018) researched whiteness and its relevance and significance when teaching in college access program. She painted narrative teacher portraits of two instructors' approaches to guiding their students. One teacher amplified whiteness and its rampant intrusion into her classroom community, whereas a second teacher aimed to decenter it. Brooks (2018) showed how practitioners' racialized decision-making is connected to how they promote college access.

In addition to facilitator hats teachers wear, they also inadvertently serve in other capacities. Kolluri et al. (2020) showed how teachers functioned as counselors to support college access efforts and help increase schoolwide capacity. Researchers positioned them as institutional agents who had power to empower students as they navigated college-going. They presented a model for positioning school personnel as empowerment agents, which showed how teachers– in comparison to college academic advisors— had greater access to students despite limited experience and dedicated time to help them. Findings from their study pointed to teachers being sources of untapped potential in college access discourses.

High School Students as Paid Laborers. High school students not only reap the benefits of college access; rather, they serve as supportive benefactors, too. Bahl (2021) presented a student-centered, work-based approach to support college access in schools. As part of formal job responsibilities, youth counselors leaned on strategies that some other institutional actors were not privileged to utilize. Most participants in their study valued one-on-one counseling sessions, as adults in their schools rarely provided that opportunity. Instead of theorizing students' experiences, youth counselors relied on resolutions strategies like engaging in conversation, providing emotional support, and relating to peers.

School Counselors. School counselors provide academic, emotional, and administrative support to students and schools. The means by which school counselors achieve their goals varies. Researchers have discussed how some counselors used specific strategies to support marginalized student populations. Groce and Johnson (2021) studied how group counseling was effective for encouraging, supporting, and socializing undocumented students toward to college access. Poynton et al.'s (2021) research showed how school counselors could advocate for systemic change related to college access and assess knowledge gaps among students in schools.

Beyond individualized efforts, scholars have begun to attend to how district make-ups and limited human capital impact counselors' workloads. Durham's (2018) research showed how locations where college access professionals (CAPs) work can be unstable and fluid. Her study shed light into two different types of college access professionals' experiences supporting students in Baltimore City Public Schools. Participants in her study consisted of one roving professional who served students at multiple school sites and one professional who served students at only one school site. Findings showed that both professionals utilized relationship-building skills with students to gain their trust, but school organizational factors and climates

either impeded or propelled their capacities to support students. The roving professional expressed how she felt over-extended and overwhelmed as she maneuvered between sites and large caseloads of student inquiries. The other professional communicated how help from other staff who did similar work, set meeting schedules with students, and high college-going institutional expectations made her work more meaningful and manageable. Findings showed that both CAPs utilized relationship-building skills with students to gain their trust and that school organizational factors impeded or propelled their capacities to support students. Implications from her study illuminated the need for students to have access to individualized support from knowledgeable professionals who facilitate the college-going process and for schools to reexamine their college-going culture from an organizational perspective.

Nonprofits, Community-Based Organizations, and Policy Outreach

Nonprofits and community-based organizations have long played critical roles in college access by providing mentorship, extended learning opportunities, and outreach services to students (Coles, 2012). Their roles have increasingly become more complex. Farruggia et al. (2020) studied partnerships between higher education institutions and nonprofit organizations. Organizational actors in their study were professionals who supported students through transition coaching and administrators over programming. Institutional actors they included were entry and mid-level administrators who were most directly engaged in student academic support services. One of their findings showed that practitioners from both realms believed one of the main purposes of their job was to reduce student barriers to college (Farruggia et al., 2020). Regarding sectoral relationships, two themes were important. The first is that partnering made identifying key people of contact easier, which strengthened ties and access into organizational and institutions bi-directionally. The second is that participants in their study noted how quality of

services rendered was an issue. Though they shared similar student-centric goals, practitioners between contexts did not communicate how to align their support with institutional policy, which was counterproductive to their purpose at times.

Organizations work exclusively to advance their own initiatives. Even when organizations market similar missions as secondary and higher education institutions, they rarely collaborate linearly to exchange varying levels of expertise and intelligence, thus hampering capacities to streamline college access efforts. This malignment illuminates inconsistencies in the boundary-spanning nature of college access work. Practitioners are expected to operate within boundaries but serve across them to produce access work. These conditions leave them little support between institutional and organizational entities to rely on as they plan how to execute tasks, a concept reflected in Kaynak and Barley's (2019) study of public affairs professionals.

Beyond serving as institutional actors who facilitate college access, all these practitioners are also institutional agents. Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined an institutional agent as "an individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high-status, either within a society or in an institution (or an organization)" (p. 1075). Institutional agents leverage their power to nurture students as they prepare for and navigate college. Stanton-Salazar (2011) went on to note how institutional agents' work functioned as "countervailing forces and interventions" (p. 1075) to offset societal inequities. One of the ways their work manifests in countervailing ways is through college access programs. College access programs are programs designed to encourage, support, and/or facilitate college-going behaviors, decisions, and/or cultures. College-going behaviors include parental degree attainment, encouraging support systems, and exemplary academic performance (Knight et al., 2004; Fike & Fike, 2008; Carey, 2016). College-going decision factors include financial aid, institutional fit, and location (Meyer

et al., 2021). College-going cultures, in particular, are upheld through language used to reference college; frequency of college-related conversations; and by programs, secondary institutions, and other organizations that promote going to college. College-going cultures include strategic supports put in place to encourage and streamline processes related to attending college (Robinson & Roksa, 2016). College access practitioners' work is sketched within those characteristics with specific attention to racially, ethnically, and economically marginalized students; students who are members of LGBTQ+ communities; and adult learners.

College access practitioners' associations with isolated programmatic efforts have stalled and curtailed their advancement into student success discourses. Some of the earliest examples can be seen in the Higher Education Act, and its corresponding reauthorizations, which sparked a host of national programmatic services. Since then, institutions have adopted and adapted national goals and agendas, and they have tailored them to fit their institutional contexts. For instance, Sabay and Wiles (2020) studied collaborative efforts between South Seattle College– a 2-year community college– and The University of Washington– a 4-year university. Specifically, they focused on TRIO Student Support Services (SSS), federal student success programming, and how it was offered at both institutional types. Their work pointed to the boundary-spanning nature of programing as students matriculated to and through institutions. They framed such programmatic stability as an equity consideration for community college transfer students.

Other college access program conversations are linked and responsive to localized educational climates. Chlup et al. (2018) explored college access through Latina parents' perspectives and sought to identify similarities and differences about what they knew and needed to know about college readiness, college knowledge, and college access. Researchers defined college access as "a way of encouraging and preparing students for higher education that focuses

on a range of college-related skills" (Chlup et al., 2018, p. 23). The theoretical perspective that grounded their study was social capital, and they aimed to contribute to the literature by honing in on "pre-collegiate preparation programs that focus positively on working with involved parents" (Chlup et al., 2018, p. 26). Participants voiced difficulties and anxieties surrounding accessing college admissions information and understanding curricular language associated with the transition between high school and college. Researchers found that "culturally responsive and responsible efforts, information, and communication resulting in social capital are lacking between the schools and Latina/o families" (Chlup et al., 2018, p. 37). Implications from their study indicated cultural differences in interpreting and undergoing the college transition process and suggested parental engagement and involvement as key components of attaining college access. Their trickle-down approach– helping students by helping their parents– attends to nature and nuance of practitioners' range and reach.

Likewise, Núñez and Gildersleeve (2016) examined the influence of Migrant Student Leadership Institute– a socio-critical literacy outreach program– on migrant student participants' college access. The program's curricular and extracurricular activities sought to effect improvements in students' motivation, persistence, leadership, literacy, social science knowledge, and college participation (Núñez & Gildersleeve, 2016, p. 511). Rooted in Foucault's ideas of regimes of truth, researchers claimed that "the anti-migrant educational policy regime has historically framed migrant students as underachieving, uninvited, and outside of higher education opportunity structures" (Núñez & Gildersleeve, 2016, p. 503). Their work presented research from two separate studies– one that was quantitative and compared application, admissions, and enrollment data between institutional types and another that was qualitative and revealed participants' experiences. They revealed how sociopolitical factors

influence college-going behavior and perceptions of college access. Examples of practitioners discretely portrayed in programmatic lights further marginalize them from being included in student success models.

Rural Postsecondary Educational Landscapes

Research about rurality, in general, is limited, and within the context of postsecondary education, it is even more sparse. Most of it is student-facing. Tieken (2016) researched how rural, first-generation students perceived messages about the value of higher education. She noted how college access practitioners in secondary and postsecondary school settings– teachers, guidance counselors, and academic advisors– discussed the value of continuing education. Practitioners framed its importance through economic lenses, highlighting struggling rural contexts and thriving non-rural contexts. These dichotomies served as push and pull factors, respectively, encouraging rural students to seek higher education opportunities. Beyond ideological perceptions about value, Scott et al. (2015) explored how rural community college students perceived barriers to college enrollment. They found that inadequate preparation and insufficient finances impeded students' access to college. However, "the structural constraints and opportunities of rural schools are regularly shaped by adults' decisions, and adults can help or hinder students' pursuit of higher education through philosophically grounded policies, and individual actions" (Kryst et al., 2018, p. 2). Parental involvement and support facilitated students' access to college. Their discussion of findings had implications on the use of econometric models, which considered factors like how much money students spent on gasoline from traveling home to campus. Additionally, their research pointed to the use of cultural capital to further analyze disparities between rural and non-rural students.

Nelson (2016) further explicated the role of capital, namely social capital networks, that rural students gleaned from as they sought postsecondary education. She noted how rural students graduate high school at similar rates as non-rural students. She argued that rural students underwent processes by which they learned to translate social capital into educational attainment (Nelson, 2016). Those processes included peer and adult networks, college-going climates in secondary schools, and academic supports. However, she noted how difficult it was to pinpoint specific processes because the nature of rurality– including close ties with the community– prevented researchers from extricating singular concepts and contributors from others.

Nelson (2019) advanced her inquiry about the complexities of ties in rural students' collegiate experiences. In a 2019 study, she researched the extent to which rural and non-rural college graduates kept ties to their former networks and communities.

> …While non-rural respondents drew on family social capital and newfound sources of social capital on campus—including adult mentors and academically-inclined peers – their reports of high school and community social capital diverged from their rural peers. Non-rural students were less likely to feel prepared for college by their high school and empowered to seek out institutional resources. Further, although – like rural students – some non-rural students relied on high school peers to seed new networks and others preferred a fresh start, nonrural students did not have the same kind of "sense of place" linked to their hometown that rural students expressed (p. 110).

As she did in her 2016 study, Nelson (2019) used social capital to demonstrate how ideals upheld in rural life translated in students' collegiate lives.

Rural college students' livelihoods are also intertwined in institutional policies and practices. D'Amico et al. (2021) studied associate degree types and their outcomes when

transferred and translated into baccalaureate-degree-granting spaces. They found that Associate of Applied Science (AAS) transfers, compared to other associate degree transfers, encountered more obstacles with credit transfer and loss (D'Amico et al., 2021). They also noted that AAS transfers came from the poorest, and often the most rural, towns and cities. Implications from their work pointed to and framed access practitioners as policy makers who inform how articulation agreements stifle or promote equity. Additionally, their research insinuates greater responsibility to be placed on access practitioners, specifically for them to assume researcher, sociologist, economist, and political scientist roles to inform their approaches, practices, and decision-making.

These works illuminated how rural college access as a concept reflected sociological sentiments. Goodhart's (2017) terms of *anywheres* and *somewheres* underpinned several works. *Anywheres* referred to people who embraced global mobility in search for individual success. Their sentiments are captured in the following statement: "I can go anywhere and do anything." *Somewheres*, on the other hand, referred to people who associated themselves in terms of place. They are more communitarian than individualistic. They might stifle their own upward mobility to remain close to home, family, and what they consider to be tradition. Similarly, research pointed to feelings of fatalism, whereby students felt that, because of their physical and geographic location, their futures were already predetermined. Such a noticing can also be positioned within Perna's (2006) model of college choice, which framed college access as a sociological issue. Gleaning from Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of social capital, she highlighted (1) interrelated, complex layers students considered about college choice and (2) micro, meso, and macro contexts that informed decisions. Ties between people and institutions were key to understanding dynamic relationships to college access, geography, and rurality.

To further understand how rural college access has been discussed, it is important to note how research has been framed. Though scholars place rurality and college access discourses in conversation with each other, they waver between addressing the terms from deficit and strength-based mindsets. These framings are important considerations when seeking to transform the language associated with college access. To better grapple with them, consider the work of Shaw (2006) who illuminated the intricacies of access-oriented, deficit framings in food desert conversations. She divided access into three sub-categories: ability, asset, and attitude— drawing attention to the practices that enable, excuse, and preclude access-based disparities. She defined the first classification, ability, as "anything that physically prevents access to food which a consumer otherwise has the financial resources to purchase and the mental desire to buy" (Shaw, 2006, p. 241). The second classification, asset, is "lack of any financially valorisable asset that prevents consumption of food the consumer can otherwise physically access and has the desire to consume" (Shaw, 2006, p. 241). The third classification, attitude, means "any state of mind that prevents the consumer from accessing foods they can otherwise physically bring into their home and have the necessary assets to procure" (Shaw, 2006, p. 242). Her work pushes me think about the conditions and practices that make college-access work permissible and sustainable.

For the most part, Amalia Dache-Gerbino's geospatial work has positioned college access as an issue of ability. Ability includes physical barriers that preclude access to and through places; therefore, multiple dimensions and conceptions are significant. In her 2016 work, she introduced *college desert* and *college oasis* as terms rooted in critical spatial analysis and used to describe limited postsecondary options and plentiful, diverse postsecondary options, respectively (Dache-Gerbino, 2016). She studied high school students' physical access to colleges and universities in Western New York. Her study was rooted in a Critical Geographic College

Access (CGCA) theoretical framework, which interrogated how geographic structures oppress communities, especially those consisting of large populations of racially and ethnically minoritized individuals (Dache-Gerbino, 2016). To collect data, she geocoded the 2014 dataset of all postsecondary institutions in the United States via the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS) and compared it in relation to distal points in Monroe County (Dache-Gerbino, 2016). To analyze data, she used two types of spatial analysis– spatial statistics and proximity analysis (Dache-Gerbino, 2016). She found that higher education resources were least abundant in areas with the most need in terms of population demographics, economic characteristics, and educational attainment (Dache-Gerbino, 2016). A year later, she framed *college oases* and *college deserts* as "postcolonial geographies" through her study of urban and suburban college access geographies. Such a linguistic pivot provided a reframe for considering the historical remnants of geospatial configurations. Using Census and Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS) data, she found that there was interrelationship between the racial make-up of geographic areas, institutions, and community planning efforts (Dache-Gerbino, 2017).

Like Dache-Gerbino, Ardoin and McNamee (2021) thought about spatial considerations in the context of rural college access. However, many of Ardoin's solo and collaborative works (see Ardoin, 2017; Ardoin & maritinez, 2019; Martin & Ardoin, 2021) discussed rurality through an asset lens, specifically, attuning to relationships between class and college access. In *College Aspirations and Access in Working Class Rural Communities: The Mixed Signals, Challenges, and New Language First-Generation Students Encounter*, Ardoin (2017) presented a case study of a rural community whose institutional actors regularly navigated college-going processes. She emphasized that "the experiences of rural students, public schools, and communities are best told

by those who live the experience" (Ardoin, 2017, p. 1). Key to her findings was understanding that the high school, as an institution, and its actors, as institutional agents, were essential in facilitating rural student college access. She and others have also factored gender (Hallmark & Ardoin, 2021) and race (Crumb et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2020), for example, into related discourses. Features of asset framings show up in more pointed discussions about the interstices between rurality and social class, like income status. Dyce et al. (2013) explored the impact a college access program had on parents' and students' college aspirations and confidence, and they based their analysis on family income status and parental degree attainment. Their study was grounded in the conceptual frameworks of social and cultural capital, and the participant population consisted of 9th grade students and their families. They found that most students, among the 75 total participants, relied on family as a source for college access information, more than half of the students began verbalizing interest in college as early as middle school, and over a third of the students engaged in regular conversations about college (Dyce et al., 2013). Their work puts rurality into perspective when considering many rural communities are socio-economically disadvantaged and with few or limited financial assets.

Attitude discourses are reflected through policy decisions. Attitudes refer to states of mind and lines of reasoning used to explain decision-making, specifically in the absence of physical or financial barriers. Bell (2020) discussed the politics of designing tuition-free college. Research questions she tackled were as follows: "How does the inclusion of a family income cap shape public perceptions of tuition-free college? How does the inclusion of academic merit requirements shape public perceptions of tuition-free college?" (Bell, 2020, p. 889). Using policy design theory, she showed how power and oppression frameworks embedded within policymaking targeted, marginalized, and disenfranchised certain populations. Further, she found

that region and age influenced the effect of policy design on how the public perceived tuition-free college. These policies are significant, especially considering rural students' identities and needs when seeking postsecondary education.

Summary

In the first section of this chapter, I discussed student success models and the messages that each sent about student-centered commitments and priorities. Nearly all were geared toward college completion, a goal inundated with pressure imposed by neoliberalism, specifically the College Completion Agenda (Rhoades, 2012). Rural communities are among the most marginalized who have felt that duress the greatest, as rurality tends to be geared toward fueling local economies through education and employment. Leaders in these localized contexts expect students to "stay put" and plant roots in rural communities. They relish in the idea and hope that local inputs (funding and other resources) will yield outputs (students-turned-workers) who serve and support the sustainment of such inputs. In essence, local leaders expect a return on investment, and they make decisions to foster a cyclical relationship. This phenomenon is transactional, as undertones of "I scratch your back, you scratch mine" underpin it. Consequences include institutions prioritizing job-readiness through messaging and practices. For example, Zepke (2018) stated that "currently, student success is defined by behavioural outcomes, generic skills, capacities, and key competencies, all narrowly derived from economic priorities focused on skills required in the workplace" (p. 442). As institutions internalize prioritize job readiness, curricular decisions and community partnerships, for example, follow suit in their priorities, which shifts the profiles of students exiting and entering institutions.

The second section discussed practitioners who do college access work. I highlighted how practitioners in and out of formal institutions have accepted the charge to support students

from various communities. Chambers and Gopaul (2010) grappled with actors' conceptions of "community" in relation to higher education's public good status. Participants mentioned that institutions were responsible for facilitating cultural diversity and transmission, regulating social change, educating the workforce, and providing general services to communities. Despite various references to communities, there is a shared understanding that institutions engage in off-campus activity. Since institutions do not, themselves, move, there is an inherent assumption that practitioners partake in boundary-spanning work between institutions and communities. Framing student success practitioners as boundary-spanners is important when considering the overarching situatedness of practitioners in higher education. Although their jobs may be geo-located and geo-planted in institutions, they are in service to stakeholders detached from the institutions. Determining the expansiveness covertly intertwined within their roles offers a foundational backdrop for evaluating their contribution to institution-wide capacity building, operational sustainment, and student success. Furthermore, because of their locality to student-centeredness, among other stakeholders, the extent of their boundary-spanning capabilities also impacts student success efforts across institutions. Centering college access practitioners seeks to re-engage access work and the professionals involved in directly promoting it in, out, and across educational arenas.

