# Rural Black and Latinx Students: Engaging Community Cultural Wealth in Higher Education

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*While there are many calls for enhancing support of Black and Latinx students on college campuses, much of the existing literature promotes deficit thinking and assumes monolithic experiences. Drawing upon Yosso's model of community cultural wealth, we used a qualitative case study approach to examine the assets 13 rural Black and Latinx students brought to their higher education experiences in the context of a specific campus-affiliated program, Emerging Scholars. This program provides college access and college success support to high school and college students from rural communities. All participants in the study were involved in the Emerging Scholars Program at Clemson University. We held focus groups based on students' academic year classification, and student participants shared resources and assets they employed as they navigated their pre-college and college experiences, including aspirational, familial, navigational, and social capital.*

While there is a growing body of literature about rural students and education, the bulk of that scholarship focuses on White students and communities. As Means (2018) wrote, this tendency leads to a "perpetuation of myths of rural America (e.g., people from rural communities are white, ignoring the lives of people of color)" (p. 1). To design effective policy and programs related to rural education, the diversity of these communities must be examined, including learning more about the educational experiences of rural racially minoritized students (Greenough & Nelson, 2015).

Limited literature exists regarding college access and success for Black and Latinx students from rural communities. The scholarship that is available often focuses on students in middle (Means, 2019) and high school (Irvin et al., 2016; Means et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2009). The experiences of Black and Latinx rural students in college needs further exploration so stakeholders can better understand and address inequities. Rural Black and Latinx students experience different and additional barriers to higher education than their White peers (Byun et al., 2012; Irvin et al, 2016; Means, 2019). Deficit practices, such as lower expectations for Black and Latinx students (Irvin et al., 2016) must be disrupted.

To better understand Black and Latinx rural students' college-going experiences related to access and success, we developed the following research questions for our study.

1. How did Black and Latinx rural students navigate their pathways into higher education?
2. What assets and resources did these students use in pursuit of academic success and progress toward graduation once on campus?

This study engaged rural Black and Latinx students in the Emerging Scholars (ES) Program at Clemson University to understand how they used their assets, resources, and networks to get into and persist through higher education. The student insights here highlight what the students themselves did and achieved and how they found and built college networks of support.

## Literature Review

Rural students face more challenges related to academic preparation and geographic isolation, including a lack of access to higher education and lower socioeconomic status, than do their non-rural peers (Byun et al., 2012). Nelson (2019) found that rural students successfully used social capital to transition into higher education, but that study did not focus specifically on Black and Latinx students' unique experiences. Nelson's (2019) work focused on community and familial capital, citing Byun et al. (2012) and Coleman (1988). For our study, we expand current literature by using an asset-based, critical race lens—Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model—to examine the assets and resources that support rural Black and Latinx students in navigating higher education.

### Rural Black and Latinx Students: College Access

Approximately one in four rural students identifies as a Student of Color (Bigham, 2021). Additionally, most of the counties whose majority population is Black or Latinx are in rural America (O'Hare, 2009). Rural Black and Latinx students are less likely to have support for educational and career planning (Williams-Johnson & Cain, 2020), and rural Black male students specifically face constraints regarding college aspirations, including lower college aspirations (Strayhorn, 2009). Existing scholarship has highlighted higher education obstacles for rural Black and Latinx students, including a failure to see rural youth as having higher education aspirations (McDonough et al., 2010). Moreover, prior research has made racial disparities in rural America evident as studies have shown that poverty has been sustained and concentrated in rural areas (Thiede et al., 2018) and that racism perpetuates poverty (Heard-Garris et al., 2021).

Family members are key in preparing rural Black students (Flowers, 2021; Means, 2019; Means et al., 2016) and rural Latinx students (Means, 2019) for higher education. Additionally, emerging scholarship has focused on the role of high schools and home communities in preparing rural students for college (Ardoin, 2018; Byun et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2021; Gafford, 2021; McGrath et al., 2001). Understanding the role that bridge programs can play from high school into and through higher education is a key element of our study that helps connect these existing areas of scholarship.

Our study adds to the literature by focusing on the assets rural Black and Latinx students use to navigate higher education. Rural students in general are understudied, and we know even less about the experiences of rural Black and Latinx students. Understanding in more detail how these students access higher education and how higher education

can be made more accessible for them is an important contribution that we make through this study.

### Rural Black and Latinx Students: College Success

College admissions for Students of Color have increased in recent years (Quaye & Harper, 2014; Schreiner, 2014), but they experience more attrition than White students (Shapiro et al., 2017; Tsui, 2007), and Black and Latinx students are less likely to graduate in six years than White students (Chen et al., 2019). Engagement and social connections have been positively associated with student success and persistence (Byun et al., 2012; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh et al., 2008; Morton et al., 2018; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Scholars have also examined the challenges that Black and Latinx students and other Students of Color face in developing a sense of belonging in college (Fischer, 2007; Griffin et al., 2016; Museus et al., 2017). Our study sought to develop a clearer understanding of how students who are Black and/or Latinx *and* going to school in rural areas cultivate a sense of belonging for themselves.

