Navigating New Worlds: The College Transition of Rural Latinx Undergraduate Students from California's San Joaquin Valley

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This study examined the college transition experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students in California's San Joaquin Valley. The literature on rural students in higher education is limited, and much of it has been focused on White students, especially those in areas such as Appalachia, the Midwest, and the Southern United States, which has led to the exclusion of rural Latinx undergraduate students and how their rurality intersects with their race to inform their higher education experiences. This study adds to the literature by focusing on the college transition experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students from the San Joaquin Valley to better understand how race and rurality impact students' experiences in higher education. Fifteen students engaged in two two-hour-long pláticas, which were conducted utilizing Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas (conversations), for a total of 30 pláticas. Three critical findings were revealed: (a) rural Latinx undergraduate students encounter academic challenges based on prior K–12 rural schooling, (b) they experienced racial microaggressions as they navigated unfamiliar racial dynamics on campus, (c) the rural Latinx undergraduate students felt socially disconnected from wealth and urban Latinx peers. These findings revealed the unique challenges that rural Latinx undergraduate students face in higher education.

The Latinx student population is one of the fastest-growing student populations entering higher education in the United States (Santiago et al., 2016). Although the rates of Latinx students' attendance in four-year universities have been on the rise, they remain lower than the national rates for persistence and completion of a four-year degree (Santiago et al., 2024). For instance, in 2021, the four-year graduation rate for Latinx students in the United States was 52%, whereas for White students, it was 65% (*Excelencia* in Education, 2023). Latinx students are less likely to graduate than their peers, and to address this trend, researchers have examined the role of college transition experiences to identify the factors that affect persistence and retention (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Hurtado et al., 2020). The literature on Latinx students' college transition also has indicated that factors like campus racial climate, cultural dissonance, and financial instability pose significant challenges to their college transition experiences (Hernandez & Lopez, 2019; Lopez, 2005; Pyne & Means, 2013).

The current Latinx research has neglected the significant role of students' geographical contexts (i.e., rural, town, urban) in their college transition. Many studies either sampled Latinx students from urban regions or fail to specify their geographical backgrounds, which excludes the higher education experiences of Latinx undergraduate students from rural communities. Examining the impact of geographical backgrounds is important because students from rural areas may have different challenges that can impact their college transition process (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; McNamee, 2019). Knowing the challenges of rural students during their college transition can help universities increase support and resources for rural students. Moreover, research on rural students' higher education experiences can reveal underlying systemic issues and inform policy changes to increase the rural student population in higher education.

Rural students also are disadvantaged regarding access to four-year universities, which contributes to their lower

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college enrollment rates in four-year universities, compared to students from urban backgrounds (Byun et al., 2012; Nelson, 2016). Rural education scholarship has highlighted geography as a dominant factor in the disparity of rural students' college enrollment in four-year universities, describing rural regions as education deserts in which rural communities are far from four-year universities (Hillman, 2016; Turley, 2009). Consequently, rural students have fewer school resources and limited access to academically rigorous courses (Burney & Cross, 2006; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015, 2016), including high-quality STEM courses, teachers, and updated facilities (Crain & Webber, 2021; Hassel & Dean, 2015).

More attention has been given to rural students in recent years, but rural education literature predominantly has focused on rural students' barriers to college access and college and career aspirations (Means et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2018; Nelson, 2016; Sowl & Crain, 2021). Much of the rural education literature has concentrated on the experiences of rural White students from the Midwest and Appalachia (Ganss, 2016; McNamee, 2019), often excluding diverse students like rural Latinx students. Researchers must acknowledge that rural communities are not monolithic and that rural White students' higher education experiences do not represent all rural students. Scholarship that has addressed rural Latinx and rural Black students has highlighted how these students use social, cultural, and community assets to navigate higher education (Boettcher et al., 2022; Colvin et al., 2023; Puente, 2023; Stone & Serrata, 2023). This research has provided insights into the unique resources and experiences of rural Students of Color, emphasizing their resilience in overcoming structural barriers in higher education.

No studies have examined the college transition experiences of rural Latinx students from California's San Joaquin Valley, however. Scholars have found that rural Latinx students choose to attend regional or community colleges due to proximity to family, cultural obligations, and economic feasibility (Colvin et al., 2023; Freeman, 2016). Puente et al. (2023) suggested that rural Latinx students in California's San Joaquin Valley tend to select a college campus that is spatially and racially familiar to their rural communities, believing that this choice will facilitate an easier transition to college. The present study addresses the underrepresentation of rural Latinx undergraduate students' higher education experiences in an urban collegiate environment in California, examining the impact of rurality and race on the college transition of first-generation rural Latinx undergraduate students.

This study explored the college transition experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students who decided to enroll in a research-intensive public four-year university located in California's Central Coast region—an area that vastly differs from their rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley in terms of racial demographics, labor industries, and polarizing household income differences. To provide nuanced understanding of the higher education experiences of rural Latinx students, the study was guided by this research question: How does the transition from a rural community to an urban college environment impact rural Latinx undergraduate students' academic and social experiences?