The third section of the literature review highlighted explicit rural college access research and implicit considerations embedded within student success language, practices, and polices. Upon reflecting on literature about college access broadly and rural college access narrowly, a few noticings are alarming. The first issue concerns data use. Though I previously mentioned Hillman et al.'s (2021) mapping study, I find it relevant to revisit it in this context. Their data practice yielded the following outputs:

> [It] Provide[d] the street address of accredited parent and child institutions and includes 'additional locations' that… provide[d] a wider and more complete list of where college opportunities are located: the cleaned DAPIP dataset includes 24,455 total locations while IPEDS includes roughly 7,000 (Hillman et al., 2021, p. 18).

Inherently, they grappled with the question of what constitutes as an institution. Though extant literature acknowledges the presence and necessity of institutional agents, it juxtaposes similar types of recognition for institutions. The second issue is that rural college access discourses are largely race evasive. Black people, for example, are not a monolith, so it is important to incorporate intersectional identities alongside Blackness to capture fuller pictures of people's lived experiences. Multiple demographic attributes and geographic contexts need to be in conversation with one another for student success discourses to advance. Though scholars have been successful at surveying college access scenes and naming socio-politics that impacted access, overall, there was limited discussion of race. Nuances about student demographics are still missing from student success discourse/literature. An exception can be seen here:

> Nearly one-third of HBCUs are RSIs, as are almost 37% of High Black-enrolling institutions, which indicates 40% or more of an institution's undergraduate population identifies as Black.20 Interestingly, a quarter of High Black-enrolling institutions are also High RSIs, which highlights the important role that RSIs play in serving Black students. (Koricich et al., 2022, p. 13).

Their research also acknowledged and countered "… prevailing stereotypes about rural places being exclusively white" (Koricich, 2022, p. 16). Other exceptions can be found in *Race and Rurality: Considerations for Advancing Higher Education Equity*, a 2024 book edited by Tyler Hallmark, Sonja Ardoin, and Darris R. Means. Throughout the book, researchers examine

rurality through the lens of students of color, broadly (Lefor & Worley, 2024; Cain et al. 2024), highlight unique state and regional contexts (Olguin, 2024; Herrerra et al., 2024), and interrogate deficit-oriented conceptions of rural life by reframing rural places as places of desire, for example (Puente, 2024). Black people and communities, specifically, are still underdiscussed racialized discourse in rural research, despite rural scholars often mentioning rurality as being deeply rooted in community and closely related to ties. Interestingly, Flowers (2024) centered Black, rural students at historically white institutions. Most of the participants in his study, however, did not attend higher education institutions with robust outreach programming designed for rural students. Additionally, as the title of his work, "Black and Rural in White Spaces: The Experiences of Black Rural College Students" suggested, the institutional backdrops of students' experiences were normed on whiteness. Since Black voices *and* Black places have been largely omitted from this discourse, corresponding and complementary ideologies are still missing from the conversation, an important issue when thinking about how Black logics tend to operate from communal vantages that are normed on Black thought (Williams & Taylor, 2022).

Chapter 3: Methods

The two research questions I posed are (1) How do practitioners' experiences and reflections about working in Black, rural communities in Alabama advance conceptions of rurality? (2) What processes and strategies support construction of a model for Black, rural student success? To answer them, with attention to the various phenomena outlined above, I chose to conduct a Critical Realist Grounded Theory (CRGT) study. CRGT has been an indispensable approach in practitioner-oriented, helping fields like nursing (Kempster & Parry, 2011) and social work (Oliver, 2012; Park & Peter, 2022), which resonates with the field of higher education and has methodological expedience for this study. Below, I illustrate the

appropriateness and utility of CRGT by highlighting its philosophical underpinnings and methodological origins and discussing the importance of this approach in relation to Black rural students' post-secondary success.

Critical Realism as an Onto-epistemological Standpoint

Generations of onto-epistemological thought foreground my study. At their core is realism, the idea that reality exists beyond and despite one's knowledge and experience. Nochlin (1971) described realism as the view of the existence and knowledge of the external world it affirms. He perceived the *existence* of reality to be extricable from the mind and body, but the *knowledge* about reality to still be accessible and attainable. Further, realism is concerned with patterns and relationships. Putnam (1975) stated, "Realism depends on a way of understanding the logical connectives (not just "truth", not just the rejection of reductionist analyses of the descriptive terms" (p. 194). Realism was, in essence, about unearthing the rationale behind connection and association.

Various other iterations of realism grapple about the relationship between reality and its function. For example, Putnam (1975) discussed internal realism and stated, "the realist explanation, in a nutshell, is not that language mirrors the world but that *speakers* mirror the world -- i.e., their environment -- in the sense of constructing a symbolic representation of that environment" (p. 483). Realism, through this lens, highlighted the dynamic relationship between people and discourse. Such an explicit turn toward the role that human actors play repositions them and their knowledge as real. Furthermore, Massimi (2022) described the directionality of perspectival realism as:

> the directionality of fellow travellers zig-zagging through the garden, with no ideal alas, but with plenty of inferential resources for reliably tracing and retracing our journeys, and not getting lost or permanently stuck along the way (p. 21).

Here, Massimi (2022) illustrates that pursuits toward realism are complex and not straightforward. Essentially, she advocates for a spirit of exploration and inquiry. Inherent within this conversation is a relationship between realist epistemology and methods. Though perspectival realists engage with knowledge adventitiously, they do so with strategic tools. Their commitment to query and movement guides what they see as real.

Extending upon conceptions of realism is the onto-epistemological standpoint of critical realism. Bhaskar (1978) grappled with the possibilities of realism by contextualizing reality into three domains– the real, the actual, and the empirical. The real represented the broadest of the three domains and referred to structures, mechanisms, and processes that govern the world. The actual comprised of events and phenomena that mediate what happens across the world. Finally, the empirical delineated people's individual, subjective experiences and perspectives in the world. House (1991) described their relationship in the following way:

> … Reality consists not only of what we can see but also of the underlying causal entities that are not always directly discernible. Reality, then, is stratified. Events are explained by-underlying structures, which may be explained eventually by other structures at still deeper levels. Hence, the process of scientific discovery is continuous (p. 4).

Several points are important here. First, distinctions between the real, actual, and empirical acknowledge and underscore the role of the social world on reality. Essentially, the way people view and navigate the world depends on the extent to which they are situated within a scope of

society. Second, what is real is not synonymized with what is known. As scope increases from micro- to meso- and macro- levels, knowledge about all levels is not necessary for them to exist. Critical realism advances realism in that it does not focus on "a purely conventional distinction between 'micro' and 'macro', [and] it appeals to the real ontological distinctions between the various layers or 'strata' in the natural and social worlds (Gorski, 2013, p. 659). Instead of power solely radiating from person to structure, critical realism interrogates what occurs at meso-levels. This idea is key when thinking about the causal nature of phenomena. Before acknowledging or analyzing causation, the scope of reality may appear remote or abstract. Therefore, when engaging with reality, one must realize that it is an iterative process that occurs over time and is sensitive to structures, events, and experiences.

Researchers play a critical role in actualizing critical realist onto-epistemologies. Ferguson (2022) stated, "Instead of viewing scientists as either removed, unquestioned experts or biased, untrustworthy agents, I argue that critical realism as a paradigm of science positions scientists as experts in theoretical knowledge that can work together with others in service to the public as well as engaging in basic scientific research." (p. 1656). Researchers can even think about their active role in research as critical realists offering insights into the three domains of reality that Bhaskar (1978) conceived. Researchers operate within the empirical when they engage with research participants through firsthand accounts. As the micro- level, those one-on-one experiences shape a type of reality. Additionally, researchers and research participants grapple with the actual together by discussing events and enacting an event, themselves through each encounter. Critical realist ideologies also push critical realists to make connections within the actual by showing how events across various contexts are related. Then, researchers reflect on the domain of the real, considering macro-level causes, changes, and impact that affect the

other two domains. Critical realism tasks researchers with iteratively traversing those domains and using theory and their expertise as tools.

Coupled to discourses around critical realism is its more recent iteration of dialectical critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008). Houston (2022) described the concept in six steps: (1) Understanding the reality of presence; (2) Noticing what is absent in presence; (3) Connecting absence with emergence; (4) Committing to absent absence; (5) Understanding the causal factors perpetuating absence; (6) Enacting transformative change to absent absence. These steps challenge researchers to contemplate what is real, not just from experience, but from social structures seen an unseen, felt and unfelt. Dialectical critical realism, then, grapples with presence and absence as means of transformation and change.

The Evolution of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a methodology that focuses on generating theory to explain phenomena. Its evolution can be conceptualized in three waves. The earliest wave is positivist and requires researchers to disengage with existing theory while theory-making. It catapulted in the mid-1960s when Glaser and Strauss, two sociologists, conducted a study about hospitalized patients' awareness of death and its relationship to caretakers' communication and disclosure decisions. After several months collecting and analyzing comparative data between hospitals and medical stations and departments, they created a theory called awareness of dying (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). Essentially, their theory offered varying levels of awareness that sought to explain its influence on caretakers' interactions with hospitalized people, especially those at risk of dying. Their study pioneered and positioned grounded theory as a methodology. Two years later, Glaser and Strauss (1967) wrote about the process of generating theory in their book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. One of their central

arguments was the idea that theory could and should be grounded, or rooted, in data, hence the name, grounded theory. One of their critiques of prior theory-based research was a general conflation between grand theory— abstract explanations of phenomena— and theory that functioned more pragmatically, particularly in the field of sociology.

A key axiological claim undergirding the earliest wave of grounded theory stated, "the theory should provide clear enough categories and hypotheses so that crucial ones can be verified in present and future research; they must be clear enough to be readily operationalized in quantitative studies when these are appropriate" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3). The idea that theory needed to be verified and in service to quantitative methods also characterized it as positivist. Such discourse insinuated a desire for reproducibility, which describes research methods, results, and inferences that can be repeated, reproduced and regenerated (Goodman et al., 2016). Reproducibility, through this lens, reiterated perceived certainty and objectivity that is a mainstay in positivist epistemology. Further, data collection and analysis complemented such a way of thinking. For example, early practices of comparative analysis pushed researchers to think about generalizability. Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated, "by comparing where the facts are similar or different, we can generate properties of categories that increase the categories' generality and explanatory power" (p.24). Relatedly, they offered the term, constant comparative, to describe the iterative nature between explicit data collection, coding, and analysis procedures. Prior to the constant comparative methods, theory-making had been commonly associated with engaging all data with primary goals to validate, disprove, reaffirm, and revise theory, but this method was unique in that it reframed the threshold for data collection/analysis to be saturation. Saturation entailed "reaching the point in the research where collecting additional data seems counterproductive; the 'new' that is uncovered does not add that

much more to the explanation at this time. Or... the researcher runs out of time, money or both," (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.136).

Specific coding and sampling procedures also define positivist grounded theory. Several codes are noteworthy. To begin, in vivo codes are analytic codes based on the names that participants ascribe to them (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In vivo codes can be most useful when aiming to preserve the language and discourse of a specific context throughout analysis. Active codes are also key to grounded theory, as they rely on the use of gerunds to describe phenomena. In vivo and active codes can appear at any stage of the analytic process. The next few codes are process-based, and typically change in scope as data becomes more saturated. First, open codes are broad lists, diagrams, and memos that seek to categorize and, at times, connect themes. "During open coding, many different categories are identified. Some of these will pertain to a phenomenon. Other categories (later to become subcategories) will refer to conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.129). Second, axial codes are more pointed that open codes. "When analysts code axially, they look for answers to questions such as why or how come, where, when, how, and with what results, and in so doing they uncover relationships among categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 127). Such questions tug at logical connectives that are causal, correlational, and conditional, among others. Third, selective coding, is the most specific code type and describes "the process of integrating and refining the theory" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process includes crystalizing diagrams and memos previously initiated and ideated during earlier analytic stages.

Coupled to these codes are sampling techniques. Open coding and open sampling work in tandem to jumpstart data collection and analysis. Open sampling occurs when, "... selection of interviewees or observational sites is relatively open in the sense that one could choose every

third person who came through the door or could systematically proceed down a list of names, times, or places" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 206). At the beginning of a positivist grounded theory study, little is known about where or how to start, so open sampling allows for flexibility to begin at the researcher's discretion. Several sampling techniques have the potential to accompany axial coding. For example, "during relational and variational sampling, the researcher is looking for incidents that demonstrate dimensional range or variation of a concept and the relationships among concepts" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Another type of sampling is also important during this stage: theoretical sampling. "Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). Finally, during selective coding, discriminate and statistical, or random, sampling rise to importance. "When engaged in discriminate sampling, a researcher chooses the sites, persons, and documents that will maximize opportunities for comparative analysis" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 211). Also, statistical sampling is intended to "obtain accurate evidence on distributions of people among categories to be used in descriptions or verifications" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 62). Both discriminate and statistical sampling help researchers reach saturation and validate emerging codes.

The second wave of grounded theory is rooted in constructivism. Plainly, constructivist epistemology places value on individualized, subjective experiences. In a 1998 book chapter, von Glasersfeld stated:

> … from the constructivist perspective, scientific knowledge is made up of theoretical models which have proved viable within a given area of experience. Even if a particular

> scientific model is the best available at the moment, it should never be viewed as the only possibility of solving the problems for which it was designed (p. 3).

Von Glasersfeld noted the importance of context when mentioning specific areas of experience. Context sustains, reinforces, and affirms the viability of knowledge, which empowers and validates various subjectivities. From this vantage, constructivism welcomes endless possibilities and alternatives for viewing, experiencing, and describing the world.

Constructivist grounded theory pivots from positivist forms of grounded theory in the following ways:

> (1) assuming a relativist epistemology, (2) acknowledging your and your research participants, multiple standpoints, roles, and realities, (3) adopting a reflexive stance toward your background, values, actions, situations, relationships with research participants, and representations of them, and (4) situating your research in the historical, social, and situational conditions of its production (Charmaz, 2017, p. 299).

Concerning the first point, a relativist epistemology can be synonymized with a constructivist epistemology, in this instance. Essentially, both recognize that knowledge is dependent on subject, meaning it varies based on who or what is central to the issue. At surface level, the second point addresses the dearth of knowledge and experiences that shape the research study. Additionally, it invites researchers to play active roles while theory-building instead of disengaging themselves from data. The third point calls upon researchers to be reflexive through their work. Charmaz (2015) suggests reflexivity during the interview process and coding process to spark co-construction between researchers and participants. Finally, the fourth point pushes researchers to consider conditions and factors that contextualize research. One of the ways researchers do this is through coding and categorization. Charmaz (2002) noted that “line by line

coding during the initial coding prompts the researcher to study the data, to dispel earlier preconceived assumptions about the data, and to begin viewing the data analytically" (p. 1168). Further, when in vivo coding, for example, "constructivist grounded theory calls for studying the meanings of participants' terms in scrutinizing the discourses they invoke" (Charmaz, 2020, p. 169). Explicit attention to discourse helps position research socially, historically, and situationally. Following coding, Charmaz (2000) described the process of creating abstract conceptual categories from specific codes, whereby "the researcher specifies its properties, notes the conditions under which it arises, relates how it changes, describes its consequences, and ultimately, specifies its relationship to the other conceptual categories" (p. 1168).

The third wave of grounded theory revolves around critical realism. Kempster and Parry (2011) argued against a specific critical realist grounded theory technique and instead offered a reframe of the relationship between critical realism and grounded theory:

> Critical realism allows researchers flexibility in the interpretation of the data and comfort in validity terms from not being constrained within the data. Researchers can accept that respondents might not consciously be aware of or be able to describe or appreciate social processes shaping leadership manifestation (p. 117).

In essence, they reimagine what it means to be "grounded" in the data by broadening the scope of analysis beyond what is collected from participants. Such analysis is retroductive in nature. Retroduction is "a continuous, spiral movement between the abstract and the concrete, between theoretical and empirical work, involving both an interpretive and a causal dimension of explanation" (Belfrage & Hauf, 2017, p. 260). Further, CRGT seeks emancipation insofar as it centers marginalized people and communities (Looker et al., 2021), suggesting it is grounded in social change like it is grounded in data.

Noteworthy is that, in comparison to positivist grounded theory, neither constructivist nor critical realist versions of grounded theory is typically associated with prescribed, restrictive sampling, data collection, or data analysis methods. Belfrage & Hauf (2017) stated that CRGT is "a normative and reflexive methodology, which sensitizes the researcher to the field and vice versa, enabling the flexible incorporation of a range of different research methods" (p. 269). When conducting CRGT grounded theory studies, researchers tend to root their thinking in critical realism, while adopting key procedures part of positivist and constructivist grounded theory (see Table 1). For example, Bunt's (2018) study on the process of adoption acknowledged a set of assumptions that were informed by existing literature, yet reframed from holding new research to those standards, which is consistent with constructivist grounded theory. Additionally, that study utilized the constant comparative methods, which is present in positivist and constructivist iterations of grounded theory. Hoddy (2019) also retained classic grounded theory features and language to explain CRGT. For example, Hoddy (2019) maintained the use of theoretical sampling, axial coding, and constant comparative methods within CRGT. Moreover, as waves of conceptualizing grounded theory advance, many of its core attributes remain identifiable despite epistemic shifts.

Table 3.1

Comparison Between Positivist, Constructivist, and Critical Realist Grounded Theory

	Positivist	**Constructivist**	**Critical Realist**
Sampling	Open; theoretical; relational; variational discriminate; statistical	Theoretical	Theoretical
Data Collection	Mostly induction; some deduction	Abduction	Retroduction; some abduction
Coding	Open; axial; selective; in vivo; active	Open; in vivo; active; line by line	Open; axial; in vivo

Data Analysis	Constant comparative; saturation	Constant comparative; reflexive	Constant comparative; stratified reality
Axiology	Generalizability; reproducibility	Co-construction	Emancipation
Means to an End	Saturation; explanation	Abstract understanding	Complex causation and interrelationship

Sampling

CRGT has the flexibility to accommodate multiple types of sampling techniques. For the purpose of this study, I began with purposeful sampling of 5 participants then moved to theoretical sampling until study completion. "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth" (Patton, 2002, p. 273). Information-rich cases in this study were practitioners who work in predominantly Black secondary schools and HBCUs in rural Alabama. Using 2021 data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), I identified secondary schools that had been designated with a "Rural-Fringe," "Rural-Distant," or "Rural-Remote" locale and enrolled at least 51% students who identified as Black. Similarly, I used NCES to identify HBCUs that have been designated with "Town-Distant" or "Town-Remote" locales, indicating a minimum of 10 miles from an urbanized area. I framed practitioners who work in these contexts as information-rich cases because research shows that Black students rely on encounters with high school actors to navigate the college selection and going process (Goings & Sewell, 2019; Means, 2019), Black students have positive postsecondary experiences at HBCUs (Ibourk et al., 2022), and the role of rural HBCUs directly impacts Black, rural students and communities (Brewer, 2022; Nelson & Lindsey, 2020). Further, Hood (2007) stated:

> When researchers decide what categories of people or situations to sample and how many of each they want to include, they are using what I call an 'a priori' purposeful sample.