Rural African American college students have identified support from faculty and administrators as key to their success in college (Flowers, 2021). They have also described as assets friends at home and former classmates (Flowers, 2021). As with rural Black students, rural Latinx students have found that support from faculty and staff (Freeman, 2017) contributes to their success. Additionally, peers have been shown to be assets for rural Latinx students (Arbello-Marrero & Milacci, 2016). Cerezo and Chang (2013) also found that Latinx students' personal-cultural fit with their college or university enhances students' persistence in higher education. Freeman (2017) found that Latinx students who are encouraged to foster their ethnic identities are more likely to be successful in college.

The assets for Black and Latinx students in higher education overlap and intersect in important ways. Both Black and Latinx rural students bring assets to higher education that include family support (Harper, 2012; Means et al., 2016; Valadez, 2008) and community expectations (Nelson, 2019). High teacher expectations in high school are also positive predictors of college completion for Students of Color (Sims & Ferrare, 2021).

To disrupt deficit narratives, our study highlights Black and Latinx rural student assets and builds on existing literature about these positive attributes and strengths. This study combats stereotypes around who "rural" students are and disrupts the use of deficit language. This study focuses on how rural Black and Latinx students talk about their success in college and how they achieve that success. By situating this study at the intersection of access and success, we make an important contribution to existing scholarship.

**Theoretical Framework: Community Cultural Wealth**

We used Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model to frame our study. This model builds on critical race theory (CRT), which asserts counter-storytelling can be used to disrupt dominant ideologies (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). CRT tenets also include the permanence of racism, which privileges White people over People of Color across society—including in education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Another tenet argues that whiteness as property perpetuates white supremacy (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). The tenet of interest convergence asserts that White people engage in change to benefit People of Color only if it first benefits White people.

CRT includes critiques of liberalism as colorblindness, equality (rather than equity), and belief in the neutrality of law, all of which fail to address white supremacy, racism, and decreased opportunities for People of Color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Yosso (2005) focused on how CRT centers those who are marginalized by white supremacy to develop a model that afforded space for counter-stories to disrupt "the assumption that Students of Color come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70).

Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model is made up of six forms of capital that Students of Color bring to school:

1. Aspirational capital concerns the resiliency families have despite facing hardships and barriers to reach goals.
2. Linguistic capital includes the skills gained from learning one or more language or style of communication.
3. Familial capital is the sense of community nurtured through relationships with family and close friends by learning lessons of caring and coping together.
4. Social capital involves support through community networks of and social contacts.
5. Navigational capital is the ability to move through and recover from experiences in institutions (e.g., schools, colleges, and universities) that are often racially hostile for Students of Color.
6. Resistant capital includes skills gained through oppositional behavior as an observer of oppositional behavior and a participant in oppositional behavior to disrupt inequities and injustices. (Yosso, 2005)

Instead of comparing them to majoritarian definitions of capital, these types of capital can be measured using counter-storytelling. This framework made sense for our study because each of these components informs how students navigate their lives and academic experiences. Our work privileges the assets of rural Black and Latinx students and centers their voices and stories to understand and disrupt narratives about these students. We employed Yosso's (2005) model to frame our research methods and as a lens through which to analyze our data.

**Research Site**

This study was conducted at Clemson University, a large, land-grant, historically White institution (HWI) in South Carolina. At the time of the study (the 2019–2020 academic year) the institution enrolled just over 20,000 undergraduates, among whom approximately 1,200 students identified as Black or African American (6% of the campus population) and 1,000 students identified as Latinx (5% of the population) (Clemson University, 2019). In contrast, about 27% of the state population identifies as Black or African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), and 6% identifies as Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Our study involved Emerging Scholars (ES) Program students. ES is a college access and success program for students from high schools in an impoverished rural region of the state. ES was established at Clemson in 2002 to address disparities in education access and success for the state's disadvantaged rural students, many of whom were living in poverty. The program began with a team of two and now includes three full-time staff members and a part-time staff member who is based in the community where most partner schools are located. ES was originally housed in Clemson's Office of Access and Equity. When the Division of Inclusion and Equity was created in 2016, ES moved there. It currently is in the Office of College Preparation and Outreach (CPO) within the Division of Inclusion and Equity.