Literature Review

The transition to college presents a unique set of challenges for students, particularly students from rural backgrounds. This literature review explores rural students' multifaceted barriers and experiences by reviewing prior scholarship on their transition to college. This review also synthesizes existing research on Latinx students' transition to college. The intersectionality of rural and Latinx identities in the context of higher education has been understudied.

Rural Students' College Transition Experiences

Minimal research exists on rural students' college transition. Existing studies show that rural students often encounter academic, social, and emotional challenges as they adjust to four-year universities in urban regions (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017). Scholars have attributed the academic challenges experienced by rural students during their transition to college to several factors, including a lack of adequate knowledge of college expectations, less rigorous high school courses, and larger class sizes, which cause many rural students to feel academically unprepared for their college courses (Byun et al., 2012; Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017). For instance, Ganss (2016) studied the college transition of rural students in Oregon and found that rural students experience unexpected emotional and academic challenges in their first year, during which high-achieving high school graduates did not expect to be challenged by the academic rigor of the university.

Research also has shown that students from rural areas often struggle to adjust to large campus environments, leading them to feel overwhelmed and have difficulties forming friendships with their peers (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; McNamee, 2019; Nelson, 2019). Rural communities are known for close relationships among community members (Nelson, 2019). When rural students move to college, they may find it challenging to recreate close friendships and adapt to new urban lifestyles that may not prioritize tight-knit relationships (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; McNamee, 2019; Puente et al., 2023; Schultz, 2004; Tran & DeFeo, 2021). Adaptation to urban life can lead rural students to experience emotional distress, highlighting

how geographic displacement intensifies feelings of culture shock and yearning for tight-knit social connections (Tran & DeFeo, 2021).

As rural students transition to college, they may encounter new forms of diversity, such as new racial differences and political viewpoints. This exposure to new diversity can heighten their awareness of their rural identity, which often is underrepresented in universities (Boettcher et al., 2022; Ganss, 2016). Despite encountering a more diverse environment, White rural students generally welcome these new experiences and do not report difficulties adapting to the diverse racial environment (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017). The underrepresentation of rural identities can have greater effects on rural Students of Color, who must navigate both the cultural and racial differences of rural-to-urban transitions and the racialized campus climate, which can marginalize their experiences (Boettcher et al., 2022). Boettcher et al. (2022) discussed how rural Black and Latinx students draw upon community cultural wealth to persist in their college education despite structural barriers. Other studies have similarly found that rural students often internalize a sense of collective responsibility toward their rural communities and families that can heighten motivation for academic success (Colvin et al., 2023; Puente, 2023; Rios Arroyo, 2025; Stone & Serrata, 2023).

For instance, Stone and Serrata (2023) emphasized the experiences of rural Latina college students who draw on collectivist cultural values as sources of resilience, enabling them to navigate feelings of unfamiliarity and social isolation and persist in their college education despite structural barriers they encountered. Furthermore, Puente (2023) critiqued the deficit-oriented language frequently used to describe rural communities as "education deserts," especially for rural Latinx populations. Puente (2023) advocated for a desire-based framework that highlights the wealth of communal networks and cultural assets that empower students to navigate spatial and structural inequities. Colvin et al. (2023) also emphasized the significance of strong social capital within local schools, which serves as central community spaces promoting cultural connections and collective support for rural Latinx college students. Nelson (2019) also examined how rural students strategically use various forms of social capital, including strong familial relationships, community ties, and institutional support systems, to navigate higher education environments.

Latinx Students' College Transition Experiences

In recent years, numerous studies have explored how race and racism impact students' experiences in higher education, particularly in terms of campus racial climate and racial microaggressions affecting Latinx students and other Students of Color (Bridgeforth, 2022; Sanchez, 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Stokes, 2023; Yosso et al., 2009). Research has shown that at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) peers and faculty often stereotype Latinx students as academically unqualified and unable to succeed (Keels, 2013; Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2016). Additionally, Latinx students may struggle to find a sense of community due to their minoritized ethnic status at a PWI and feel an unwelcoming campus racial climate (Clayton et al., 2019; Garcia & Hurtado, 2011; Serrano, 2022). Similar studies have found that Latinx students experience challenges in finding a community during their transition to college, with many reporting high rates of marginalization and signs of acculturative stress (McCoy, 2014; Nuñez, 2011; Pan & Reyes, 2021).

Furthermore, Latinx STEM majors report higher instances of isolation. For instance, Cole and Espinoza (2008) discovered that Latinx students often find themselves among few Latinx students in their STEM courses, leading many to feel isolated from their White peers. Other scholars who have examined Latinx students in STEM also found that not being prepared for college expectations in STEM courses, along with their ethnic minority status on campus, affected students' psychological well-being and academic progress (Peralta et al., 2013; Sparks et al., 2023). Many Latinx students come from low-resourced high schools and feel academically underprepared for college (Ducheon, 2018). For example, Ramirez et al. (2023) found that Chicana/Latina students became hyperaware of the lack of educational resources at their high schools as they transitioned to the university and compared themselves to other students who seemed to be more academically prepared based on having more educational resources before entering college. Ramirez et al. (2023) noted that students began questioning their belonging as STEM majors due to a lack of academic preparedness and the underrepresentation of Chicana/Latina women in STEM.