> However, if on the basis of their analysis of the first several cases they decide to sample other categories, they are using a 'contingent' purposeful sample (p. 156).

Based on this definition, I specifically used contingent purposeful sample at the onset of the study. Practitioners who served as information-rich cases helped inform subsequent participants. Based on information shared from them, I engaged in theoretical sampling, as outlined in the previous section. Through theoretical sampling, and eventual saturation, I centered the voices of 22 practitioners (see Table 3.2) whose experiences and reflections contribute to emerging data about rurality, race, class, and student success.

Table 3.2

List of Participants

Pseudonym	Race/Gender	Work Context	Geographic Marker
Institutional Practitioner A	Black/man	HBCU; 4-year; Private	Central Alabama
Institutional Practitioner B	white/man	PWI; 4-year; Public	Southeast Alabama
Institutional Practitioner C	Black/woman	HBCU; 4-Year; Private	East Alabama
Institutional Practitioner D	Black/woman	PWI; 4-year; Public	West Alabama
Institutional Practitioner E	Black/man	PWI; 2-year; Public	East Alabama
Institutional Practitioner F	Black/woman	PWI; 4-year; Public	Southeast Alabama
Institutional Practitioner G	Black/woman	PWI; 4-year; Public	Southeast Alabama
Institutional Practitioner H	white/woman	PWI; 2-year; Public	Northeast Alabama
Institutional Practitioner I	Black/woman	PWI; 4-year; Public	Southeast Alabama
Institutional Practitioner J	Black/man	PWI; 4-year; Public	Southeast Alabama
Institutional Practitioner K	white/man	K-12; PWI; 4-year; Public	Southeast Alabama
Institutional Practitioner L	Black/man	HBCU; 4-year; Public	Central Alabama
Institutional Practitioner M	white/woman	PWI; 4-year; Public	West Alabama
Institutional Practitioner N	Black/woman	PWI; 4-year; Public	Southeast Alabama
Institutional Practitioner O	Black/man	PWI; 4-year; Public	Central Alabama
Institutional Practitioner P	Black/woman	PWI; 4-year; Public	Southeast Alabama
Institutional Practitioner Q	Black/man	HBCU; 4-year; Private	East Alabama
Organizational Practitioner A	Black/woman	Local Government	South Alabama
Organizational Practitioner B	Black/woman	Non-profit; Civics	Central Alabama
Organizational Practitioner C	Black/woman	Non-profit; Mentoring	Central Alabama
Organizational Practitioner D	white/woman	Local & State Government	South Alabama
Organizational Practitioner E	Black/woman	Non-profit; Religious	Southeast Alabama

Data Collection

I collected data from 22 practitioners over the course of 4 months during the 2023-24 academic year. I conduced two virtual interviews per participant, with the exception of one participant who was unable to schedule a second interview. The first interview was unstructured, with respect to grounded theory methods. During unstructured interviews, "the researcher has conversations with interviewees and generates questions in response to the interviewees' narration. As a result, each unstructured interview generated data with different structures and patterns (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Recognizing that conceptions and practices of rurality take shape differently across workplace contexts, I also understood unstructured interviews to provide an opportunity for me to build organic relationships with participants and learn about the culture and norms of places without imposing acontextual assumptions onto their lived experiences. Unstructured interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and were centered on practitioners' work within their communities, institutions, and organizations. Unstructured interviews directed me to ask questions like the following: How do you and your institution/organization conceptualize rurality? How does your work contribute to Black, rural student success? What considerations do you make as you support Black, rural students? Nevertheless, I developed an interview protocol based on iterative data collection and analysis throughout the study's duration.

During the unstructured interview, I also facilitated a critical qualitative mapping (CQM) activity. Marx (2022) stated that CQM meets 4 criteria:

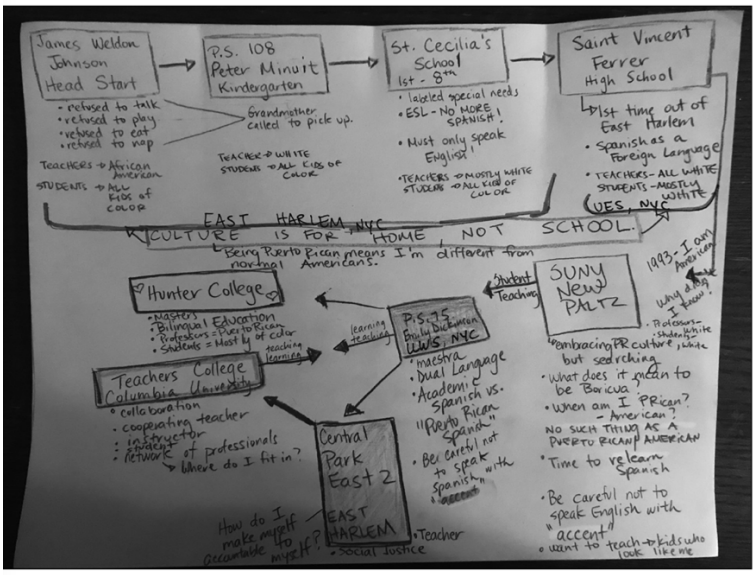
> … (1) centres participant experiences and perceptions, understanding them as meaningful knowledge; (2) involves participants illustrating a journey or process and then describing the illustration in an interview, conversation, or other format; (3) relies on the creativity

of illustration as an accessible entry into research; and (4) is contextualized within a critical theoretical and/or methodological framework that showcases the aims shared above (pp. 2-3).

Within the family of CQM research is journey mapping (see Figure 3.1), which is a socio-spatial approach to mapmaking that requires participants to illustrate processes of phenomena and highlight injustices throughout them (Annamma, 2017). Figure 3.1 shows an example of a journey map from another study that displays a researcher's process of becoming a teacher, explicating instances of race and racism across contexts (see Souto-Manning & Martell, 2019).

Figure 3.1

Image of a journey map used in Souto-Manning and Martell (2019)



Creating journey maps required participants to write, name, list, and/or draw institutions, organizations, and neighborhoods within the sphere of their student success service areas, denoting their journeys toward supporting Black, rural students' success. Participants had the option to create their journey maps via a web-based, interactive whiteboard a blank sheet of paper. Journey mapping probed and prompted questions such as: Draw the communities you

serve. What areas are rural? Where do students to get resources and information about post-secondary trajectories? Where are your partners and networks? Locate where students learn about strategies for seeking postsecondary trajectories. Where is your work best received? Where is your work most visible? Further undergirding CQM techniques is "accessing, integrating, and elevating local 'voices' (i.e., perspectives, values, knowledge, data) into the research project" (Laituri et al., 2023, p. 2), allowing participants to uplift localized features and facets of their student success work. CQM complemented CRGT by providing space for participants to visualize and reflect on hotspots that foreground, inspire, facilitate, and impact their work. Pinpointing such spaces helped me identify rich sources of rural student success efforts taking place, elicit contextualized information about rurality, narrow the scope of participant recruitment, and iteratively refine the purview of my study.

The second interview was semi-structured, partially based on codes from initial, unstructured interviews and partially based on emergent themes from iterative coding processes. I gleaned from two types of semi-structured interviews (SSIs): descriptive/corrective and descriptive/divergent. "The purpose of the contemporary descriptive/corrective SSI is to evaluate the dominant discursive representation of an experience by comparing it with participants' actual experiences," (McIntosh & Morse, 2015, p. 3) while descriptive/divergent SSI compares and contrasts perspectives and experiences across contexts of participants. In the context of my study, I used descriptive/corrective SSIs to prime data for retroduction and descriptive/divergent SSIs to consider variations in practitioners' experiences. I also developed an iterative interview protocol for semi-structured interviews, which primarily focused on policies and politics that practitioners navigated. Participants also discussed specific processes and strategies that support

Black, rural student success, which helped me directly respond to my second research question. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

Key to engaging in retroductive analysis is recognizing that it requires researchers to rely on "pre-concepts relevant for the analysis to understand better how particular imaginaries and projects are practically relevant and form part of social situations and organizational life" (Belfrage & Hauf, 2017, p. 260). Such pre-concepts help stabilize, shape, and inform data analysis. Table 3.3 provides a 12-step guide of how I engaged in constant comparative data analysis. After collecting data in an initial cycle of field work, I began data analysis through an initial conceptualization phase of the data, which consisted of 4 steps. The first step in this phase was a reflective moment, where I wrote reflective memos in response to each transcript and journey map. According to Birks et al. (2008), memos denote ideas, musings, and reflections captured throughout the entire research process and sway researchers between the empirical and the conceptual. In this CRGT study, analytic memos also captured and tracked themes, retroduction, and other analytic decisions. Additionally, it denoted how and why phenomena were present, absent, enabled, suppressed, or possible— key concepts that characterize critical realism. The second step in this phase was an inductive moment, where used ATLAS.ti web software to engage in open and in vivo coding on each transcript. As I developed codes, I created a code book via coding software and Excel. Saldaña (2016) noted that codebooks typically contain lists, descriptions, and data examples of codes. Next, was a deductive moment, where I looked to existing theories, discourses, and concepts to guide subsequent data collection and analysis (Belfrage & Hauf, 2017). My deductive moment also included axial coding, where I made connections between emerging codes, and reflexive memoing. In contrast to reflective

memoing, reflexive memoing "represents a methodical process of learning about self as researcher, which, in turn, illuminates deeper, richer meanings about personal, theoretical, ethical, and epistemological aspects of the research question" (Kleinsasser, 2000, p. 155). The last step in this phase was a constructive moment, where I created categories around codes. Following this phase, I collected data from a second and third round of participants, and repeated reflective, inductive, deductive, and constructive moments above.

Table 3.3

Step-by-Step Process for CRGT Data Analysis

Conceptual Phases	Description
Initial Cycle of Field Work	**Step 1:** Data collection from 5 information-rich cases.
Initial Conceptualization	**Step 2:** Reflective Moment – Reflective memoing intended to capture initial thoughts and reactions about each transcript and map. **Step 3:** Inductive Moment – Open and in vivo coding using ATLAS.ti web software to identify key ideas and discourses reflected in transcripts. **Step 4:** Deductive Moment – Axial coding and reflexive memoing intended to capture relationships between existing codes, literature, and theories. **Step 5:** Constructive Moment – Generate categories from existing codes.
Secondary Cycle of Field Work and Deskwork	**Step 6:** Theoretical sampling to collect data from approximately 8-12 subsequent participants. **Step 7:** Repeat "Reflective, Inductive, Deductive, and Constructive Moments" as described in Steps 2-5.
Grounded Conceptualization	**Step 8:** Refining, complicating, nuancing, and comparing initial and emerging conceptualizations.
Tertiary Cycle of Field Work and Deskwork	**Step 9:** Theoretical sampling to collect data from approximately 8-12 subsequent participants. **Step 10:** Repeat "Reflective, Inductive, Deductive, and Constructive Moments" as described in Steps 2-5.

Grounded Reconceptualization	**Step 11:** Finalize categories based on findings, research questions, existing theories, and transformation and change. **Step 12:** Construct a critical realist grounded theory.

Two types of conceptualizations help facilitate the construction of a critical realist grounded theory: (1) a grounded conceptualization and (2) a grounded reconceptualization. In the context of my study, the former— a grounded conceptualization— takes place between secondary and tertiary cycles of field and desk work. It serves as a pause and checkpoint to refine, complicate, nuance, and compare initial conceptualizations. The latter— a grounded reconceptualization— takes place at the end of analysis. It encompasses the final two steps, which are to finalize categories and construct the critical realist grounded theory. These steps required me to reposition my research study broadly within the scope of the research questions, findings, socio-political contribution. As a result, CRGT research has the potential to produce several outcomes, including "deepening or broadening of substantive knowledge; establishment of new conceptual connections; refinement or reconstruction of theory; and more profound challenges of existing theories" (Belfrage & Hauf, 2017, p. 260). Noteworthy, is that constant comparative methods require data collection and analysis to occur iteratively, so I completed most of the data analysis within the same 4-month time span as I complete data collection. Subsequent data analysis extended one additional month past data collection, which allowed me to more thoroughly engage in the retroductive process.

Relationality Statement

As a Black woman native and current resident of/in a Black, rural community in Alabama, I appreciate and value its unique place-based context. My geographic locale afforded me the opportunity to grow up and still live on family land, heirs property, with most of my

neighbors being immediate and extended relatives. I also attended (and still attend) a Black Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) church, which as a denomination was formerly considered a Colored Methodist Episcopal church actively involved in the founding and sustaining of two HBCUs— Miles College in Alabama and Lane College in Tennessee. I also attended the only predominantly Black K-12 school in my county school district, which in my case, meant that I often had amazing elementary and secondary teachers and administrators who were committed to centering Black thought, Black language, and Black community throughout academic and social student success efforts. It also meant that I became well-accustomed to dealing with disparity, as my school did not receive the same quality of resources or attention as larger, predominantly white schools across the district and county, more broadly.

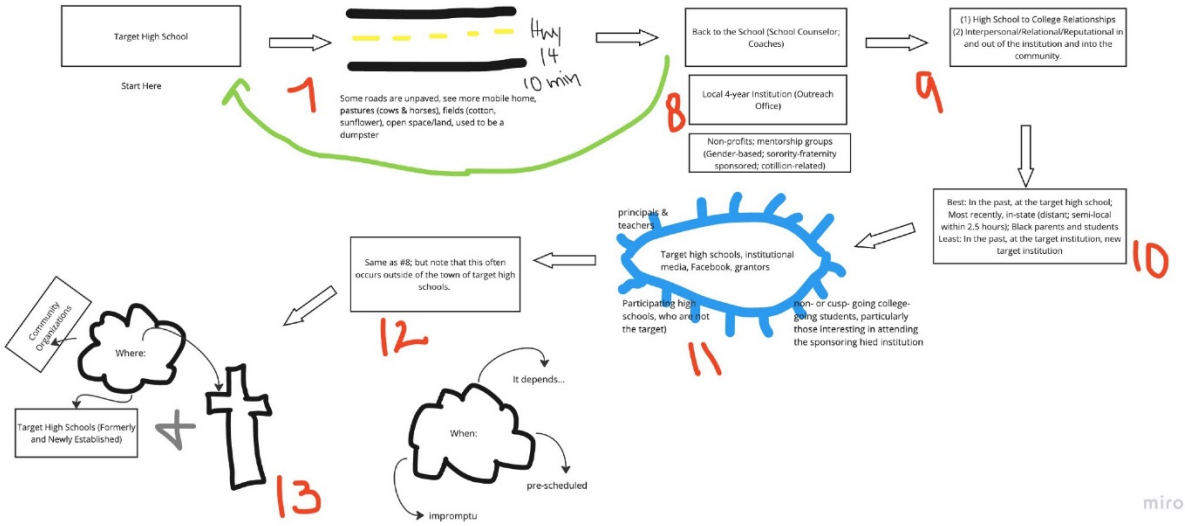
Notwithstanding that observation and reality is that my K-12 school was about 15 minutes from a notable PWI land-grant institution and about 20 minutes away from an esteemed HBCU land-grant institution. As a result, my school was a common target and partner school for educational outreach efforts led by both institutions. For example, I began postsecondary and college access programming in the 7th grade and continued throughout high school graduation. I also regularly attended academic and social residential summer camps, conducted on-campus lab-based research alongside undergraduate students, and obtained dual enrollment credit at the PWI throughout my high school tenure. Coupled to the fact that I graduated high school as a third-generation college student and as valedictorian, my transition into college— the same PWI where I formerly was on the receiving end of outreach programming — was virtually seamless.

Throughout undergraduate education, graduate education, and professional roles, I continued to engage in outreach efforts as a practitioner. Early in my career, I worked as a work-study student employee in the same office that planned and sponsored summer camps that I

previously attended, then eventually I became a director of one of its staple programs. Figure 3.2 shows my journey to plan that program during the 2022-23 academic year. I shared this journey map with each participant during virtual interviews, which allowed them to learn more about how I contextualized the complexities of Black, rural student success work, and it modeled a way for them to think about, frame, and organize their own journey maps.

Figure 3.2

Researcher's Journey Map



Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, I present four findings, which I offer as a set of logics that outreach-oriented practitioners (OOPs) in Black, rural communities assume and abide by as they engage in their work. Each finding— logics of agency, logics of perspective, logics of relation, and logics of communication— reflects an assemblage of OOPs' practice, contexts surrounding their practice, and their thought processes as they engaged in and navigated practice in context. I used

two types of data to construct these findings: quotes from participants' virtual interviews, including participants' journey maps, as well as metadata from analytic memos I generated through data collection and analysis phases. I organized the findings around logic models generated from analytic memos to underscore how practitioners rationalized and validated their practice and thinking similarly, beyond merely co-experiencing phenomena.

Finding 1: Logics of Agency

In the first finding, logics of agency, I emphasize how practitioners understood power and power limitations within their work to support Black, rural students and communities. Expressions and performances of power at various levels impacted how practitioners conceptualized their work, allies and partners to their work, and assessment to improve their work. Three sub-themes constitute this finding— noticing interferences in agency, pinpointing agentic entities, and enacting agentic styles of practice.

Noticing Interferences in Agency

Practitioners noticed and named instances when institutions and/or organizations interfered with their agency. They had an astute and acute awareness of the impact of policies and practices that hindered their abilities to operate autonomously and productively. Practitioners' acts of noticing were fully recognized during thwarted and halted plans to realize programs and accomplish their goals. The repercussions of institutions' and organizations' actions complicated how practitioners crafted, structured, and managed narratives about their Black, rural programs and often increased their workload. Institutional Practitioner D— a Black woman OOP at a PWI in west Alabama— expressed frustration with how her institution actively suppressed a rural medicine program that she directed.

> And then the way they have it on the website is so convoluted, it'd take you about 20 minutes to find our rural programs. And they have kind of stifled us from having social media. Now they're coming around, but we want to have our own Facebook page. We need our own Instagram page and our own Twitter [X] page so we can directly contact or be in front of the kids that we need.

Institutional Practitioner D described some of the challenges she encountered that precluded her communication with Black, rural students. Considering how she distanced herself from the website's creators and designers, evident by contrasts in "they" and "we" language, it was clear that she took issue with its layout and did not have input in it. Further, she mentioned being "stifled" from having program-specific social media accounts, indicating that she lacked authority, or experienced an inhibited state of agency, in such decision-making. Her experiences offered a few key points related to practice. First, she viewed program-specific websites, Instagram pages, and X pages as viable communication platforms for reaching Black, rural students. Second, she considered ease of access as an essential priority of communication platforms, particularly for "the kids that [she] need[ed]." Third, because her work operated beneath an umbrella of bureaucracies, so the visible presence of her program was partially dependent on authoritative forces that enclose and embed the program within various offices, departments, and colleges.