ES students are assigned to cohorts and spend time on the Clemson campus during the summers in which they are enrolled in the program. Program enrollment has grown from 40 students in the first cohort (2002) to 80 students in the 2020 cohort. The program serves 220 students from seven schools across 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Students apply in the spring of their ninth-grade year. At Clemson they take math, English, and public speaking courses. Additionally, students engage in college preparation skills, college application planning, and major/career exploration. During the academic year in their home communities, ES students participate in weekly programmatic events such as SAT/ACT preparation, leadership development, research projects, and STEM lessons, which are delivered in partnership with Clemson Cooperative Extension.

Students are not obligated to attend Clemson, but those who do are eligible for a scholarship (instituted in 2016) that covers tuition, housing, meals, and books for four

years if they maintain a 2.5 GPA and complete 24 credits per year. Approximately 101 ES students have attended Clemson and received additional support once they were enrolled, including registration guidance, weekly advising, study hours, and school year events. High school students who participate in ES may choose to go to any college or university and may apply for other ES scholarships at other institutions, but the support they receive at each institution varies.

## Research Methods

We used a case study approach to examine the experiences of Black and Latinx rural students as they navigated higher education. The case study approach was appropriate as this study sought to understand the perspectives of individuals involved in a real-life context (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2017). This case was bounded both by the institution (Clemson University) and the specific program in which the students participated (Emerging Scholars), in keeping with qualitative case study research design (Yin, 2017). The selection was intentional as the program includes rural Black and Latinx students who are successfully navigating higher education, which is what we as the researchers sought to learn more about (Merriam, 2002). We selected focus groups as our data collection tool so that participants could make meaning collectively

regarding the environment within the ES program and provide us with a deeper understanding and new insights about the students' experiences (Breen, 2006).

### Participant Recruitment and Selection

To recruit participants, members of the research team who work with the program reached out personally and emailed all ES students who were enrolled at Clemson during the 2019–2020 academic year. Information provided in the email included proposed meeting times, a brief overview of the purpose of the focus groups, and responses to participant questions. Lunch was provided at the focus groups.

Thirteen students, 45% of the total number of ES scholarship students at Clemson at the time of the study, participated in four one-hour focus groups of two to four students, divided by academic year classification. Participant demographics are provided in Table 1.

### Data Collection

We selected focus groups for data collection because this approach provides rich data, helps participants with recall, and is both cumulative and elaborative (Fontana & Frey, 1998). Additionally, participants can hear one another's comments, which may stimulate additional

**Table 1**
*Study Participants*

| Pseudonym | Race/ethnicity | Gender | Year | Major |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| BA | Black/African American | Woman | Freshman | Political science and communication studies |
| Brielle | Black/African American | Woman | Sophomore | Secondary education and math science |
| CB | Black/African American | Woman | Freshman | Computer information systems |
| Denzel | Black/African American | Man | Freshman | Marketing |
| DJ | Black/African American | Man | Sophomore | Sociology |
| Eddy | Black/African American | Man | Senior | Management |
| Jade | Black/African American | Woman | Sophomore | English |
| Juan G. | Latinx | Man | Senior | Computer information systems |
| Kharson | Black/African American | Woman | Senior | Computer science |
| Lizzy | Black/African American & White | Woman | Junior | Biological sciences |
| Mariah | Black/African American | Woman | Sophomore | English |
| Ramon | Latinx | Man | Senior | Mechanical engineering |
| Su | Black/African American and Asian | Woman | Junior | Sociology |

information (Patton, 2002). Finally, this approach allows participants to share insights in a social context, resulting in high-quality data (Patton, 2002).

Our focus group protocol began with an introduction to the study and a review of the participants' role, their ability to withdraw at any time, and participants' selection of pseudonyms for the study. We then asked participants about getting into college, their participation in ES at Clemson, and their personal academic stories on campus. The semi-structured interview format allowed students to go beyond the scripted questions, affording them the opportunity to participate in the research more fully. We did not frame our questions around Yosso's (2005) framework but used it to analyze our data, as outlined in the next section.

### Data Analysis

Focus group interview audio recordings were transcribed by a transcription company, and we reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy. As focus group data are influenced by participants' social interaction, we analyzed data at the focus group level vs. the individual level (Hughes & DuMont, 2002; Smithson, 2000). First, each research team member reviewed the transcripts, identifying patterns across focus group data and developing an individual codebook that included a list of codes and associated descriptions and examples (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011).

Second, we met as a research team to discuss individual codebooks, identify commonalities and differences, and develop a common codebook. Our common codebook reflected themes based on forms of community cultural wealth, including aspirational, familial, navigational, and social capital. Students also talked about systemic challenges such as racial exclusion, imposter syndrome, and finances. Third, we assigned two research team members to apply the common codebook to each transcript. Each team member then identified preliminary themes. As a team, we met as a group and discussed preliminary themes, identified commonalities across our individual preliminary themes, and used the commonalities to develop our collective findings for the study.

### Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of this study we employed triangulation through the use of multiple investigators (Denzin, 1978). Each of us brought our own experience, expertise, and lens to the work. For example, as ES staff, two team members had insider knowledge. This information helped us to understand program language that participants used but was unfamiliar to the two team members who have not worked directly with the program. By working closely to challenge each other as we analyzed data, we developed the study findings.

Additionally, we employed researcher reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) in the process. As a group we hold different identities and experiences with ES. Our interactions and relationships with participants varied, so being aware of our individual positionalities was important to our scholarship. Our researcher positionalities are highlighted below.

The first author is a White woman who researches community and senses of belonging in higher education with a focus on first-generation students and transition experiences of students, staff, and faculty. Previously, she worked in residence life and conduct for 20 years. She does not work directly with ES outside this study.

The second author is a White woman who served as the director of ES for 14 years and currently works with three other programs and initiatives at Clemson. She is also a doctoral candidate whose research focuses on the educational experiences of rural Black families.

The third author is a White woman whose work with college access and success programs spans several states and has focused primarily on first-generation, rural Students of Color. She has spent the last four years working directly with ES and is currently the program director.

The fourth author is a Black man who researches college-going and collegiate experiences of rural Black and Latinx students. He also spent close to eight years working for a college program focused on college access and college success for minoritized student populations, including Students of Color, low-income students, and first-generation college students. He has not worked directly with ES outside this project.

### Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations to our work. The research was conducted at a single site with a small number of participants. The influences of campus culture, geographical region, and institutional history impact participants' experiences. This study provides a single snapshot of the students' experiences. While the participants were at different stages of their academic careers, these data are comprised of their insights based on a single moment in time. Additionally, 11 of our participants identified as Black/African American and two as Latinx. While this distribution is proportionally reflective of program participation, it is a limitation of our study. Finally, while focus group interviews allowed us to gain a better understanding of the pre-college and collegiate experiences of Black and Latinx

rural students, we recognize that the focus group interview setting may have led students to withhold some stories, experiences, and perspectives or to align what they shared with other participants' narratives.

### Findings

Student participants described several challenges in their educational trajectories, including poverty and social isolation due to the low enrollment of Black or African American students at the institution. Despite challenges, participants in this study highlighted four forms of capital related to their experiences as rural Black and Latinx students who were navigating higher education: familial, social, aspirational, and navigational. Students highlighted resources and strategies they used to persist into and through college. Students also talked about aspects of their experiences that cut across different areas of capital. The ES program was described as a hub for a variety of forms of community cultural wealth that students used in college. The program was not only an academic support, but a holistic source of capital in their college experiences.

### Forms of Community Cultural Wealth

#### *Familial Capital*

Participants discussed support from their family, including parents, grandparents, and siblings, that helped them pursue and persist through college. Families were involved in many aspects of students' lives when they started college. Students had a sense of pride in where they came from and how they represented their families.

Parents were key supporters for students, encouraging them throughout their P–12 education to go to college and earn a degree. Students talked about encouragement and the ongoing support of family around higher education. Mariah talked about her mom's expectations after high school: "My mom really pushed education saying, 'You have three options: school, workforce, or military.'" Denzel was encouraged by her mom to go to college. She said,

> What [inspired] me to go to college was when my mom... Well, specifically when my dad died, she always would tell us, "I really want you girls to do good in school." So it's like, "Okay, Mom." I'm not only going to college because I want to further my education, but most of all I'm doing it for [my dad] and for my mom, 'cause my mom ... she didn't [go] to a four-year university or even a tech school, so she's like, "I want the best for my children—I want my children to be successful."

Students consistently shared that their parents were supportive and encouraging of them to go to college.

According to the participants in this study, parental support continued once students were in college. Students discussed the role their parents played even as—in some cases—their parents were learning about higher education alongside their students. Ramon said,

> [Our parents] want to learn what the different processes are and what they look like and what they can do to help. They may not always know what to do, but they're always very understanding of what we're going through in school and very supportive because they know that some of the support can be limited because of the fact that we're at Clemson, and it's four hours away from home… They're very understanding of their circumstances back home and our circumstances here. They're very understanding and supportive 110%.

These quotes exemplify what many students shared about the familial capital they accessed in college. Whether the capital consisted of encouragement to go to college after high school or encouragement once students enrolled, participants enjoyed a wealth of capital and support from their parents, whether or not their parents had gone to college. The support and celebration of success throughout their college experiences was very strong for study participants.