Table 4.1

Logic Model 1

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner D**
Logic	**Disjunctive Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** Institutional Practitioner D's institution permits her Black, rural program to operate its own social media pages, or her institution embeds her Black, rural program within the social media pages of larger programs, offices, departments, and colleges.

	Part 2: Institutional Practitioner D's institution does not permit her Black, rural program to operate its own social media pages. **Part 3:** Therefore, Institutional Practitioner D's institution embeds it within the social media pages of larger programs, offices, departments, and colleges.

While creating this logic for Institutional Practitioner's D comment, I noted the core barrier that interfered with her work. Essentially, she explained a real world where her institution suppressed her agency and an imagined, more idealized world where she had agency to operate and control her program's own social media pages. This logic model also framed permission and embeddedness as indicators of agency. Institutional permission behaved in a vicarious manner where, regardless of if it were granted, it affixed and crystallized itself as a necessary step toward progress. Put differently, the institution interfered with the streamlining of agency, so Institutional Practitioner D would have had to compromise and relinquish some of her agency by requesting institutional permission or merely making time to notice the need to obtain it. In a complementary fashion, institutional embeddedness interfered with direct access to agency. The further embedded Institutional Practitioner D and public-facing information about her program were within the institution, the greater control larger programs, offices, departments, and colleges had to exert. This dynamic enlarged the presence of upper-level administrators' practice that materialized during programmatic implementation and imposed upon work at micro-levels, creating a feigned sense of agency.

Like Institutional Practitioner D, Institutional Practitioner J— a Black man OOP at a PWI in southeast Alabama— also noticed great extents to which powers beyond his control affected his agency. Institutional Practitioner J mentioned his experiences contacting regional news outlets.

> So, we have 4-H events and stuff in my county all the time. I would invite WSFA and WAKA and all that stuff. They never come. We have water festivals, safety days, the

> scholar bowls, we have cycling club things, all kinds of stuff going on with 4-H. And they never come to it. However, when those [students] did the shooting, they were all over it.

According to Institutional Practitioner J, news outlets deprioritized and overlooked Black, rural student success events in favor of violent acts in Black, rural communities. Despite providing news outlets ample opportunities to report on county-wide 4-H events, he stated that they never accepted the invitation. Contrarily, when there was a shooting in the county, those same news outlets readily provided coverage. From his purview, news evaded positive narratives of rurality in Black communities in favor of negative, deficit-oriented narratives. In this example, several practices interfered with and restricted his agency. First, by ignoring a Black, rural practitioner, WSFA and WAKA silenced his voice and his students' voices, jeopardizing their individual and collective agency. Second, that discriminatory practice delimited a place-based agentic boundary around Institutional Practitioner J, essentially denying him access to more expansive audiences. Third, it prevented Institutional Practitioner J from balancing the already-tilted narrative of Black, rural communities. In terms of noticing, Institutional Practitioner J recognized the need to and possibility of disrupting deficit narratives about Black students in his county. His 4-H programming functioned to dilute and neutralize perceptions that were biased toward the demise of Black communities.

Table 4.2

Logic Model 2

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner J**
Logic	**Disjunctive Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** Media outlets demonstrate their concern for and commitment to Black, rural students and communities by reporting on educational and social progress or by reporting on violence.

	Part 2: Media outlets do not report on Black, rural communities' educational and social progress. **Part 3:** So, they report on Black, rural communities' violence.

Though I structured Institutional Practitioner J's logic model like Institutional Practitioner D's logic model, I went beyond framing interferences in agency as a barrier and highlighted its affective and systemic implications. Notes of desired rectification, obstinate refusal, and recurring disenchantment coiled throughout his comments. Institutional Practitioner J essentially viewed news outlets' decisions with practice as a grievance and disappointment. Additionally, I illuminated how such a practice rewarded violence and was, ironically, an act of violence in itself when contemplating ethical considerations and practical tendencies to consistently engage in skewed reporting practices.

Contextualizing Agentic Entities

As practitioners became acclimated to various contexts of their work, they began to acknowledge nuances within agentic entities, namely their respective institutions and organizations. These entities were a combination of people, programs, institutions, and organizations. Institutional Practitioner M— a white woman OOP at a PWI in west Alabama— identified her institution's mission statement as an explanation for her and others' grant writing practices. She stated, "We're often not looking for grants that are going to make the university bigger and better. We're looking for grants that are going to let us do our outreach to the schools." Institutional Practitioner M's priorities remained to her community-based constituents, including K-12 schools and students in Black, rural communities. Her practice to prioritize her community over her institution was savvy, political, and subversive. While expressing strong views about the role of grants at her institution, she discussed her practice of redirecting resources to center and empower non-institutional entities. According to her, she rejected the

assumed responsibility to make the university "bigger and better," and instead, she worked in service to external partners and networks.

Table 4.3

Logic Model 3

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner M**
Logic	**Disjunctive Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** Institutional Practitioner M seeks funding opportunities that support Black, rural students and communities or advance her institution. **Part 2:** She does not seek funding opportunities that advance her institution. **Part 3:** So, she seeks funding opportunities that support Black, rural students and communities.

As a follow-up question to a response about the grant that supported her work, I asked Institutional Practitioner M if she considered her unique role in the outreach space to require her to develop or foster an entrepreneurial spirit. She explained how that was not the case in her role and used the above quote as justification. In that moment, she found it important to not take individual credit for the practice. Instead, she credited her college for initiating a community-based approach to outreach work and for essentially socializing her agentic spirit, specifically during the grant seeking process.

The other agentic entities that practitioners contextualized were churches. Organizational Practitioner D— a white woman OOP at a workforce organization in south Alabama— explained relational networks in Black, rural churches. She stated, "And so those paths are aligned with those church affiliations. Because it's what you know, but it's more of who you know. So, those are really strong resources in our small-town areas." Organizational Practitioner D helped legitimize churches as professional networking spaces, a stance that is key to understanding their purpose beyond religious fellowship spaces. According to her, church actors were well-educated and held jobs across the community. Church actors' professional status positioned them as key

sources of capital for students who knew them and were seeking to enter their educational and/or career pathways.

Table 4.4

Logic Model 4

Practitioner	**Organizational Practitioner D**
Logic	**Disjunctive Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** Church affiliations help determine college and career pathways for Black, rural students or they operate solely as religious entities. **Part 2:** Church affiliations are not solely religious entities. **Part 3:** So, church affiliations help determine college and career pathways for Black, rural students.

It was important to me to underscore "church affiliation" language in Organizational Practitioner D's logic model. *Church affiliation* was a stance and action operating as an intermediary between *church* and *church actors*. So, Organizational Practitioner D's logic was that Black, rural students should not haphazardly choose *any* church to attend. Instead, they should consider how a church affiliation and the church actors who are professionals therein can help to advance their college and career trajectories.

One notable church actor that played an essential role in Black, rural students' success was the pastor. Organizational Practitioner E— a Black woman OOP at various church, educational, and civic organizations in southeast Alabama— raved about the pastor of her predominantly Black, Baptist rural church. She said, "He kneels down and comes by the room and stuff like that, and they [the students] just melt. They love him, they love him! He becomes a child. He does the skateboarding with them, he does the hayride, and they want to ride on his tractor." Organizational Practitioner E underscored the importance of pastors, and the Black church broadly, being invested in the social and emotional wellbeing of students. She underscored the pastor's approach to connecting with students by engaging them in social ways,

which was evident in how he kneeled to talk to them and engaged in activities like skateboarding, hayriding, and tractor riding. All these activities disrupted social and political hierarchies between actors in churches, schools, and communities. Blurring the lines between each context helped emphasize the importance of engaging in communal practices.

Table 4.5

Logic Model 5

Practitioner	**Organizational Practitioner E**
Logic	**Disjunctive Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** Church actors connect with Black, rural students on secular topics, or they solely connect on religious topics. **Part 2:** Church actors do not solely connect with students on religious topics. **Part 3:** So, Church actors connect with Black, rural students on secular topics.

Logic models for Organizational Practitioners D and E conveyed the same message. Churches in Black, rural communities and their respective actors were agentic entities with vested commitments to nurture students' academic, professional, social, and emotional growth. They built rapport with students, worked to earn students' and families' respect, and vetted resources and opportunities. In addition to being religious outlets, churches in Black, rural communities were sites of networking and play, which was an aesthetic that appealed to a range of P-20 students. Practitioners leveraged these sites to socialize, recruit, and advocate for students.

Agentic entities also manifested through ideologies that practitioners enacted. Institutional Practitioner H— a white woman OOP at a community college in northeast Alabama— recalled her experience with a future colleague as she prepared to accept her first job in the state.

> He was the head of the hiring committee, and he called me up and he said, 'Look, we were very impressed at your interview, and we'd very much like to have HR send you an

> official offer.' He said, 'But before we do that, I just need to talk to you about [something]. Do you really know what you're getting into coming here, to rural Alabama from a gigantic city?' And we had a really good talk, and he was very frank, and honest. He said, 'Well, our students are not always prepared when they enter the community college… It's a much slower pace of life.'

Institutional Practitioner H's conversation with the head of the hiring committee, a man who was an administrator at the vice president level, functioned in multiple ways. First, it positioned rurality as a way of living that warranted warning. Prior to extending an official offer to Institutional Practitioner H, he felt inclined to add a prerequisite, off-the record condition to her employment, which was a post-interview phone call to heed her of the job. Second, the conversation served to starkly contrast rural Alabama to Institutional Practitioner H's previous city in an attempt to manage expectations about anticipated culture changes. Third, it communicated a generalized disposition about rural students and their readiness for community college, insisting that they operate in/at a "much slower pace of life." Relatedly, it also suggested that slowness was substandard and undesirable.

Table 4.6

Logic Model 6

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner H**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If outsiders express interest in working in/with rural communities, then insiders question their intentions and readiness. **Part 2:** If insiders question their intentions and readiness, then insiders enact a more thorough vetting process. **Part 3:** If outsiders express interest in working in/with rural communities, then insiders enact a more thorough vetting process.

The logic model that I created for Institutional Practitioner H illustrates how a construct of rurality transcended into an institutional practice. Although Institutional Practitioner H

identified the administrator as an agentic entity, the logic model indicated that it was actually the institution that was the agentic entity. In essence, the institution exercised its powers as an entity of *insiders*, which enabled the administrator to protect that identity by warding off *outsiders* who could not acclimate to the institution's rural culture.

Enacting Agentic Styles of Practice

Though practitioners demonstrated skill and versatility in recognizing how power shaped their agency across their institutions, organizations, and fields; they, themselves, also enacted agentic styles of practice. Institutional Practitioner J discussed how his thinking and approach to work changed throughout this career.

> And a lot of times what I found is we have everything we need. We just try to use the same model that they use in these counties that have resources and it does not work. You may not be able to go out there and get money to buy some chickens, but you may know this old lady down the street that has chickens running all across the road. Go down there and ask her, "I got some kids and want three chickens." Literally, it's stuff like that. It's a completely different approach.

Institutional Practitioner J used his Black, rural community context to strategize about meeting his students' needs. Specifically, his strategy included intentionally considering, leveraging, and navigating place. Though he juxtaposed his county against other counties with linear, pronounced resource landscapes, he still considered his county to be rich in resources. This positioning reflected an asset-based approach to viewing community. To make his case, he first recognized that various approaches exist to reaching a means to an end, which in this example, were chickens needed to implement a program in a Black, rural school. Afterwards, Institutional Practitioner J communicated a common dilemma that often confronts his colleagues. He noticed

that practitioners in Black, rural communities who tried to replicate student success models that practitioners in differently-resourced communities used failed to achieve their intended outcomes. In turn, he offered a counter-example that critiqued, resisted, and decentered replication and modification practices. Institutional Practitioner J found the most success when he approached problem-solving from a completely different model and mindset. His reimagined strategy required him to recognize residents in Black, rural communities as resources, garner relationships with those residents, and include them in his efforts to maximize his resource capacity. To this end, Institutional Practitioner J illuminated how practitioners' outreach success runs in tandem with communities' resource sources and their ability to mutually communicate and meet each other's needs. Ultimately, he exercised his agency to interrogate the limitations of orthodox approaches, cultivate context-specific approaches, and align those approaches with his skills and the community's strengths.

Table 4.7

Logic Model 7

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner J**
Logic	**Disjunctive Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** Institutional Practitioner J believes that practitioners in Black, rural communities should adopt student success models from non-Black, rural schools and districts, or they should create their own models that center their unique contexts. **Part 2:** He does not believe that practitioners should adopt student success models from non-Black, rural schools and districts. **Part 3:** So, he believes they should create their own models that center their unique contexts.

I designed Institutional Practitioner J's logic model to encapsulate the essence of his evolved conceptions of agency. Throughout the context of his work, the act of creating and starting anew was an agentic style of practice. Like Institutional Practitioner J, Institutional Practitioner C— a Black woman OOP at an HBCU in east Alabama— followed a similar logic. She spoke about

starting over after arriving to the realization that she needed to increase the visibility of a degree program that she oversaw.

> Well, prior to this year, and I'll just say from my four years there, no one knew that [the degree program] existed because we didn't have any graduates. None… So, I would say the entire campus didn't know we existed. But since [recently], we had… five or six [graduates] who we finally wrote up a degree program that's non-certificate… So now, everybody knows us.

Institutional Practitioner C saw connections between the number of graduates in a degree program, the number of prospective students recruited, and the program's presence across the institution and other communities. Though she acknowledged that the actual existence of the program remained consistent over time, she associated perceptions of its existence with its ability to produce graduates. From this perspective, she framed graduates as widely recognizable and accepted visibility currency and a key communication marker to signal existence. By creating a non-certificate version of the degree program that attracts, matriculates, and graduates more students, she solidified and legitimized its presence among relevant stakeholders. Institutional Practitioner C leveraged her knowledge of the various implications of standard metrics like graduation to increase awareness and access and ensure the future success of the program.

Table 4.8

Logic Model 8

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner C**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner C wants internal and external partners to notice her program, then she must produce graduates. **Part 2:** If she wants to produce graduates, then she must create a non-certificate degree program. **Part 3:** If she wants internal and external partners to notice my program, then she must create a non-certificate degree program.

Though I employed two different types of logic models to describe the experiences of Institutional Practitioners C and J, I noticed that their own logics mirrored each other. Institutional Practitioner C thought about creation in relation to innovation, specifically to solve a problem, whereas Institutional Practitioner J thought more pointedly about creation in relation to maximization, making the most of success by crafting a positive narrative. The idea of maximization also came up in another practitioner's comments. Institutional Practitioner O— a Black man OOP at a PWI in central Alabama— reflected on the complexities of his work and how it informs how and where he seeks professional development opportunities.

> So, I have to get really creative because what I actually do here is not directly applicable to every [student] group. [Each student group that I work with] has pieced departments together like first-year experience, obviously diversity and inclusion, but [also] academic success, professional development, [and] personal development. We piece those things together. So, there are a lot of things that I see out there when I'm looking for conferences that are relative but not necessarily specifically connected to what I do.

Institutional Practitioner O's comments proceeded reflections about previous conferences that he attended. He stated that he had to "get creative" about which conferences to attend because no one conference fully or adequately met all of his needs. He continued by discussing the nature of his current work, insinuating that it was a hodgepodge of "pieced together" departments. At best, he shared that he had only found conferences that were "relative" to his work, but not "specific" to it. Hence, his proximity to knowledge bases, like conferences, forced him to activate his creativity to filter content, extract relevant information, and convert it into useful practice.

Table 4.9

Logic Model 9

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner O**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner C does not see his collective work to support Black, rural students fully represented in a single professional development space, then he disassembles his work into individual functional areas. **Part 2:** If he disassembles his work into individual functional areas, then he strives to seek professional development from multiple spaces. **Part 3:** If he doesn't see his collective work to support Black, rural students fully represented in a single professional development space, then he strives to seek professional development from multiple spaces.

The logic model that I created for Institutional Practitioner O highlighted how he creatively adapted his expectations of professional development and adopted a style of practice that best suited his needs. His constant practice of disassembling, reconfiguring, and reassembling was brilliantly savvy. His practice required him to take inventory of a wide range of functional areas across the field of higher education, identify which functional areas aligned with his work despite lack of clarity in his role and job description, assess the scope of professional development opportunities, and continually address his persisting and residual needs.

Institutional Practitioner D and Institutional Practitioner K— a white man OOP with dual roles at a predominantly Black high school and a PWI in southeast Alabama— both noted how their agency directly impacted their students. Institutional Practitioner D stated:

> We pay for everything! But I charged them an admissions [fee] or I used to call it the application fee. I'm going to call it a holding fee now so that [students] can hold [their] spot. That $100 is not a lot compared to the thousands that we spend. But you've got to have some buy-in into what we're doing.

Her remarks followed expressions of frustration that she experienced while working with some students. She noticed that some students would not follow through with attending her programs, despite confirming participation. Because of that, she enacted her agency by charging students a fee to hold their spot. Noteworthy is that she viewed money as a currency to barter buy-in for a program that was intended to be free. Not only did she use subversion to reconceptualize that component of the incentivization process, but she also used it to constantly rename the fee.

Table 4.10

Logic Model 10

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner D**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner D instates and enforces a small superfluous fee to attend her program, then students will invest in and follow through with their attendance. **Part 2:** If students invest in and follow through with their attendance, then her planning efforts will not be in vain. **Part 3:** If she instates and enforces a small superfluous fee to attend her program, then her planning efforts will not be in vain.

The logic model that I created for Institutional Practitioner D complemented the excerpt by nuancing her perspective and practice, tempering the magnitude of her intentions with their potential consequences, and teasing out the agency that she enacted. Although, at face value, it seemed most expedient to inaccurately reduce her practice to being cost-prohibitive, I surmised that the fee acted as a veil for ensuring students' attendance and subsequent participation. So, she used context to calculate a fair market value for a programmatic fee that she knew would yield mutual benefit and engineered discourse to actualize the plan. Essentially, this dynamic reflected her adeptness to glean from capitalistic ideals to exercise her agency.

Further, Institutional Practitioner K enacted agency as he grappled with how he socialized students toward specific institutions and careers that appealed to rural aesthetics.

> As the years have gone by, I'm less and less gung-ho about pushing kids to college because of debt and just the world changed during COVID, and there's nobody to fix cars. There's nobody to come to your house to fix stuff anymore, and so I've pushed several kids to [go to a local community college] lately to learn HVAC [heating, ventilation, and air conditioning].

Two socio-political factors that initially influenced his socialization practices were heavy student debt burdens and the aftermath of Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. He supplemented his comments by framing the lack of trained trade professionals and the dwindling of front-door-style service they provide as problems. To address those problems, he assumed the responsibility of scaffolding more students into community colleges that specialize in providing credentials for trade specializations.

Table 4.11

Logic Model 11

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner K**
Logic	**Constructive Dilemma**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner K recognizes changing societal landscapes across the nation, then he alters his advising strategies and messages to Black, rural students. **Part 2:** If Institutional Practitioner K recognizes a void in technical expertise across the local workforce, then he advances and advocate for a practical, workforce-driven educational agenda, fueled by community colleges. **Part 3:** He recognizes changing societal landscapes across the nation, and he recognize a void in technical expertise across the local workforce. **Part 4:** Therefore, he alters his advising strategies and messages to Black, rural students, and he advances and advocates for a practical, workforce-driven educational agenda, fueled by community colleges.

Institutional Practitioner K held unique roles in secondary and higher education spaces. As an OOP centered in K-12, he supported Black, rural high school students by teaching them in traditional classroom environments; writing job, scholarship, and admissions recommendation

letters; advising them on various postsecondary education options; and connecting them with resources and community contacts to aid in their postsecondary educational pursuits. As an OOP centered in higher education, he worked with educational leaders to implement pre-college programs for high school students and recruited teachers and staff for university-led community-wide initiatives. His positioning in and across both contexts was helpful for understanding his comments and for creating the logic model. In essence, he enacted his agency by deviating from traditional, 4-year college pathways and pivoting toward debt avoidance, rather than income attainment, through his advising style.

Finding 2: Logics of Perspective

The second finding, logics of perspective, explores how practitioners understand levels of society and phenomena within them. It encompasses core micro-, meso-, and macro- levels, while also examining their interplay and their impact on practice. It also explores, when applicable, the role of societal interactions in shaping and shifting ideologies.

Institutional Practitioner G— a Black woman OOP at a PWI in southeast Alabama who works with incarcerated students across the state— alternated between intrapersonal and interpersonal levels of engagement. Specifically, she described internal conflicts that she navigated when describing her job to members of the general public.

> First of all, I do want to say that I do try to be careful not to receive backlash from the public eye because I know that a lot of people of the public feel like when you go to prison, no matter if you had a violent crime, a nonviolent crime, you're undeserving. And for their own personal reasons, they feel that way. So, a lot of the times, I say I work for [my institution] unless they ask for more details, and when I do give them more details, it's like they don't know how to respond.

Institutional Practitioner G was intentional about evading potential backlash, which spewed from supporting incarcerated students. To mediate or avoid negative responses to her work, she used her institution's name as a broad employer instead of her specific office. By scapegoating the institution, she used it as a protective shield to ward off unsolicited opinions and critique of prisons, crimes, and educational rights. She found this strategy necessary to rely on because she noticed that members of the general public struggled to reconcile their personal beliefs with civic duties to support and serve all students. Relatedly, Institutional Practitioner G's experiences also underscored how pervasive public opinion was in higher education outreach work.

Table 4.12

Logic Model 12

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner G**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner G understands her work from the perspective of those who critique it, then she alters the language used to describe her work to fit the audience. **Part 2:** If she alters the language used to describe her work to fit the audience, then she braces herself for resistance. **Part 3:** If she understands her work from the perspective of those who critique it, then she braces herself for resistance.

Like Institutional Practitioner G, Institutional Practitioner I— a Black woman OOP at a PWI in southeast Alabama thought about how others perceived her work, again juggling perception with reality.

> I think over the years, some people assume that because we're working with the schools that are majority Black, that the Black students don't have different things or different resources. They may lack some resources, but they still have some resources. And they may think that the students are not intelligent or know things, but the students know a lot…They're not dumb.

Institutional Practitioner I wavered between the perceptual, the hypothetical, and the actual—which all comprised various realities of working with Black, rural students. In regard to the perceptual, she talked about outsiders'— namely non-Black people's— assumptions of the resource landscape that her students navigate, specifically concerning conflations between having no and some resources. Hypothetically, she also mentioned that some non-Black people may think that her students lack intelligence. In response to these perceptual and hypothetical scenarios, Institutional Practitioner I followed up by stating examples from her actual experience working with Black, rural students. To invalidate non-Black people's misconceptions, she affirmed and confirmed that her students did, in fact, have some resources and were very intelligent. Broadly, Institutional Practitioner I's experiences illuminated what advocacy looked like on behalf of Black, rural students and communities. To advocate for her students, she found herself rectifying harm that some non-Black people purport about Black, rural students. To remedy the effects of those claims, she specifically found utility in clarifying wrongs and reiterating truths to mediate discourses about her students.

Table 4.13

Logic Model 13

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner I**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner I recognizes that others see her students from a deficit framing, then she mentally corrects and reframes those notions to center students' assets. **Part 2:** If she mentally corrects and reframes those notions to center students' assets, then she safeguards her own perceptions about Black, rural students and reasserts truths about them. **Part 3:** If she recognizes that others see her students from a deficit framing, then she safeguards her own perceptions about Black, rural students and reasserts truths about them.

Both logic models for Institutional Practitioners G and I tug at practitioners' self-care and self-preservation strategies. As Black women OOPs, they found it important to guard their minds, hearts, and bodies against those most critical and distant to their work. Their logics also illustrated how little impact negative feedback had on their desire and willingness to continue engaging in the work. Though they developed strategies to deal with such responses, they were undeterred to abandon their commitments to serve Black, rural students.

In a separate comment, Institutional Practitioner G recounted an experience that followed the same logics as her earlier comment about communicating with the general public. In this instance, however, she focused on her encounters with incarcerated students.

> Transparency is very important in these spaces because a lot of the students that I deal with now, because of their situation and because they know how the public sees them, they just don't trust people or institutions, higher institutions or really big institutions like [us]. And then I have to constantly remind them that, hey, I work for [my institution], but this organization is separate in its way. You know what I'm saying? We have our policies and [my institution] has theirs. We work with the Alabama Department of Corrections, but we are not the Alabama Department of Corrections.

Here, Institutional Practitioner G described a dynamic that was explanatory, apologetic, and stemmed from a place of distrust. She found herself constantly explaining that her line of work was distinct from institutions' and organizations' work, which were sources of students' skepticism. To garner buy-in and reassure students, she was transparent about how she positioned herself among her partners, intentionally distancing and detaching from their reputations and legacies of oppression.

Table 4.14

Logic Model 14

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner G**
Logic	**Constructive Dilemma**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner G views her work through the lens of how her students view her work, then she can understand their warranted distrust of her presence. **Part 2:** If she explains basic organizational structures to her students, then she can manage resistance and distance her work from negative constructs that command related organizations. **Part 3:** She views her work through the lens of how her students view her work, and she explains basic organizational structures to her students. **Part 4:** Therefore, she can understand their warranted distrust of her presence, and she can manage resistance and distance her work from negative constructs that command related organizations.

Institutional Practitioner P— a Black woman OOP at a PWI in southeast Alabama— arrived a similar consensus but relied on different logics. Instead of solely focusing on her own practices, she noted her colleagues' practices, and compared the two.

> Here in this [institutional] community, folks look up each other's salaries and all that kind of stuff. I don't have time to do that because that would get in the way of my work. I know people probably make way more than me and they don't look like me, but I can't get frustrated. I mean, I guess some people are like, 'Well, you need to know so that you know...' I'm over it. You have to understand that there's an injustice and don't think that you can solve the world's problems, but you can chip at it a little bit, right? You have to be realistic about your goals, too.

Institutional Practitioner P shared her views about the institutional culture that she circumvented and how it impacted conceptions about her work. Specifically, she noted practices that she condemned and practices that she championed. She frowned upon her colleagues' practices of nosiness and intrusiveness. She diminished those character traits to be petty, time-consuming barriers that distract her from supporting Black, rural students. Another practice that she found

distasteful was people imposing their politics on her. Instead, she preferred to distance herself from her colleagues' suggestions and advice about how to engage within her institution. Her choice to disassociate from those colleagues was not rooted in a place of ignorance toward oppressive systems or inability to relate; rather, she displayed a propensity to avoid messy social situations and remain diplomatic in the workplace. In terms of practices that Institutional Practitioner P championed, she valued the ideology and possibility of engaging in localized work. Though she conceived solving the world's problems to be beyond her reach, power, and capacity, she recognized her impact on a much smaller scale. Her framing is interesting insofar as she viewed Black, rural student-centric work as bits and pieces of the world, so her contribution, although limited, was still ubiquitous. Also immersed within this conversation were two sets of dichotomies that Institutional Practitioner P profiled. The first represented a "Black woman v. others" contention, which is evident in how she recognized pay inequities among herself, as a Black woman, and colleagues who did not look like her. The second represented a "real rurality v. not-as-real other" depiction of place. For Institutional Practitioner P, working in an environment that centers Black, rural students required her to be realistic about her goals. Her beliefs about what was real galvanized her practical approach to serving Black, rural students, leaving little room for entertaining ambitious, lofty, or superficial practices.

Table 4.15

Logic Model 15

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner P**
Logic	**Destructive Dilemma**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner P feeds into petty practices within her institutional culture, then she distracts herself from supporting Black, rural students. **Part 2:** If she seeks to make monumental changes within her work, then she risks making no progress at all.

Part 3: She doesn't distract herself from supporting Black, rural students, and she doesn't risk making no progress at all.
Part 4: Therefore, she doesn't feed into petty practices within her institutional culture, and she doesn't seek to make monumental changes within her work.

Certain practitioners focused heavily on their institutional and regional contexts, as their work existed at those intersections. Institutional Practitioner B— a white man OOP at a PWI in southeast Alabama— drew connections between extension agents, service areas, and bureaucratic territories.

> I'm in a department that has a lot of extension agents. And [all 3 land grant institutions offer different] extension services, but we don't want to step on each other's toes. So… it depends on how you measure the Black Belt. Is it along the county lines or is it along the smaller township model? Because if so, we would end up carving part of [a county], but we also don't want to encroach into the Black Belt.

Institutional Practitioner B recognized that there were large numbers of extension agents in his department, at his institution, and across partner institutions. Due to those numbers, he did not want to hamper the extension efforts enacted outside of his service area. To prevent "step[ping] on each other's toes," he offered a working solution of intentionally measuring a hodgepodge of Black, rural communities in the Alabama Black Belt. The issue with his working solution, however, was that each institution did not widely accept, implement, or communicate the same metric. So, the encroachment that Institutional Practitioner B spoke about was threefold, insofar as it had the potential to impose upon practitioners' work, institutions' work, and Black, rural communities.

Table 4.16

Logic Model 16

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner B**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner B interrogates measurements of Black, rural communities, then he risks infringing upon others' Black, rural student success work. **Part 2:** If he risks infringing upon others' Black, rural student success work, then he jeopardizes job security and existing resource landscapes in Black, rural communities. **Part 3:** If he interrogates measurements of Black, rural communities, then he jeopardizes job security and existing resource landscapes in Black, rural communities.

Institutional Practitioner A's style of Black, rural practice also directly aligned with his institution's commitments. His remarks highlighted a place-based recruitment strategy.

> But we at [my institution] have taken it upon ourselves to recruit those students [in the Black Belt] better because they are not seen by other colleges as a valuable commodity. And here, I think, that we want them to be seen as something that is transformative [so] that they could go back into their community and be transformative themselves as well.

He took pride in his institution's ability and willingness to recruit Black, rural students better than other institutions. Particularly, he framed Black, rural students as a valuable commodity. According to him, their value was an asset that often went overlooked. His institution, on the other hand, recognized students' value and simultaneously saw its own value in being a vessel for evoking transformation in Black, rural communities.

Table 4.17

Logic Model 17

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner A**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner A targets recruitment efforts in underserved Black, rural communities, then he monopolizes on a student service area.

	Part 2: If he monopolizes on a student service area, then he gains leverage against institutional competitors. **Part 3:** If he targets recruitment efforts in underserved Black, rural communities, then he gains leverage against institutional competitors.

Institutional Practitioner A also discussed barriers that he encountered as he centered his work in Black, rural communities. In a separate discussion, he grappled with scaled perspectives that related to visibility. He offered two examples using social media and billboards.

> And that's why social media is so good if used the right way. It's been disappointing and frustrating to see what has happened to Twitter [X] over the last year, because Black Belt children that don't have a bunch of billboards... I cannot put an [institution] billboard outside of [a Black, rural high school in central Alabama] because it doesn't make enough money, so the advertising dollars I spend on it don't make sense… Being seen, especially in those rural areas where those students aren't seen, is huge. And it's important. It's important to me.

Institutional Practitioner A framed social media as a sensible, affordable communication alternative to billboards, or the lack thereof, in Black, rural communities. Unlike billboards, which had to be justified by making financial sense, social media platforms like X, posed less of a financially risky investment. Further, he proceeded by stating the importance of institutional visibility among students who society deems invisible. More broadly, his comments relay the institution's commitments to permeating communication structures and establishing presence in Black, rural communities.

Table 4.18

Logic Model 18

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner A**
Logic	**Destructive Dilemma**

Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner A is able to use Twitter [X] to market his institution, then he can gain visibility on national and global scales. **Part 2:** If he is able to use billboards to market his institution, then he can gain visibility on local and regional scales. **Part 3:** He cannot gain visibility on national, global, local, or regional scales. **Part 4:** So, he is not able to use Twitter [X] or billboards to market his institution.

Two practitioners' remarks specifically connected the utilization of perspective and scale in the process of devolution. Institutional Practitioner N— a Black woman OOP at a PWI in southeast Alabama— attributed the success of a program that supported Black, rural students to two friends who were committed to working with one another.

> So even like, we had our leadership institute, which [a neighboring institution] managed because both of the advisors are friends. So, that's the way we've been able to closely work out [differences] with each other because both of the advisors know each other… So, those types of relationships are important to establish and kind of cement for the organizations [within institutions].

Her comments underscored the importance of strong practitioner ties between institutions. Though she acknowledged "differences" that existed at the institutional level, she recognized that practitioners had the authority to overcome those differences at lower levels of engagement, which were between micro-level organizational actors nestled within institutions.

Table 4.19

Logic Model 19

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner N**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If practitioners in Black, rural communities establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, then they can co-plan, co-implement, and co-develop solutions to actualize their programs. **Part 2:** If they can co-plan, co-implement, and co-develop solutions to actualize their programs, then they can circumvent the brunt of institutional conflicts.

	Part 3: If practitioners in Black, rural communities establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, then they can circumvent the brunt of institutional conflicts.

Institutional Practitioner J recounted his experience working with civic organizations across multiple counties. He considered their organizational flexibility as an asset to his work.

> And then, [civic organizations] are more flexible than [my university-affiliated extension office] because [at my institution], the way that you handle money and all this stuff, you have to go through all these hoops. But if the [members of a predominantly Black Greek-letter organization] want to say, "Hey, we want to give kids money for a contest," I'm like, "Okay, well, come up here with your money. Just give it to them. Don't give it to me."

Tedious bureaucracies associated with money management in higher education institutions affected how Institutional Practitioner J circumvented financial decisions. He valued external organizations who operated and delegated their own finances, as they could essentially subvert or supersede his institutions' policies. Therefore, he advised them to give their money directly to students, a strategy that removed him from being an intermediary responsible for financially reporting and issuing money in a proxy role.

Table 4.20

Logic Model 20

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner J**
Logic	**Destructive Dilemma**
Argument	**Part 1:** If fewer, less complicated bureaucracies existed at Institutional Practitioner J's institution, then he would be more inclined to funnel money through it. **Part 2:** If programmatic partners preferred a hands-off approach to their philanthropic endeavors, then Institutional Practitioner J would need to engage with his institution to administer finances. **Part 3:** He is not inclined to funnel money through his institution, and he does not need to engage with his institution to administer finances.

	Part 4: Therefore, fewer, less complicated bureaucracies do not exist at his institution, and programmatic partners do not prefer a hands-off approach to their philanthropic endeavors.

Finding 3: Logics of Relation

My analysis of the third finding, logics of relation, underscores the reasons that practitioners offered for interacting with students, colleagues, residents, and geographies in Black, rural communities. It focuses on how practitioners relate to one another and to places, and how those relationships drive their practice. Practitioners made conscious decisions about who/what they engaged with, and when, where, and how they engaged with them. The logics presented in this finding informed their practice, and their enactments of those logics constituted those practices. Two subthemes comprised this finding— valuing face-to-face interactions and navigating place and space.

Valuing Face-Face Interactions

Several practitioners valued face-to-face interactions. Institutional Practitioner E— a Black man OOP at a community college in east Alabama— found greater value in in-person communication exchanges than information shared on websites. He said, "Ain't nobody going to our website, they ain't doing that. So, the way that they get it, at least from my perspective, is when I come out visually and when they can see me visually, and I can give them that information and see their eyes light up." Within the context of his work, he noticed that Black, rural students related visibility to corporeality, so the presence of his material body resonated with students more than the existence of virtual, web-based content.

Table 4.21

Logic Model 21

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner E**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**

Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner E makes in-person visits to schools, then he reaches students who do not visit the institution's website. **Part 2:** If he reaches students who don't visit the institution's website, then he can assess the direct impact of his work on students. **Part 3:** If he makes in-person visits to schools, then he can assess the direct impact of his work on students.

Through the lens of critical realism, Institutional Practitioner E appreciated an empirically real world— one where he and his students could share physical space and read each other's body language. On the other hand, he eschewed an actual real world, insinuating that out-of-sight, out-of-mind proverbs were not ideal in practice. With that in mind, I created the logic model to connect the importance of empirical reality to assessment. I concluded that there was mutual benefit when Institutional Practitioner E had the opportunity to experience and witness his impact. In a complementary fashion, the behaviors of experiencing and witnessing prompted self-accountability to ensue, where Institutional Practitioner E sought to confirm, affirm, and adjust his impact, as needed.

Institutional Practitioner B also discussed why he valued face-to-face interactions, particularly with Black, rural students and communities. He recognized how his well-respected reputation and action-oriented service work in Black, rural communities facilitated his connection with prospective students, ultimately impacting his program's recruitment and enrollment.

> So, that's been a really big eye-opening experience for me because my recruiting events, although good, are not the inspirational 'I want to join' type situations. So, it's interesting how my research and grounded work to clear title and help people save the family farm or the family forest actually directly informs who enrolls and comes and works with me. So, it's been this really good synergy and duality to it.

Institutional Practitioner B made clear distinctions between "recruiting events"— concerted, designated time and space to recruit students— and "grounded work"— community-based outreach work he engaged in with Black, rural communities to clear title and reinstate land to Black families. Distinguishing between both types of work was significant because it implied that context-specific, bottom-up, and relational approaches were more highly valued than generic, prescriptive approaches. He noted that his recruiting events were "good" but not "inspirational," insinuating that the latter was more effective in Black, rural communities. Here, the role of inspiration comingled with the practice of human connection to help build trust and inform college choice and access. From this vantage, he noticed that Black, rural students felt most inclined to pursue postsecondary education when there was direct alignment to the likenesses of their communities and when there was collective benefit for their families. By recognizing the synergy and duality to outreach and recruitment efforts, Institutional Practitioner B found success when recontextualizing the function of grounded work, acknowledging that it had the potential to serve multiple purposes. Those purposes were explicit like saving family land, inadvertent like informing enrollment, and latent like facilitating trust among practitioners, prospective students, and communities.