The participants also talked about grandparents and older siblings as sources of support and motivation. Lizzy said, "Living with my grandparents, they always told me about college… Ultimately, I knew college was in the picture [because of] my grandparents." Similarly, Ramon spoke explicitly about the role of his sister in his college experience:

> Whenever my sister went to college right out of high school, that was a big motivation for me because she was the first person in our family to graduate from high school and also the first to go to college and then graduate school… She has been able to kind of help guide [my brother and me] whenever we have to fill out certain paperwork or anything school related because she had that experience… I always just refer to her, and she'll tell us what we have to do.

While parents were central to many students' discussions of the familial capital from which they drew, these examples show that other family provided support as well. Participants' success was celebrated by extended family just as by their parents. Students shared that their college

attendance was a point of pride for family members. As highlighted in the quotes above, participants' families, parents and grandparents alike, expected that students would move forward to obtain more education after high school.

An additional source of familial capital was younger siblings and cousins. Mariah shared the following.

> My sister is in ninth grade. She wants to do what I do. She wants to follow my footsteps. I let her come whenever family visits. I let her stay with me in my room to give her as much as I possibly can, like the outlook on it, on Clemson. She wants to come here, too.

Younger relatives were not mentioned as providing guidance about the college experience, but they were a source of familial capital in terms of motivating and inspiring participants. The rural Latinx and Black students in this study felt it was their responsibility to lead the way and serve as role models for younger siblings and cousins regarding what going to college looked like. They actively engaged in exposing younger relatives to college life, whether through conversation and guidance or by inviting siblings and cousins to spend time with them at college.

A final source of familial capital that participants described was the ES program itself. Students talked about the program as both familial capital (program staff as their family on campus) and social capital (peers and cohort members as part of their social networks). Denzel mentioned each of the ES staff by name and said, "Y'all were really a big [part of my campus family], too. I gotta say that." Juan G. said that he felt a familial connection to ES before he arrived on campus: "I knew, I myself, had a family here before I even came to Clemson... I had that connection [with ES]. I had that group that I could turn to if I needed when I got here."

Participants saw older students in the program as their family as well. BA said, "They're there, and they wanna help us 'cause… they're our extended family… That's really helpful, and it makes you feel like you're at home again." Kharson also turned to older peers for guidance:

> [Older students in ES] really became like my uncles, like my big brothers. They really looked out for me… They became everything that I needed when I needed 'em. I still text [an older student] now when I'm emotional… That was my people to turn to 'cause I ain't really have nobody else to turn to.

Students described ES staff and other ES students as family throughout their college experiences.

Students cultivated familial capital at Clemson as well as drawing from the familial capital they had in their home communities. Participants in the study talked about others in the programs as "big brothers" to whom they could turn when they needed support. They spoke about the ES staff as family members who were there not only when they were upset about something, but who also told participants when they needed to step up their work. They saw staff as family members who would be direct with them and make sure they completed assignments, administrative tasks, and other responsibilities when they needed a reminder or a nudge.

### Social Capital

Students also discussed how friends, cohort members, and older peers were sources of social capital. Students described turning to cohort members and older peers for social engagement and connection so that students could build campus connections beyond academic engagement. Su said,

> I just knew that I wanted a new experience, and I wanted to meet new people. That was kind of my outlook with applying with my other colleges, as well. It wasn't kind of like, "Oh, I want to go there for a particular program or something." It was kind of like, "Oh, I know college in general will get me new experiences, and I'll meet new people." That was kind of my whole forte for applying to colleges and stuff like that.

Kharson agreed and said older students helped her find social connections. The social network at college was important in terms of personal connections as well as serving as a source of capital for navigating challenges that emerged while in college.

Students also talked about finding community in their residence halls. Denzel shared the following.

> Giving us the opportunity to be a part of the [living learning community] program, and actually live in that community with people that look like me that are in the same majors as me… I know they say you're supposed to branch out and meet different types of people, but I also wanna see people I'm used to as well, so that really helped.

Student communities were more than a network of friends to socialize with. BA said that friends were essential to her learning and development in college. She talked about how they provided not only academic guidance, but holistic support:

[My friends] allow me to be more healthier as far as my mindset and physically, too. So it's like having that in my corner, having us all being on the same page even though we all have different majors, our end goal is all the same. We're all here to graduate, to learn. To not just memorize and to do better as people and then to become somebody successful. So having that with me has really been helpful and healthy for my life.

These friend networks did not focus solely on individual tasks or responsibilities but encouraged participants to look at the big picture. Being physically and mentally well was as important as being academically well. Participants established these relationships in pursuit of graduation, a good job, and other types of success.

The common experiences and backgrounds of peer groups was an additional asset to students' experiences. Denzel highlighted this shared experience as another level of connection between her cohort and those who had come before:

And they keep it as a reality for us too. Because you could ask any of our mentors, but they don't come from where we come from. So [older peers] keep it as a reality of people from the low country. Like, "Hey listen y'all, we're not like them, so we're gonna have to study harder, or we're gonna have to put in more motivation, put in more work than others or than how your mentors can do it… We know our ability, that we would just have to work harder and do better." So I think they keep it more real—that's why we connect with them more, why we can ask them anything, because at the end of the day, we came from the same place.