Table 4.22

Logic Model 22

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner B**
Logic	**Constructive Dilemma**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner B adapts his recruiting strategy to be more community-centered, then students see how rural-centered research can be collectively beneficial. **Part 2:** If Institutional Practitioner B conducts practical and meaningful work inside Black, rural communities, then students are more inclined to enter college to study rurality. **Part 3:** He adapts his recruiting strategy to be more community-centered, and he conducts practical and meaningful work inside Black, rural communities.

Part 4: So, students see how rural-centered research can be collectively beneficial, and students are more inclined to enter college to study rurality.

Practitioners also valued face-to-face interactions with their colleagues, which aligned with Black, rural cultural norms and practices. Often, such interpersonal engagement signaled respect and mutual understanding about the significance of working with Black, rural students and the competencies and skills required to do so. Institutional Practitioner I discussed her perception of funding entities' apathetic roles in supporting Black, rural student success programs, especially beyond financial contributions. In this instance, she noticed that the college that housed her work disengaged and disregarded her work and was uninterested in the program's operations or impact.

> Even though they were giving us the money, they really still didn't know what we did. They just gave us the money, they didn't know our work. And it's just like even with [our college], even though they're paying my salary, and then my boss may talk about what we do, [but] because they don't come and see us, what we do, I still don't think they're in touch with what we really do and how we touch those kids. If they did know and were to see what we were doing, I believe we would get more funding.

According to Institutional Practitioner I's experience, the level of engagement between her Black, rural student success work and upper-level administrators was primarily fiduciary. She considered them to be delegators and managers of money with limited vested interests in paying her salary and conservatively funding the program that she coordinated. She expressed concern that the positive impact and implications of her work often went unnoticed. Based on this example, Institutional Practitioner I associated administrators' evasiveness to their micro-level engagement and proximity to students. Put differently, their commitment to solely interacting with the program's budget, but not directly with its students, communicated superficial intentions

to support Black, rural student success efforts. Furthermore, their commitments did not solely impact students, but trickled into impacting Institutional Practitioner I, as well. Hence, she reconciled competing priorities to fulfill her duties and responsibilities as an employee while existing in an institutional environment that did not value her work.

Table 4.23

Logic Model 23

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner I**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If funding entities cared about Black, rural students, they would commit to engaging with Institutional Practitioner I's programming. **Part 2:** If they would commit to engaging with Institutional I's programming, then they would increase their investment. **Part 3:** If funding entities cared about Black, rural students, then they would increase their investment.

Another practitioner valued face-to-face interactions with colleagues because he believed it improved productivity. Institutional Practitioner L— a Black man OOP at an HBCU in central Alabama— spoke about institutional culture shifts that occurred as a result of staff changes. He said, "Well [the first] secretary, that person knew you could go to her, and talk to her, and say, 'I need this…Where is this?' She could tell you, [but] the other person, the newer person, [was] not as acquainted." In Institutional Practitioner L's line of work, secretaries and administrative staff played integral roles in supporting practitioners who prioritize Black, rural students' success. They were agents of knowledge, resources, and solutions. However, across his department, personnel changes thwarted information-sharing models that centered and relied on secretaries. This dynamic accentuated an institutional culture that stressed actor-based codependence and centralized information funneling. It also highlighted the importance of relationship in being acculturated into office dynamics that prioritize communal and relational approaches, which was integral throughout his HBCU context.

Table 4.24

Logic Model 24

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner L**
Logic	**Disjunctive Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** Institutional Practitioner L prefers to work with experienced administrative staff who are familiar with institutional processes and who can function as strategic thought partners, or he prefers to work with new administrative staff who need time to acclimate to the institution. **Part 2:** He does not prefer to work with new administrative staff who need time to acclimate to the institution. **Part 3:** Therefore, he prefers to work with experienced administrative staff who are familiar with institutional processes and who can function as strategic thought partners.

Navigating Place and Space

The second sub-theme, navigating place and space, highlighted how practitioners engaged with rural terrains, particularly as sketches of place and space. Their intuitiveness about various rural landscapes shaped their self-care practices, self-concepts, and overall rationalizations about place in relation to their work. The excerpts in this subsection were fueled by two interview questions, which prompted participants to consider (a) the travel routes they took while enacting their work and (b) how/when they physically or mentally stopped or paused during their workday.

Institutional Practitioner Q— a Black man OOP at an HBCU in east Alabama— offered a representative example of participants' comments and sentiments. He stated, "But how could you [rest] when you want to mentor students?... So, how do you turn it off when you've got so much to give? And if you do, who's going to miss you?" Broadly, he underscored how crucial and life-altering his line of work was to himself and his students. His first question interrogated negotiations between rest and mentorship, essentially contrasting them to illuminate their disconnection. The second question he posed grappled with rest and the urgency of giving.

Finally, his third question pointed to the consequences of rest, which implied that the costs of rest were affective. From a critical realist perspective, Institutional Practitioner Q's comments elucidated a causal reality. Hence, a driving force that continually motivated his work was the inspiration he gleaned from engaging with Black, rural students, which provided an opportunity for him to enact his purpose. This was yet another example of Black, rural centered student success work being mutually beneficial to students and practitioners.

Another practitioner, Institutional Practitioner J, expressed similar sentiments as Institutional Practitioner Q. He said, "When I first started working, I had three counties, so I never had time to take annual leave [in an 8-year span] because even if I wanted to take a break, I would fall behind on all my sessions." Because his work spanned three counties, he frequently traveled by car to visit multiple schools and districts. Not only did his day-to-day responsibilities require him to plan session activities for Black, rural students, but another salient component of his labor was driving in and across Black, rural counties. As he traveled, he observed commonalities between different communities. Institutional Practitioner J went on to say, "When I think of rural, I think of Black because that's just all the counties that I've served. It's always been out in the country in the boondocks. I don't be getting no signal." His comment emphasized two ways that Black, rural communities go undetectable. First, he mentioned how their geo-locales are in the "boondocks," largely isolated from other communities. Second, he mentioned that he gets no cell phone signal, which insinuated increased distance from cell towers— an issue with socio-economic overtones.

Other practitioners engaged with geographic and topographic elements of rural communities in strategic ways. For example, Institutional Practitioner A traveled across Alabama and neighboring states to enact his work. He said, "I have to travel through a sundown town…

but I won't be [there] after sunset… So, I wouldn't say I necessarily avoid anything unless it's post sunset." Though Black, rural towns, themselves, were not sundown towns, traversing to, through, and from them, sometimes required Institutional Practitioner A to navigate sundown towns and abide by the rules and procedures undergirding them. Because Institutional Practitioners J and A both contended with town and county politics, I created a singular logic model that captured the essence of their contributions.

Table 4.25

Logic Model 25

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioners J and A**
Logic	**Constructive Dilemma**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioners J and A are cognizant of their identities as Black men, then they can understand the implications of traveling through racialized rural communities. **Part 2:** If they engage in cross-county work, then they manage their workload around cross-county schedules. **Part 3:** They are cognizant of their identities as Black men, and they engage in cross-county work. **Part 4:** Therefore, they can understand the implications of traveling through racialized rural communities, and they manage their workload around cross-county schedules.

In their case, I found it significant to note their identities as Black men because they not only navigated *place*, on a geographic level, but they also concurrently navigated it within conceptions of self-care. Institutional Practitioner J was concerned with the implications of acknowledging his self-care needs with professional expectations of performance. Considerations about the proximity between county sites mediated those expectations, making those connections geo-spatial. Though Institutional Practitioner A was less concerned about proximity, he thought about self-care alongside time— specifically the time the sun sets. Interestingly, both practitioners' valuation of geography was critical, as they used it as a risk indicator to gauge potential consequences of distress.

Like them, Institutional Practitioner G and Organizational Practitioner D saw the importance of Black, rural geographies in informing and shaping their practice. Institutional Practitioner G discussed how much she valued rural landscapes while driving home from work. Because she worked in a high-stress, high-trauma functional area, she valued long, quiet rides home to decompress from her workday.

> It's so dehumanizing. It will mess with you… So, I really [try to turn it off] at 4:30[P.M.] … Or when I'm on the road, I drive the back roads. [Highway Name] stretches all the way through [a rural community]. So, by the time I get ready to hop back on [the highway], I try to turn it off because baby, you will be thinking about that stuff all day.

The well-being of her incarcerated students and their joint living and learning conditions directly affected Institutional Practitioner G. Because the facilities were so dehumanizing, she empathized with her students, and as a result, struggled to suppress, acknowledge, or abandon those feelings once she left work. To combat those feelings, she chose driving routes that were on back roads, away from the hustle and bustle of busy highways until it was necessary to use them. From this vantage, back roads soothed her and revived her into a mental and emotional state of normalcy. Organizational Practitioner D followed a similar logic and highlighted some rural amenities.

> Food and beverage, coffee shop, park. So, if there's a little county lake or a picnic area or something like that, then a lot of times I'll get my drive-through food and I'll go and find a just serene, nature filled spot to decompress. But I love exploring small towns.

Instead of using rural geographies and topographies to facilitate leaving, Organizational Practitioner D used them to support her reason for staying. Attractions like local restaurants and recreational areas were more than sites of consumerism; rather, they were places to reflect and

refuel after work. In essence, small towns offered a serene aesthetic that assisted in her relaxation process. As I grappled with Institutional Practitioner J's and Organizational Practitioner D's comments, I noticed them relying on two sequential logics, which is why I created two separate logic models. The first logic model functioned as a prerequisite for the second logic model.

Table 4.26

Logic Model 26

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner J & Organizational Practitioner D**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner J and Organizational Practitioner D recognize that their work is mentally demanding, then they allot proper time to decompress. **Part 2:** If they allot proper time to decompress, then they prepare themselves to engage in critical reflection about their practice. **Part 3:** If they recognize that their work is mentally demanding, then they prepare themselves to engage in critical reflection about their practice.

Merely mentioning their needs to turn thoughts off and decompress implied that their commitments to Black, rural student success work was stressful and taxing. This recognition was key to them mandating end-of-the-day lulls and reflections into their schedules. They realized that, in order to pivot away from their professional persons, they needed time to gather their composure and continue their day. The second logic model that I created for Institutional Practitioner J and Organizational Practitioner D delved deeper into their processes for engaging with rural geographies and topographies.

Table 4.27

Logic Model 27

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner J & Organizational Practitioner D**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner J and Organizational Practitioner D view rural lands, scenic routes, and amenities as sources of peace and tranquility, then they incorporate them into their self-care and self-preservation strategies.

	Part 2: If they incorporate them into their self-care and self-preservation strategies, then they wield *place* to unwind after a workday. **Part 3:** If they view rural lands, scenic routes, and amenities as sources of peace and tranquility, then they wield *place* to unwind after a workday.

Key to developing this logic model was centering rural lands, scenic routes, and amenities as conductors of peace. Both practitioners amplified and, to some extent, personified rural terrains by giving them healing power. This framing resisted narratives that land and landscapes were stationary, passive, and mere accessories to admire. Instead, rural places and spaces played active roles in transforming practitioners' attitudes and moods. At that rate, practitioners themselves demonstrated prowess in wielding those lands to their benefit and making agentic decisions to prioritize their well-being.

Finding 4: Logics of Communication

Throughout the fourth finding, logics of communication, I showcase practitioners' techniques for conveying messages to and with Black, rural students and communities. OOPs crafted narratives that were honest, relatable, and loving. They also remained cognizant of their environments, and the perceptions therein, and used them as contextual frameworks for communicating with various people. This finding also engaged excerpts from participants' journey maps to highlight specific institutional and organizational actors who co-existed along their communication channels.

One covert way that practitioners communicated with Black, rural students is by actualizing racialized and gendered ideologies and incorporating them into their practice. For example, Organizational Practitioner C— a Black woman OOP at an educational organization in central Alabama— mentioned decisions about her and her staff's attire that she enforced when visiting Black, rural high schools.

> But when I'm at work, I'm always professional. So, I make sure me and the people that I supervise and work with, we have polos we wear. No jeans… [We] wear slacks… But you want to show a hierarchy between you and the students. Although we're close in age, you still want to show, okay, I'm here to mentor you. I'm a professional friend, but I'm not your personal friend.

Organizational Practitioner C communicated clear distinctions between her staff and students, their attire, their roles, and their relationships with one another. Fundamentally, she created, enacted, and enforced a bureaucratic system in which she expected everyone to oblige and respect. Part of this practice, she stated, was because of close age gaps between high school students and some of her staff. Through this lens, she manufactured the hierarchy to compensate for the lack of perceived authority exerted by age and to assert her team as respectable adults and professionals in Black, rural schools. Although one might construe that practice as controversial, Organizational Practitioner C's goal was role clarity rather than student subjugation.

Table 4.28

Logic Model 28

Practitioner	**Organizational Practitioner C**
Logic	**Constructive Dilemma**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Organizational Practitioner C has an idea of what a professional looks like in Black, rural communities, then she ensures her appearance and actions align with her ideas of professionalism. **Part 2:** If she works to avoid misunderstandings of her role, then she manages the respect that she receives. **Part 3:** She has an idea of what a professional looks like in Black, rural communities, and she works to avoid misunderstandings of her role. **Part 4:** So, she ensures her appearance and actions align with her ideas of professionalism, and she manages the respect that she receives.

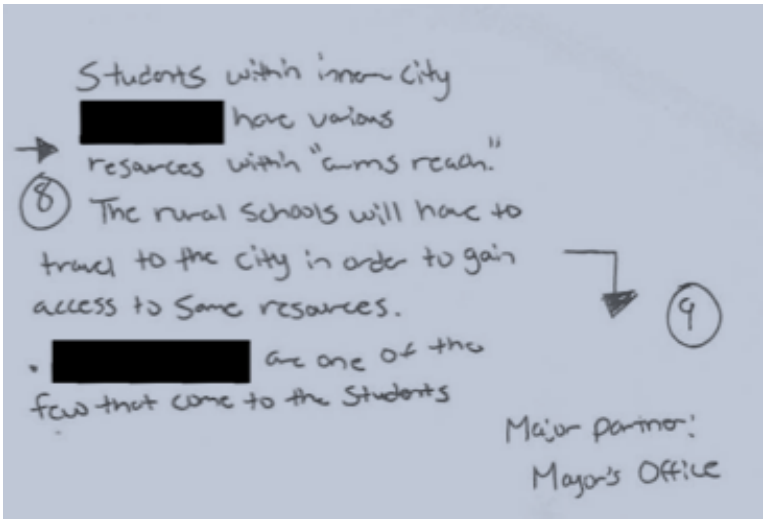
The logic model underscored the role of communication and power in translating Organizational Practitioner C's ideas to practice. She recognized that she had preconceived

notions about professionalism, which motivated, drove, and justified decisions about authority. Establishing these power dynamics were important, as they helped leverage respect for her team. Relatedly, it also helped Black, rural students manage their perceptions of and behaviors toward external actors. Essentially, she scaffolded students to develop an understanding of allyship in the outreach space, which operated as a channel between personal and professional friendship.

An excerpt from Organizational Practitioner C's journey map added context to her logic. Two points were key. First, she mentioned that her organization was one of the few local organizations that utilized a "push in" method for working with Black, rural students, where OOPs traveled to students. Most other programs that she was aware of operated inversely and required students to travel to the innermost parts of the city to obtain resources about postsecondary options. So, inherently, she assumed the responsibility of also "pushing in" an image and agenda of professionalism alongside tangible resources about college and careers. The second key point was that the mayor's office was a major partner. In fact, she stated that the program "started as an inner city [program] at the mayor's office, and then it expanded." Therefore, she was tasked to enact work on behalf of a program that was intrinsically politicized by virtue of its ties to local government and its redesign as an eligible support for rural students and schools.

Figure 4.1

Journey Map 1



Other practitioners grappled with how to describe their Black, rural educational contexts, as they contended with traditional markers of rurality. For example, Institutional Practitioner K spoke about a Black, rural school in relation to surrounding communities.

> Well, we consider our school a rural school, but really it's not. I mean, [our Black, rural town] is a community. Now granted, most of the kids don't live within the city limits. But I mean, I guess after so long looking across the road and seeing soybeans or cotton and passing farms and horses and stuff, that's about the only way that we think of it. But everybody rides the bus. So, we are a rural school, but we also consider ourselves almost a [neighboring, predominantly white city] school. In fact, we have a [city] mailing address. We're just not part of the [city's] school system, but we're part of the [city's] community. So, rural to us is just outside the city limits.

Essentially, Institutional Practitioner K grappled with the extent to which a Black, rural high school stretched the boundaries of rurality. He strategically chose to describe the locale as a community, especially because words like "rural" and "city" did not fully capture the realities of the school and its students. Some of the markers that defined the school context were its location across from soybean and cotton fields, near farms and horses, and in communities with large

numbers of bus riders. Institutional Practitioner K's comments also resisted discursive practices of exclusivity that rely on monolithic terms to contextualize Black, rural communities. He noted that the school's geo-spatial locale rested along rural-city binaries and spectrums that were dependent on various factors like city limits and mailing addresses. Similarly, Institutional Practitioner C referenced two types of school districts in a city in central Alabama.

> And [city in central Alabama] has two [school] districts. They have city and county [school districts] for K-12. And it's so weird because I'm like, how do y'all even have a city school district? So, what they consider [my institution] is in the city and then the surrounding areas like [neighboring city]. I don't even know the other little areas around, but as I drive into work off of [the highway], there are some schools, and they call that the rural area.

Institutional Practitioner C contended with city and county K-12 school districts in her community and considered them to be "weird." Interestingly, she mentioned the names of her institution and the neighboring city, which were proximal to the city school district; however, she disclosed that she did not know the names of smaller areas that constituted the rural school district. Her framing highlighted how Black, rural communities sometimes go unnamed and unmarked. Further, from a geo-spatial lens, she stated that schools in the county school district were located directly off the highway, while schools in the city school district were near her higher education institution. She used both locales as markers for identifying geographies of Black, rural schools, despite dual classification systems.

Organizational Practitioner A— a Black woman OOP in a local government role in south Alabama— reflected on politicized town and city limits across her county. She compared two locales with vastly different residential populations and racialized demographics.

> First, you see a sign that says Welcome to the City of [name of rural city with an approximate 30% Black population]. Then, you see a sign that says Welcome to the Town of [name of rural town with an approximate 15% Black population]. And you're like, 'How can I be in [both the city and the town]?' Well, that's the demographics where they separated the city many years ago. That side that they didn't want, they put it over there, and then the side that they thought would be well off and everything, they kept that. So, the [town and city] are neck and neck. They're intertwined in there.