Here Denzel made the point that different people can help students navigate campus, but because of their backgrounds, having near peers who can help them through the specific lens of their previous community and academic preparation was essential.

Students bridged campus and home community social capital in another way, as well. While students were building social support in college, many participants wanted to continue to build social capital with their home communities. For DJ, this interest surfaced as a desire to give back: "I want to do something, like be in a community where we come from… I want to study sociology to be able to give back and try to give more than what we got as kids when we grew up." Students talked about the ability to cultivate and use social capital not only in their social context in college, but also through their ongoing social connections in their home communities.

## Aspirational Capital

Students' social capital connections between college and back home connect to their aspirational capital. Before going to college, participants were focused on college aspirations. During college, they looked forward to other aspirations that would benefit their families, their communities, and themselves. Participants shared that their desires to further their education were related to not only their individual success, but also to success for their families and communities. All students displayed an element of aspirational capital in their desire to go to college, but their way of acknowledging that capital varied. For example, Mariah focused on her college aspirations in connection with her future career and life. She said,

I always knew I was gonna go to college because everything I wanted to do required college. And so either that, or I would have to go straight into the workforce, and I know I didn't have any skills to go straight into the workforce.

Participants understood that college was foundational to their personal and professional goals. This understanding overlapped with the encouragement they got from their families, as discussed above, but it served participants in a separate and distinct way as well. Throughout high school, participants had engaged in reflection about what they wanted to achieve next, as a high school diploma was not the end goal.

Just as finishing high school was not a final step, neither were students' aspirations to get into college or to be done with their education after earning a bachelor's degree. Aspirational capital was something students used to propel themselves beyond the four-year degree to advanced education or employment. Juan G. talked about going to England and finding out about a graduate fellowship program. He said,

I was able to connect with people for what is now my number one choice of grad school, University of Michigan. I was able to pull some strings and had a campus visit that was for the most part fully funded by the University of Michigan… And I got a heads up on what the program was like, and that's still my number one choice.

Aspirational capital was essential for students to navigate not only into and through college, but also beyond higher education. Students talked about next goals throughout the focus groups. No one spoke about being finished upon completing their undergraduate degree.

Another key element in students' aspirational capital was the ES program itself. The building of this capital started

during the participants' participation in the program during the summers before college, and it expanded into support as they entered and persisted through higher education. Su shared that ES helped her see herself as a college student. She said, "The ES program helped me have reassurance as I was thinking about going to college. It kind of just added value to what I thought about, in terms of college and education and social life and stuff." Kharson explained that her ES experiences before starting at Clemson were intertwined with her aspirational goals:

> I think even before I got here, back in high school, the reason I chose to be a computer science major was because of the computer science class I took through ES… I chose my major based off of that class and the fact that I was good at it.

Students saw ES as a resource on which they could draw to reach their goals and aspirations and as a support for the work they knew they had to do to achieve those goals. Participants spoke about ES across a variety of types of capital—as a resource for personal and academic success in the past, the present, and the future.

### Navigational Capital

Just as participants' aspirational and familial capitals informed their desires to go to college early in their lives, they were also cultivating navigational capital long before they started college. The time students spent on Clemson's campus in high school helped with their transition to the role of full-time college students. Jade shared, "The program helps you, because it's actually being on the college campus and experiencing kind of what we would be going through, and all that, so that helped." Ramon agreed, adding,

> One of the biggest things the program did, at least for me anyway, just bringing us up here to Clemson. Those three different summers and just… getting me in the habit of like, "Oh I'm on a schedule." Just putting me in the habit of walking around campus to a specific classroom or a specific professor and bringing us here to a college atmosphere. That was really beneficial for me.

While students described ES as critical for their transition into higher education, they also described feeling a sense of disconnection with the campus community because it did not reflect the racial demographics of their home communities. Students had to navigate being isolated because they often were the only Black or Latinx student in a space – a classroom, a meeting, sometimes and entire academic program. Learning to navigate the campus setting, find and use resources, and understand the expectations for college students were important to participants as they prepared for and pursued higher education, despite challenges.

Several students discussed majors and career options as a part of navigational capital. Brielle talked about coming to Clemson for the education program but realizing she wanted to go to law school. She explored options and found that English was a better fit for her. She said,

> The reason for my major, I always liked to write. When I was younger, I liked to write little, short stories and all kinds of stuff. I kind of looked up the best majors for law school and things like that, and English was one of them. I was like, perfect fit. I like to write. Sometimes I like to read, so why not?