Broadly, Organizational Practitioner A described the effects of redlining in her community. She alluded to pockets of predominantly white and Black communities being embedded within cities and towns. Such pockets, according to her, were a byproduct of several instruments: exclusionary political, geographic, and class-based practices. She noted that exclusionary practices were rooted in rejection, particularly of Black, rural communities that were unwanted. Conversely, wanted and "kept" places centered whiteness and symbolized wealth, as they were "well off." Organizational Practitioner A, Institutional Practitioner K, and Institutional Practitioner C used similar logics to describe where their work took place. Their logic model emphasized their discursive decisions to communicate the fluid and dynamic nature of Black, rural schools, districts, and communities.

Table 4.29

Logic Model 29

Practitioner	**Organizational Practitioner A; Institutional Practitioners K & C**
Logic	**Hypothetical Syllogism**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Organizational Practitioner A and Institutional Practitioners K & C can pinpoint an example of geo-politics in Black-rural communities, then they can interrogate rural-city discursive dichotomies. **Part 2:** If they can interrogate rural-city discursive dichotomies, then they can more accurately relay the intricacies of Black, rural student success work.

	Part 3: If they can pinpoint an example of geo-politics in Black-rural communities, then they can more accurately relay the intricacies of Black, rural student success work.

Examples of geo-politics that practitioners alluded to were the product, imposition, prevalence, and sustained enforcement of redlining, cotton economies popularized during slavery, disenfranchisement, and land grabbing. These racist and oppressive systems aided in blurring the lines between what practitioners considered and constructed to be rural and city attributes. In turn, they were forced to develop communication styles that accurately described their outreach milieus.

Other practitioners discussed the direct importance of communicating with Black, rural students and their families. Organizational Practitioner B— a Black woman OOP at a civics education organization in central Alabama— explained her strategy for equipping parents with tools for reconciling their parenting techniques with conflicting expectations.

> I worked with LGBTQ+ students or primarily LGBTQ+ students in that role. And the parents would be like, 'I want my student to be a leader.' And I'm like, 'Do you? Because you're directly hindering them from developing those leadership skills by telling them to blindly follow you just because that's how you think and what you do.' And I feel like a lot of that is being unstated in the rural Black community. You want your kid to do as you say, believe as you believe, think as you think without so much as saying, 'I want them to be a follower.'

Table 4.30

Logic Model 30

Practitioner	**Organizational Practitioner B**
Logic	**Constructive Dilemma**

Argument	**Part 1:** If Organizational Practitioner B works with Black, rural students as they become leaders, then she addresses parents' roles in shaping students' beliefs and practices. **Part 2:** If she interrogates the role of the Black, rural community in upholding standards of authority, then she supports families as they reconcile their renewed understandings of leadership. **Part 3:** She works with Black, rural students as they become leaders, and she interrogates the role of the Black, rural community in upholding standards of authority. **Part 4:** So, she addresses parents' roles in shaping students' beliefs and practices, and she supports families as they reconcile their renewed understandings of leadership.

Organizational Practitioner B discussed her experiences working with LGBTQ+ students and their parents in Black, rural communities. In that role, she supported them as they developed their understanding about leadership. While working with parents, she relied on a few strategies to scaffold their learning. First, she made space for parents to communicate their goals for their students. Then, she challenged the accuracy and sustainability of those goals by asking critical questions. Afterwards, she provided parents with clear counter-logics, using examples that mirrored parents' actual words and actions, rather than their expectations. Finally, she explained how dissonance between words, actions, and expectations yield misaligned, unrealistic, and unintended outcomes. More broadly than the example she provided, Organizational Practitioner B critiqued rampant practices of indoctrination in Black, rural communities. To address them, she viewed her role as an intermediary to disrupt the flow of unchecked power, specifically supporting Black, rural LGBTQ+ students who acquiesced in their parents' decision-making. The corresponding logic model reaffirmed her strategic practices, specifically connecting her reasons for acknowledging parents while working in student-centered environments and engaging systemic ideologies as accountability holders in the conversation about Black, rural students' leadership success.

Moreover, Institutional Practitioner O expressed how important it was for him to convey care for his students through shared meals.

> It was important to me that they understood that, number one, I was here because I care about them because I care about their success… So we sat down, [and] we started every meeting with a meal from somewhere, and not just pizza, [but] all the good stuff that I liked growing up. And I specifically thought about meals that I shared with my role models or my mentors, with my brothers because those things kind of define that motivation that I gained.

Institutional Practitioner O valued meals with his role models, mentors, and brothers. As a result, he imparted his personal value system on the students that he served. He also associated the quality of food served with the quality of care transmitted. From this vantage, the "good stuff" described concerted efforts to create bonds within familial-like contexts and constructs. A communication logic undergirding this phenomenon was care. Though it was clear that the feeling of care was ever-present, the communication of care was just as striking. The politic of exerting effort and being seen doing so demonstrated his commitment to building capital through engagement. Noteworthy is that he said it was important for students to "understand" his reason for being there, meaning he valued translational components of care. Furthermore, the combination of high-quality food, sincere sentiment, and good company communicated a labor of love that Institutional Practitioner O found to be beneficial to his work. Not only did it relay a message of care, as he blatantly stated, but it also incubated a culture of respect, trust, and buy-in for future conversations.

Table 4.31

Table 31

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner O**
Logic	**Constructive Dilemma**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner O cares for his Black, rural students like family, then he mimics family traditions and values with them. **Part 2:** If he gives his Black, rural students food that he considers to be high-quality, then he demonstrates a commitment to supporting a high-quality education for them. **Part 3:** He cares for his Black, rural students like family, and he gives his Black, rural students food that he considers to be high-quality. **Part 4:** Therefore, he mimics family traditions and values with them, and he demonstrates a commitment to supporting a high-quality education for them.

Finally, Institutional Practitioner F— an OOP at a PWI in southeast Alabama— spoke candidly about how she interacts with her Black students. During a conversation about the politics of delivering unfavorable news to students, she mentioned her approach with Black, rural students.

> But I do have to give that same news to these Black students, but I feel like they receive it better coming from me because I can turn off my work voice and be like, "Baby, look," and then go into auntie mode and the rest of the office, they can't do that.

Her cadence mirrored a Black Southern vernacular, whereby she framed their relationship as familial. By using the name “baby” to refer to her students and “auntie” to refer to herself, she recognized that discursive practice as effective for building strong connections. Noteworthy is that “baby” in this sense is not infantilizing her students; rather, it is more so about blurring the lines between the formalities of work language and informalities of language expressed elsewhere, which is why she felt the need to turn her work voice off.

Table 4.32

Table 32

Practitioner	**Institutional Practitioner F**
Logic	**Constructive Dilemma**
Argument	**Part 1:** If Institutional Practitioner F needs to have critical conversations with Black, rural students, then she reasserts herself as a familial proxy to mitigate their responses. **Part 2:** If she gleans from African American vernacular as a communication tool, then she differentiates her skillset from her non-Black counterparts. **Part 3:** She needs to have critical conversations with Black, rural students and she gleans from African American vernacular as a communication tool. **Part 4:** So, she reasserts herself as a familial proxy to mitigate their responses, and she differentiates her skillset from her non-Black counterparts.

She also discussed the role of receptivity in communication. Despite delivering the same message or news to Black students as she would to other students, she recognized that Black students received the discourse that she espoused better than they received communication methods from her colleagues. This observation is especially important considering she shared that she was the only Black person in the office. Essentially, the logic model for Institutional Practitioner F explicated specific communication tools that she curated.

Summary

In sum, I presented four findings— logics of agency, logics of perspective, logics of relation, and logics of communication. Separately, each set of logics demonstrated practitioners' reasonings and processes of/for reasoning as they created, fostered, and enacted practices to support Black, rural students and communities. Together, they coalesced to demonstrate practitioners' aptitude, awareness, and perceptive abilities to respond and adapt to shifting student success contexts.

A Retroductive Interlude

CRGT is both telescoping and iterative, making it challenging to present a linear account of the development of findings. As stated in chapter three, retroduction involves engaging with "pre-concepts relevant for the analysis to understand better how particular imaginaries and projects are practically relevant and form part of social situations and organizational life" (Belfrage & Hauf, 2017, p. 260). I present this retroductive interlude to illustrate the conceptual influences and analytical moves that led to generating the presented findings, following my stepwise approach to retroduction that is presented in Table 3.3. I begin with proto-theories to pinpoint specific theoretical and conceptual scholarship that helped frame my initial conceptualization. Next, I highlight the fieldwork and deskwork that helped me move toward a grounded conceptualization. Last, I highlight the continued field work and deskwork, including analytical feedback and contributions from my dissertation chair, that helped me to generate the grounded reconceptualization. This interlude offers context for the next and final chapter where I offer a discussion of these findings, extant literature, and movement toward a grounded theory of Black, Rural Praxis.

Proto-theories

I initiated data collection and analysis by engaging two pieces of scholarship. In their book, *Critical Rural Theory: Structure, Space, and Culture*, Thomas et al. (2013) interrogated the role of urbanormativity on constructs of rurality (Thomas et al., 2013). They defined urbanormativity as "the assumption that metropolitan lifestyles are the dominant, mainstream form of life" (Thomas et al., 2013, p. 182). Key to their argument was understanding how rural structures, spaces, and cultures coalesced with social processes of urbanization. Regarding structure, they stated, "the structural position of rural areas is, ironically, one of dependence:

urban areas need rural products but through a variety of means rural populations see themselves at the mercy of the city, not the other way around" (Thomas et al., 2013, p. 180). What struck me the most was this idea of rural products because it elucidated the centrality of commodified logics that undergird exchanges between rural and non-rural communities.

That logic complemented and paralleled an additional piece of scholarship, which was Taylor's (2022) concept of the student success enterprise. Essentially, he noted how various contexts were integral in steering and foreshadowing student success trajectories, recognized business-like behaviors across student success landscapes, noticed how data had been used to weaponize marginalized students and communities, and realized the importance of individual and collective actors who bore the onus of mishandled or abandoned student success work. The student success enterprise reflected how state and economic priorities drove institutional accountability; standardized measures of student and institutional performance; regulatory student success landscapes; student success work taking on increasingly managerial and bureaucratic configurations; economic logics pervading and eventually governing student success decision-making; the commodification of students and (their) data; and the emergence of student success intermediaries (Taylor, 2022). The student success enterprise, as discussed by Taylor (2022), was also especially focused on powered political entities and actors that comprised and controlled student success landscapes. As a nuanced extension of the student success enterprise, I considered OOPs to be part of various student success consortia. Just as consortia form bonds and band together, often operating with similar tendencies, intentions, and goals, Black, rural student success consortia represent groups of practitioners working together as allies to support college-going in their communities.

Furthermore, Thomas (2013) situated space and culture alongside structure within this discourse, stating that "it is in the physical space that local residents interact and generate local culture" (Thomas et al., 2013, p. 181). These spaces are often mediated by socio-politics, like racial segregation, business disinvestments, disproportionate stratifications of class, and strains on educational and economic mobility. Moreover, local cultures operate and contend with broader oppressive cultural systems. For example, "urban cultural hegemony is expressed through a series of cultural motifs against which rural areas are judged and to which rural areas attempt to live" (Thomas et al., 2013, p. 182). Common stereotypes, media depictions, and dominant discourses reinforce hegemonic powers that aid in disenfranchising rural communities.

Initial Conceptualization

Initially, I approached my inquiries with a plan to prioritize Black, rural student' success efforts at and between meso- and macro- levels, specifically highlighting practices and politics at institutions and organizations across Alabama. It seemed to be most fitting, especially considering how critical rural theory (Thomas et al., 2013) and the student success enterprise (Taylor, 2020) were juxtaposed against various systems. In an early iteration of data analysis, I even labeled a finding *Traversing Politicized Black, Rural Terrains* where I centered institutional, local, state, and national policies that participants mentioned during their interviews. From there, I scaffolded them to also consider the role of politics in navigating those policies and achieving their intended outcomes.

Continued Cycles of Fieldwork and Deskwork

As I continued data collection and analysis, I began to think less about holistic systems and more about practitioners' practice within systems. To do so, I engaged with the concept of micro-politics in education. Blase (1991) noted that "micropolitics refers to the use of formal and

informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in education" (p. 11). K-12 education scholars have gleaned from micropolitics to explore topics like rural school consolidation (Williams, 2013) and governance issues surrounding rural superintendency (Laub & Aslim, 2022). In the context of my study, I re-oriented my focus on practitioners, as individuals, to consider manifestations of micropolitics specifically in their plights to materialize programs, supports, and resources for Black, rural students. A sub-component of this conversation involved micropolitical reform. "Micropolitical reform addresses the divergent interests of participants involved in change and recognizes ideological disputes, loss and gain, coalition building, and coordinated opposition" (Haag & Smith, 2002, p. 3). Some of the code names that I developed during this stage were as follows: *micro-politics, visibility, receptivity, communication, and activist strategies*.

Grounded Conceptualization

Thinking about micro-politics led me to develop a sub-theme of *Navigating Micropolitics of Bureaucracy* underneath the aforementioned theme of *Traversing Politicized Black, Rural Terrains.* I intended the sub-theme to narrow the scope from meso-level to micro-level analysis, which aligned with micropolitics. The language of the sub-theme, however, pushed me to think about the relationship between bureaucracy and agency. Higher education scholars have researched practitioners' agency to shape student success discourse and practice (Bensimon, 2007), promote equity in student success (Bragg, 2023), and engage in racial justice work (McNair et al., 2020). So, I turned my attention to agency, which permitted me to conjecture that practitioners' agency was the primary ingredient for sustaining Black, rural student success work. While coding for agency, I also observed how frequently practitioners discussed communication practices with various stakeholders, which led to a code labeled *theorizing*

communication, and I identified a hodgepodge of lines of thinking that I initially coded as *epistemologies*. At this point, my grounded conceptualization included three major tenets: agency, communication, and epistemology.

Further Fieldwork and Deskwork

After reaching saturation and working to digest codes from 43 interview transcripts and 22 corresponding journey maps, I reached out to my dissertation chair to discuss emerging findings. We met once per week for approximately 60-90 minutes for three weeks. These meeting series were key to further developing the grounded conceptualization and maturing it into a grounded reconceptualization. A synopsis of those conversations is below:

Concerning Agency and the Broader Study.

Chair's Feedback: Consider the role of practitioners' styles of practice.

Personal Reflection: This was a minor discursive suggestion that aided in me thinking about *style* as a byproduct of *how* and *why* questions. To me, style denoted a specific manner, and at times, mannerism about a particular topic or task. So, not only did I think about what practitioners did (e.g. their actions) but I thought about how and why they did those things.

Concerning Communication.

Chair's Feedback: Differentiate between communication and marketing techniques.

Personal Reflection: When I initially coded for *theorizing communication*, I did not disentangle it by practice. For example, Institutional Practitioner A mentioned that one of his primary responsibilities was to spark "sidewalk conversations" about his institution by wearing institutionally branded merchandise. Though that was a way that he communicated to Black, rural students about the existence of his institution, it was part of

his marketing agenda and did not align with communication techniques that other practitioners voiced, which more explicitly centered Black vernacular and ideologies.

Concerning Epistemology.

Chair's Feedback: State the epistemology.

Personal Reflection: In conversation, my chair posed his concern as this question: *Well, what's the epistemology?* Of all three pieces of feedback, this one perplexed me the most, perhaps for two reasons. First, since I made conscious decisions to conduct a critical realist grounded theory study, I was adamant that critical realism was and should continue to be the core epistemological framing. Of course, I knew that interlocking a collage of epistemological strands was possible, but I did not see it as necessary for how I imagined this study. The second reason his question puzzled me was because I felt like I did not have the data to support a legitimate response. Arriving to that realization left me feeling slightly despondent because I knew I needed to pivot from systematic thematic analysis to advance my thinking.

Creating Logic Models

In the weeks following the meeting series, I revisited text excerpts from interviews that I had previously extracted to arrive at early findings and general conceptions of *epistemology*. On a basic level, I thought about *epistemology* as the nature of knowledge. Essentially, I asked myself, *What shared knowledges do practitioners express?* Again, I could not answer that question. So, I widened the scope to think about other philosophies. Some of the main ones covered in my doctoral program were ontology and axiology, which centered the nature of reality and values, respectively. Upon continued reflection, I thought about another philosophy, logic, which I studied as part of my undergraduate coursework. In that course, I learned how to

identify, name, and create logic models and prove them using inference rules. I focused on four types of logic: disjunctive syllogism, hypothetical syllogism, constructive dilemma, and destructive dilemma. Through memoing, I followed the logical sequence of each logic to create logic models that aligned with extracted text excerpts from virtual interviews with participants. During that process, I realized that *shared reasoning* (logic) more so than *shared knowledge* (epistemology) undergirded practitioners' experiences.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Discussion

The stories and experiences of participants in this study are evidence that, regardless of progress in the U.S. and Alabama, many of the same barriers to opportunity shaped by race, politics, and geography, also shape the work of those working to promote postsecondary opportunities in Black, rural communities. Perhaps most significant is the relationship between land and labor. In the first chapter, I explored both dynamics through the lens of class, specifically highlighting that the names and configurations of Black, rural places were inextricably connected to social mobility. Findings from this study extend understandings of those relationships, underscoring how practitioners navigated the institutionalization of land- and labor- based policies. For example, several OOPs' work realized as a result of institutions and organizations recognizing that Black, rural students had little to no transportation access to their programming. In response, OOPs and their respective programs enacted outreach practices that were school-based and community-centered. Scull and Cuthill (2010) referred to these interactions as engaged outreach. The aim of their model was "to shift outreach models from a traditional, school-based focus to identifying, engaging and collaborating with the full range of stakeholders who impact or otherwise influence the decision to go to university" (Scull &

Cuthill, 2010, p. 63). Similarly, OOPs not only engaged with students, but they engaged with families, community members, community organizations, and other partners to support Black, rural students' needs.

Findings from the study point to the logics that undergird and direct actors' practice as they navigate various student success terrains. Logics of agency centered power and power limitations within context. Each practice associated with logics of agency— noticing interferences in agency, contextualizing agentic entities, and enacting agentic styles of practice— showcased the power that practitioners exerted, regardless of factors that stifled their work. Acts of noticing, contextualizing, and enacting agency were important features of their work because, as OOPs, they navigated multiple powered contexts in and beyond their workplaces. These contexts can be thought of as third spaces— convergences and intermediaries of physical and socio-cultural spaces (Bhabha, 1994; Soja,1989; Whitchurch, 2008). Behari-Leak and le Roux (2018) stated, "working in the third space often means contending with a series of constraints and challenges that emerge when traditional university job descriptions do not match or align with actual job realities in spaces of practice" (p. 31). From a critical realist perspective, OOPs' agency helped them to differentiate between empirical realities of their work (e.g. institutions/organizations, their actors/stakeholders, and explicit job responsibilities) and actual realities of their work (e.g. social dynamics and innuendos). OOPs' approaches to enacting agency can empower other practitioners to intentionally traverse multiple contexts and make necessary decisions to improve their efficiency, collaborate with student success catalysts, subvert resistance, and fearlessly advocate for students, despite politicized barriers that exist.