DJ also chose Clemson in part because of the major he planned to pursue. He explained, "No other school really fit for my major that actually had a good program, so I was like, 'Okay this is what I'm about to be already getting myself into. Why not come here since I had the opportunity?'"

Navigating college involved more than simply choosing a major, however. Academic success was another part of the college landscape for which students developed skills. DJ talked about finding a tutor for his program. He said some programs offered lots of tutoring options, but added, "For me, in political science, it's rare to find a tutor. I would have to go online and actually request one for them to try and send me one." Students developed skills for multiple aspects of academic success, including identifying resources to support that success in college.

Participants also described helping others develop navigational capital. Su talked about assisting younger students as they transitioned into a "big school like this" and helping them navigate the challenges they faced. She explained that she had developed the skills to support students in the cohort behind hers. She said, "They're only a year behind us. Some things they've mentioned, we're like, 'Oh, we went through the same thing freshman year.' It's relatable. You can give some knowledge and wisdom of being in that place a year ago." Students understood, both through their own experiences and through their work helping other students, that navigational capital was essential for success in college.

### Discussion

Analyzing participant conversations through the lens of Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth revealed that students employed different forms of capital throughout their journey to and through college. Here we address our first research question: How did Black and Latinx rural students navigate their pathways into higher education? Participants shared that during decision-making

processes about attending college and choosing a major, students accessed familial capital. Familial capital came in the form of the support from parents, grandparents, and younger and older cousins and siblings.

These findings affirm what other scholars have found about rural Black (Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019) and rural Latinx (Means, 2019) students and family support. Similarly, social capital on campus was important for participants as they built relationships with cohort members and other students. Of special importance was the role of older students in the ES program as they provided insight with the same home community frame of reference.

Once on campus, students used a variety of forms of capital, particularly in connection to the ES program. The themes around these forms of capital help to answer our second research question: What assets and resources did these students use in pursuit of academic success and progress toward graduation once on campus?

Students used their navigational capital while transitioning into higher education and even more so once they were on campus and made their way through college. Underscoring the entire experience was students' use of aspirational capital. Students employed aspirational capital as they decided to go to college and selected a major. Students reported making those decisions based on the life they wanted for themselves or their families.

The ES program bridged all aspects of the capital that participants highlighted. ES engaged with students during high school and introduced the college experience early, the summer before their sophomore year, to cultivate aspirational capital by helping students see themselves in college. At the same time, ES built a foundation for the navigational capital students needed to understand college campuses and experiences. ES provided a social network for students through cohorts and community connections with other ES students. Finally, students consistently referred to the ES staff as family and saw that the staff provided a level of care and attention that replicated what they sought from family at home—but with the additional knowledge of the college experience.

## Rural Black and Latinx Student Experiences

This study builds on previous scholarship that asserts that while geographical distance can be an obstacle for rural students (Schafft, 2016), and higher education can be incongruent with rural life (McDonough et al., 2010), colleges and universities can foster "a more responsive relationship with rural areas by increased involvement in

rural life" (McDonough et al., 2010, p. 206). Not only did participants in this study possess aspirational capital related to attending college, but they also linked familial capital and aspirational capital to their college experience. Families encouraged students to pursue college and prepared them for higher education though involvement in the ES program during 10th, 11th, and 12th grades.

Social capital is essential for rural student success. In our study, we found that these structures took the form of both familial and social capital through the ES program. Our study also fits with existing scholarship about the importance of campus resources in helping rural students build social capital (Nelson, 2019). With the specific focus on Black and Latinx rural students, our study makes an important contribution to existing scholarship.

Our study also affirms Nelson's (2019) finding that rural students are able to cultivate social capital effectively because of their ability to replicate connections with home communities. Our study adds to Nelson's (2019) scholarship by highlighting that Black and Latinx rural students are also able to cultivate social capital in this way. Additionally, our study highlights the importance of familial capital in students' experiences of navigating into higher education, which aligns with what Byun et al. (2012) found about the link between rural students' success and parental expectations.

## Implications for Research and Practice

This study can inform those researchers who wish to explore the experiences of rural Black and Latinx students. Our work provides insight into the experiences of rural Black and Latinx students through their own descriptions of how they drew upon various forms of capital before and during college. Additionally, this scholarship provides an examination of a specific program and how that program provided support across the forms of capital described by students.

### Implications for Research

While this work focused on the experiences of Black and Latinx rural students, it is important to look at the experiences of students who hold other racialized identities. The intersection of racism and different systems of oppression may impact student experiences. Until more research is conducted, it is difficult to identify unique challenges and opportunities for different demographic groups.

In addition, the geographical location of rural students, even how the word "rural" itself is defined, is important to understand. While our study focused on students in rural communities in South Carolina, the experiences of rural students in the Northeast, Midwest, other locations in the South, and the West are likely to differ. We should not assume that all rural communities face the same challenges and that all rural students aspire to the same educational outcomes or have the same assets. Again, with more research comes more detail and specificity about different communities as well as diverse students.

Additional scholarship might explore the experiences of rural Black and Latinx students related to degree or major. What role does social capital play in the experiences of rural Black and Latinx students in STEM? What do their on-campus and in-class experiences look like? How might the experiences of students who are pursuing degrees in education differ from those who are earning degrees in philosophy or English or sociology? All these areas are worth exploration to achieve more complex and multifaceted understanding of the student experience.

Finally, additional scholarship about specific programs such as ES is important. How are programs designed to foster community cultural wealth and to play upon the strengths, talents, and assets that rural students bring with them to college? What programmatic resources are most important to students? How does pre-college engagement lead students into higher education in ways in which they can thrive and achieve their goals?

**Implications for Practice**

Based on the knowledge and insight shared by participants, this study highlights specific areas of capital development. Other institutions can use this information to understand student assets. Specifically, it is essential to understand how students build networks and connections to help them thrive academically, socially, and personally in higher education.

While students' development and use of different forms of capital can emerge in different ways on a given campus, students in this study identified communal space as important. This space could take the form of student lounges and/or study spaces and, more specifically, student spaces near offices for programs that serve rural Black and Latinx students or other Students of Color. Such space can be created in collaboration with students and the staff who serve rural Black and Latinx students, as they have expertise on where the space should be located, furnishings, and how it can accommodate different activities. Providing staff office space and furnishings that invite students to connect between classes or during stressful times facilitates group and individual spaces of support. Together, these approaches can create a sense of place where students feel they belong and can access resources to help build networks of support. That said, a final consideration is how these spaces and options are informed by the current pandemic in a post-COVID setting.

Given the prominence of family in students' networks, providing resources and information to parents, grandparents, siblings, and other family members is essential. In our study, families were very involved with the ES program through high school and into college. Institutions may want to consider what information, resources, workshops, and other opportunities for family engagement are needed.

Family engagement could happen during orientation, but to cultivate a deeper and richer understanding of college access and success, additional sustained involvement with families and communities is important throughout the year. Examples include building and maintaining relationships with families while students are in high school, offering financial aid workshops, and providing families with a sense of what their students' college experiences are like—including bringing parents to campus for workshops and tours. This work should not only happen during recruitment, admissions, and orientation, however. Rather, it should occur through in-person conversations, webinars, and newsletters throughout students' college years.

Another implication for practice is benchmarking programs to see what other institutions have done to serve this population of students. By understanding different approaches to supporting rural Black and Latinx students as they build community, institutions can individualize their approaches based on student needs and requests, financial and other resources, and staff and faculty partnerships designed specifically to serve rural Black and Latinx students. Benchmarking followed by design in collaboration with students can increase college access and strengthen relationships with rural communities.

As a first step in the work of benchmarking, this study provides an overview of an exemplar program and the role that staff and administrators on campus can play as students build their networks and navigate college. By sharing the experiences of rural Black and Latinx students within the context of a specific program, colleges and universities can use this study as a template to design, build, fund, and sustain programs specific to their institutional contexts.

Numerous lessons emerged from this study that can be applied at other institutions, including the importance of having affirming staff, peers, and spaces to support student success in higher education. This finding aligns with previous scholarship about the importance of places for students "to seek refuge and dress wounds…, places for hard conversations, where differences can be aired and strategy mapped" (Lawrence, 2002, p. xvii). Additionally, our study supports the findings of Kirby et al. (2020), who

asserted that affirming spaces can increase students' sense of belonging and send positive messages about inclusiveness on a particular campus. In our study, it became clear that the staff and peers in ES represented familial capital, and students got support, information, and encouragement from ES staff and peers to persist in higher education. Perhaps most importantly, the role of time was essential to the development of student-staff relationships. Participants in this study had known the ES staff for three or more years before starting college at Clemson. The staff knew the students' families, communities, successes, and struggles and actively engaged with students to identify ways to support and celebrate them.

## Conclusion

Our study identified four forms of capital within Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model that rural Black and Latinx students employ in their college-going experiences. Through an examination of a specific program that focuses on establishing a college-going culture among students in families from the state's economically disadvantaged areas, familial, social, aspirational, and navigational capitals emerged as central strategies that students used in pursuit of success in college. Students shared how familial, social, aspirational, and navigational capitals are intertwined and how they drew upon each of these forms of capital for academic, social, and personal success. Additionally, based on the information shared by students, this study provides an examination of race, finances, and programmatic work that cut across all four of these forms of capital. Finally, the ES program provides an example for institutions that are working to develop initiatives to support of rural Black and Latinx students on their campuses.

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