The second finding, logics of perspective, encompassed a set of telescoping practices that practitioners relied on to do their work. By this, I mean that OOPs intuitively repositioned and

reimagined themselves and their work through multiple vantages. That practice helped them understand how others viewed their students and programs, leading to the development of subversion tactics, renewed and more practical commitments to serving students, and heightened attention to a broad range of players who operate in the same student success mesosphere. It is noteworthy and important for practitioners to cultivate skills and insights to identify phenomena that shape student success work at various levels of abstraction. This prepares practitioners to meaningfully engage with higher education scholarship aimed at making them better leaders (Gilbert & Burden, 2022) and to strategize how to engage with partners in ways that are beneficial to themselves, their programs, and their students (LePeau, 2015).

Logics of relation, the third finding, concentered on OOPs' interactions with Black, rural students, communities, and geographies. The two sub-themes were valuing face-to-face interactions and navigating place and space. Their approaches to prioritize community aligned with asset-based framings of rural knowledge and resources through the lens of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005; Boettcher et al., 2022) and underscored the role of community in Black, rural transition and postsecondary experiences (Crumb & Chambers, 2022). Findings presented in this section, however, extended the role of community by highlighting how interactions with rural community actors and aesthetics reflected and affected their practice. Several OOPs used community-engaged interactions as the basis for introspection, allowing them to adapt their practice to better relate to Black, rural students and communities. Practitioners' abilities to relate to students was important because it helped legitimate Black, rural student success work. It increased their time spent in the field, facilitated recruitment, and allowed them to develop affinities for and sensibilities about Black, rural students' experiences in and out of educational contexts.

The fourth finding, logics of communication, concerned OOPs' practices for conveying and translating messages to Black, rural students and communities. Those messages helped practitioners assert themselves as student success professionals and experts across the field of higher education and relayed how loose conceptions of place described and circumscribed Black, rural contexts. Two examples of communicative practices that practitioners relied on were ethics of care and Black vernacular. Though ethics of care communicated practitioners' commitments to loving and caring for students, Perez and Bettencourt (2023) noted that cost of engaging in them could have deleterious effects such as increased compassion fatigue and stress. Further, many Black practitioners, in particular, gleaned from Black southern vernacular to propound it as a manifestation of what Kynard (2018) calls race-radical literacy. "Race-radical literacies and intellectual work nest with an assumption that you are working toward liberation such that your sole audience isn't whiteness, white teachers, white standards, white economies, but marginalized communities" (Kynard, 2018, p. 523). Such an angle makes space to understand OOPs' discursive, linguistic, and overall Black-centered communicative choices as being simultaneously normal and novel. That dualistic positioning, in my opinion, renders OOPs' practice to rest at the intersections of culturally relevant pedagogy and critical pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1992) stated that "culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy of opposition that recognizes and celebrates African and African American culture" (p. 314). Additionally, Giroux (2020) noted that components of critical pedagogy advised educators to do the following:

> … resurrect a language of resistance and possibility, a language that embraces an oppositional utopianism while constantly being attentive to the forces that seek to turn such hope into a new slogan or punish and dismiss those who dare look beyond the horizon of the given (p. 141).

So, as OOPs used context to continually craft their messages to Black, rural students, they posited practices of opposition that often defied their workplace culture, resisted student success practices and policies that were normed on whiteness, and centered Black southern vernacular and rural ideologies that resonated with their students.

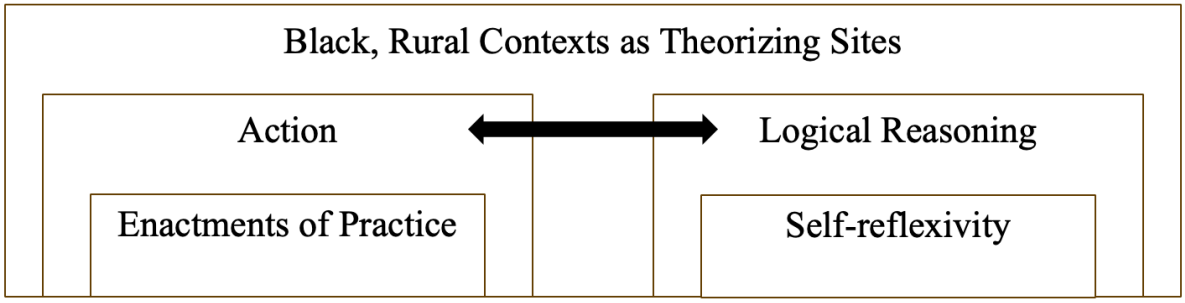
Overall, findings from this study reaffirm that practitioners' work is complex and entails ambiguous, sometimes hidden, roles and expectations that rest on the periphery of their outlined responsibilities (Taylor, 2022). In "Toil and Trouble: Contextualizing Student Success Work at Research Universities," Taylor (2022) organized his findings around three social practices, which were reconciling, leveraging, and changing. A subtheme within the first social practice was reconciling competing priorities (Taylor, 2022), which reverberated across this study through OOPs' work as they labored in and across postsecondary institutions; Black, rural K-12 schools and communities; non-profit organizations; and government and policy organizations. Findings from this study, however, are primed to extend conceptualizations of Taylor's (2022) other two findings of leveraging and changing. OOPs in this study leveraged a specific type of insight, which were logics. Logical reasoning, more so than shared experience and prior knowledge, undergirded their student success approaches. Through this lens, OOPs valued a propensity for practicality, inherently considering and inquiring about what made the most sense for them and their work to support Black, rural students. Further, Taylor (2022) discussed how practitioners initiating, sustained, and resisted change. As an extension of all three of those forms of change, I noticed OOPs renegading change. By this, I do not quite view them as student success traitors, but rather they provided evidence and demonstrated willingness to abandon meso-level aims and directives in service to micro-level courses of action.

Toward a Theory of Black, Rural Praxis

Findings and analysis from this study lead me to offer a critical realist grounded theory, which primes, prompts, and promotes what I consider to be Black, Rural Praxis (see Figure 5.1). This preliminary theory of Black, Rural Praxis focuses on the relationship between logic and action. As practitioners in Black, rural communities enact iterations of practice (e.g. action), they engage in self-reflexivity (e.g. logical reasoning) to make thoughtful, critical, and timely student success decisions. Throughout that process, they use Black, rural contexts as sites to theorize about the nature of their work. Logics of agency, perspective, relation, and communication help ground and contextualize the iterative process of formulating logics and realizing actions, elementally evolving practice into praxis.

Figure 5.1

Visual Representation of the Theory of Black, Rural Praxis



As mentioned in the third chapter, Belfrage and Hauf (2017) noted that grounded theory, as conceptualized through a critical lens, is capable of producing several outcomes, which include "deepening or broadening of substantive knowledge; establishment of new conceptual connections; refinement or reconstruction of theory; and more profound challenges of existing theories" (p. 260). My work directly attends to the second point of establishing new conceptual connections, specifically linking logic to action and positioning them as place-based

components, identifiers, and facilitators of Black, Rural Praxis. Perhaps less blatant, but no less pertinent or relevant, my work also relates to the other three points. In a youth participatory action research alongside Black, rural high school students, Willis (2023) reified the role of communities— namely high schools, students' relatives and friends, and local organizations— in informing and supporting students' ideas about college access. I deepen understandings of Black, rural communities by situating OOPs as key community actors who establish relationships with students and, at times, broker relationships with other community members. Further, my work refines what Hunter et al. (2016) conceptualized as Black placemaking, which refers to "the ways that urban black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance" (p. 2) and "the ability of residents to shift otherwise oppressive geographies of a city to provide sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics" (p. 4). Tichavakunda (2024) extended that work to consider Black placemaking, as a theory, in higher education contexts and posed two questions to the field for building upon it, "*Who labors to support/sustain Black places?... How does Black placemaking look in different contexts by different stakeholders?*" (p. 117). My study underscores how OOPs labor to support Black, rural students and communities and demonstrates how Black placemaking materializes in rural places. Further, my work reinforces a profound challenge of current student success definitions, theories, and models that prioritize *measuring* (see Varlotta, 2016; Manly et al., 2020) with little to no careful or explicit consideration of race and place, or rurality, specifically.

A Dialectical Interlude

In this section, I revisit and engage two previously mentioned concepts. They are (1) Houston's (2023) stepwise rendition of Bhaskar's dialectical critical realism, which I introduced in the third chapter and (2) participants' thoughtful, critical, and timely student success decisions,

which I asserted as an outgrowth of Black, Rural Praxis. This dialectical interlude marries both concepts to accentuate the interrelationship between critical realism's realities within the context of my study.

Step 1: Understanding the Reality of Presence

The first step in the dialectic process, understanding the reality of presence, "involves an awareness of the human condition in all its dimensions: biological, psychological, existential, social and (not least) material" (Houston, 2023, p. 32). Many OOPs worked in and across institutional, organizational, and social environments that exercised and practiced anti-Blackness. Jenkins (2021) stated, "the spatial contours of anti-Blackness are tumefied when we consider not simply the location of gratuitous and wanton violence against Black people, but the conceptions of space that make room for anti-Black violence to occur" (pp. 110-111). Acts of violence that OOPs in my study encountered affected their agency and communication, often stipulating how they engaged with Black, rural students and communities. By imposing conditions and restrictions to practice, institutions and organizations postured themselves as places of power that frequently relied on bureaucracy and hegemony, for example, to regulate its laborers. OOPs often used their prowess to counter and fracture such exertions of power.

Step 2: Noticing What is Absent in Presence

Houston (2023) described the second step of the dialectic process as "locat[ing] the absence of well-being in life" (p. 33). One way to think about absence is through "lack of knowledge or a lack of critical understanding of personhood" (Houston, 2023, p. 33). When I created logic models for participants, I did so with heightened sensibilities about their personhood— as OOPs, subject-matter experts in their functional areas, and racialized and gendered beings. Though each of them referenced various parts of their professional and

personal identities, they seldom related those identities to their practice. So, the logic models functioned, in part, to center the reality of the work and materiality of the body— a vantage that some OOPs were aware of but did not always explicitly name or relay in conversation. Examples of this dynamic are reflected through Black women OOPs experiencing misogynoir (Bailey, 2010; Bailey & Trudy, 2018) and responding by tailoring their advocacy and practice-based efforts to protect themselves from attacks on their work.

Step 3: Connecting Absence with Emergence

Step 3 operates under the postulation that "… an awareness of 'absence' leads to questions of how transformative change is possible" (Houston, 2023, p. 33). As OOPs became increasingly aware of oppressive Black, rural student success landscapes, they developed and reinforced practices that fostered community with Black, rural students and communities. During this step, critical, thoughtful, and timely decisions emerge.

On Critical Decisions. I consider several of OOPs' practices to be critical, contributing to the vitality of related student success efforts. For example, engaging in funding activities that are site-sensitive, rather than source-sensitive, was a practice that emerged from commitments to and relationships with K-12 administrators at Black, rural schools who ultimately authorized OOPs to work with their students during school hours. That practice forced OOPs to remain mindful of schools' capacity for partnering and responsive to their changing needs. Additionally, recognizing the full scope of Black, rural student success work across the state was another critical practice. It allowed OOPs to contemplate the potential consequences of (un)ethical and (in)equitable practices on changing the field and serving communities.

On Thoughtful Decisions. OOPs' thoughtful decisions helped them to reimagine means to an end— an end that frequently centered college-going. A relevant practice includes

ideological deviation from the norm through advising structures and messages. In my study, practitioners used social and economic cues to steer students toward community colleges; blurred the lines between outreach work and research to connect with prospective students; and hosted students in settings and environments that mimicked their home and familial culture. These practices emerged during reflection and anticipation of societal shifts that posed as a potential threat to Black, rural students' well-being and thriving.

On Timely Decisions. OOPs' timely decisions represented the urgency by which they situated their work. One of the most astonishing reasons OOPs made timely decisions was to communicate with outsiders about their work. Noteworthy is that outsiders, in this sense, encompass a full range of people who do not work alongside OOPs to actualize their work. Nevertheless, several practitioners developed strategies for conversing, which included oversimplifying and oversaturating their work; reading facial cues for (mis)understanding; listening for relevant political and social stances; and addressing racist, anti-Black, anti-rural, and dehumanizing comments about their students. OOPs learned how to glean from these practices and craft a combination of rehearsed and improvised responses when discussing their work.

Step 4: Committing to Absent Absence

The fourth step in the dialectic process underscores the need to "remedy or challenge what is absent and its attendant contradictions" (Houston, 2023, p. 34). This process of "'absenting' is the removal of constraints (material and otherwise), untruths and disempowering ideology impinging on human flourishing" (Houston, 2023, p. 34). Step 4 reiterates how OOPs' critical, thoughtful, and timely decisions, as highlighted in the preceding step, are propellors of transformation and change when framed as commitments. One-off, stop-and-go, and occasional

instantiations of practices that support Black, rural students do not suffice as commitments, and are therefore inadequate in absenting significant, long-term constraints.

Step 5: Understanding the Causal Factors Perpetuating Absence

Step 5 asks the question, "What is happening at the level of causality for this 'absence' to occur?" (Houston, 2023, p. 34). Here, it is important to reconsider OOPs' roles as boundary-spanning professionals. To some extent, being able to work among a spindle or swivel of student success contexts is advantageous, as it positions practitioners to engage with actors across institutions, organizations, and communities. However, such a posture also affects legitimacy confirmation and affirmation from site-specific actors. For example, OOPs' day-to-day visibility— or the lack thereof— in specific Black, rural K-12 schools, churches, and communities create conditions where they feel compelled to (re)articulate their aims, (re)establish their roles, and (re)assess various student success landscapes. Though consistent, their work is often seasonal, periodical, rotational, and situational at specific sites because their services are designed to support an expansive network of Black, rural students. Precarious funding landscapes, shifting institutional and organizational missions and goals, and competing interests from other student success players all enable this dynamic.

Step 6: Enacting Transformative Change to Absent Absence

"Enacting transformative change arises when human agents exercise their agency through praxis to effectively 'absent' the 'absence' by using insights from the preceding five steps to develop concrete change strategies" (Houston, 2023, p. 34). My theory of Black, Rural Praxis is a vessel for transformative change, as it accommodates practitioners' agency to legitimate their decisions, the logics undergirding those decisions, and the reflexive processes that warrant action informed by both. The liberatory power and potential of Black, Rural Praxis is paramount, as it is

a theory created by a Black, rural practitioner for practitioners who support Black, rural students and communities; that can be pedagogically scaled through OOPs' strategic teaching, mentoring, and application; and that has transdisciplinary capacity to account for an array of student success work in Black, rural communities.

Implications

This study provides implications for research, practice, and policy. CRGT methods proved to be an effective mechanism for inductive investigation. Researchers should use CRGT when their lines of inquiry are undertheorized and demand greater nuance. Rural life, broadly, has existed under a motif of simple life, and as a result, some methods to explore it have lacked complexity to grapple with race, class, and politics alongside geography. In response to that observation, this CRGT study offered theoretical and conceptual gravitas to existing scholarship about place-based, racialized student success practice. Future research should theorize in Black, rural communities, as I have, to understand how practice transpires within such unique contexts. Additionally, future research should queer conceptions of place. In his book, *Vibe: The Sound and Feeling of Black Life in the American South*, Miles (2023) stated, "The lines on maps don't make a space. They divide it. Rather it is the relational experiences of people who sit on porches that build a place. Cartography is a way of being" (p. 112). Queered research, through this vantage, necessitates humanizing ways of engaging with Black, rural students and communities.

In practice, this study also expands the use and utility of logic models. Traditionally, organizations use logic models to mold and direct systems change and institutional transformation efforts— both operating at meso-levels. Often, they are created to set key performance indicators and drive assessment and evaluation. This study showed how versatile, technical, and individualized logic models can be, specifically when centering institutional and

organizational actors as micro-level agentic beings. This can be helpful for employers as they seek to assess and evaluate practitioners' commitments to supporting Black, rural students. Their appraisals can inform programmatic longevity, hiring processes, professional development opportunities, and team building activities. Also, in practice, it is important to consider all the players involved in student success work that centers Black, rural communities. Outreach— as a sub-field— is flexible enough to harbor, convene, and foster those players. Likewise, OOPs is an inclusive and comprehensive term that reflects a host of professionals from multiple functional areas who engage in similar work and have similar student success aims.

Finally, philanthropic and governmental funding entities should fund Black, rural outreach efforts. These efforts provide helpful insights that nuance the profile of Black students and shed light into leading practices that support them. Relatedly, funders should re-evaluate common, national metrics that dictate eligibility for rural grants. Common data hubs like the Census and the National Center for Education Statistics view rural places as an afterthought behind urban and other non-rural places. Even Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, which have nine categories for categorizing metropolitan and micropolitan areas, categorize data at the county level. This assemblage does little for Black, rural communities, which are sometimes located in pockets, in crevices, and on the fringes of neighboring, often bigger, towns, cities, and counties. Therefore, maps— and quantitative and political data that materialize them— do not always reflect or correspond to the demographics of Black, rural places, consequentially diluting and skewing their presence. This dilemma is also one that directly concerns data. "Insofar as data that includes narrowed episodes of Black livingness are used to shape Black students' lives, data practices in higher education (and elsewhere) maintain an oppressive, hegemonic relationality" (Taylor, 2024, n.p.). Funders can affirm Black, rural student success work by widening the scope

of grant eligibility requirements to include inductive and inventive ways for demarcating Black, rural life. In this study, I complemented CRGT methods with journey mapping, which primarily functioned as a participant-centered qualitative mapping activity. Other useful methods include arts- and community-based methods like cartography, photography, and storytelling that signal and uplift Black, rural livelihood.

Summary

In sum, my study offered a fresh perspective on the state and status of rurality and rural student success work in and among Black, rural communities. In Chapter 1, I provided background knowledge about relevant racial, political, and geographical undercurrents of state and national educational landscapes. Such context helped fortify my desire and the field's beckoning to center Black, rural students and communities. In Chapter 2, I placed literature about college access, student success, practitioners, K-12 and postsecondary education, and rural sociology in conversation with each other to provide a thorough snapshot of historical and contemporary scholarship. In Chapter 3, I illustrated how CRGT and journey mapping coalesced in inductive, place-based research, and I explicated specific steps to execute those methods. In Chapter 4, I presented four findings— logics of agency, perspective, relation, and communication— that served as a foundation for a theory of Black, Rural Praxis. I also provided a reflective and narrative account of my retroductive process. That chapter also allowed me to nuance age-old rural motifs. For example, OOPs in my study used geographic and topographic terrains in Black, rural communities to temper their relationships with their work, which is an alternative way of approaching "movers and stayers" discourses that departs from neoliberal constructs that use employment and economic mobility as typical markers of movement. In the last chapter, Chapter 5, I revisited my findings and research at large to re-engage them with

literature, the dialectical process, and implications for continuing this work. Overall, my theory of Black, Rural Praxis served as an articulation of imagination, practicality, love, and care for Black students, communities, and practitioners. Future enactments, iterations, and critiques of it should approach it with loving attention and Black, rural communities as foci.

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