Many Latinx students at in four-year universities also are low-income and first-generation college students who, upon entering college, find themselves navigating the campus alone (Falcon, 2015; Green & Wright, 2017). Latinx students have been reported to hold part-time jobs in college to afford tuition and housing (Falcon, 2015; Perez & Farruggia, 2022). Research has found that working while enrolled full-time can cause college students to experience lower academic outcomes, less engagement with campus life, and higher stress, negatively affecting their college transition (Hernandez & Lopez, 2019; Nuñez, 2009; Perna & Odle, 2020; Sy, 2006).

Contributions to the Literature

Existing studies on rural students' higher education experiences have mainly used samples of White rural students. Higher education researchers need to acknowledge, however, that rural White students' experiences do not represent the experiences of all rural students. By focusing on rural White students, existing scholarship has excluded the examination of rural Latinx students' racialized experiences and has inadequately captured the unique experiences and challenges they face in higher education settings. While recent scholarship has increasingly addressed the experiences of rural Latinx students and other rural Students of Color, much of this research has focused on how these students employ social and cultural tools to navigate higher education (Colvin et al., 2023; Puente, 2023; Stone & Serrata, 2023). Prior research has highlighted the resilience and agency of rural Students of Color, demonstrating how communal strengths mitigate structural barriers in higher education.

This study further advances the literature by explicitly centralizing race alongside rurality, examining how rural Latinx students experience the transition from low-income, farm-working Latinx rural communities into a higher education environment situated within an urban-centric, affluent, and predominantly White population. The Latinx college transition literature has not considered students' geographical background and its impact on rural Latinx students' college experiences. This study makes major contributions to the rural and Latinx college transition literature by examining the experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students who are first-generation and from farm-working, low-income families in California.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on bridging multiple worlds theory (BMW; Cooper, 2011) and Latino critical race theory (LatCrit; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to examine factors such as race and rurality in the college transition of rural Latinx undergraduate students. The BMW framework examines how students' various social environments (peers, school, family) interact and influence the challenges, resources, and success of culturally diverse students' pathways to college (Cooper, 2011). Cooper (2011) formulated five dimensions to track students as they navigate through their multiple worlds: (a) family demographics, (b) students' aspiration and identity pathways, (c) math and language academic pathways through school, (d) resources and challenges in students' worlds, and (e) cultural research partnerships from K–20. Using family demographics, academic pathways through school, and resources and challenges across students'

world dimensions, I used BMW to consider the college transition of rural Latinx undergraduate students because it effectively captures the complexities of their experiences. Rural students often come from rural communities with limited resources, resulting in a mismatch when they enter universities in large cities (Hillman, 2016; Manly et al., 2020; Puente et al., 2023). This transition exposes them to new cultural and social worlds that may differ vastly from their rural environments, creating unique challenges.

The study also used LatCrit to examine how attending a PWI affected the college experiences of rural Latinx students. LatCrit extends critical race theory (CRT) to highlight how race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression shape the educational experiences of Latinx students (Pérez Huber, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). CRT challenges dominant ideas like meritocracy and colorblindness, which present educational institutions as neutral systems that promote success for all students (Pérez Huber, 2012; Solórzano, 1998; Yosso et al., 2009). LatCrit was also used to capture the nuances of the rural Latinx students' experiences with race and racism in higher education settings. Research has shown that Students of Color at PWIs face racial microaggressions, such as racial isolation, which negatively impacts their college experience (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). I used LatCrit to critically analyze how rural Latinx undergraduate students' newly found racial dynamics affected their academic and social transition into the university. BMW focuses on the students' navigation of different cultural and academic environments, while LatCrit highlights the systemic inequalities and racial dynamics that influence their college transition experiences.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used qualitative methods to comprehensively understand rural Latinx students' college transition experiences. It included individual Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas (conversations; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) with 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students who had completed their first year of studies at Central Coast University (pseudonym), a public four-year university located in an urban region in California's central coast. Pláticas, as a qualitative data collection approach, engage both researcher collaborators and researchers, resulting in richer experiences and perspectives.

Positionality

My work on rural Latinx students' experiences in higher education is informed by my experiences as a rural Latinx immigrant from Mexico to Corcoran, California, a small

agricultural town in the San Joaquin Valley. I experienced my rural upbringing with limited educational resources that would have prepared me to attend a research-intensive four-year university. Transitioning from a rural, immigrant, farm-working community to the University of California, Los Angeles, an urban research-intensive university, I encountered institutional neglect of rural identities, which amplified my feelings of isolation and academic self-doubt. These personal insights give me critical sensitivity to this study's research inquiry and research collaborators. My commitment to researching rural Latinx higher education experiences comes from these experiences. My research advocates for institutional policies and practices that support rural Latinx students from college enrollment to completion.

Chicana/Latina Feminist Pláticas

This study used the methodological approach of Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas. Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas emerged as a qualitative method through the validation and reclamation of everyday cultural practices, particularly the informal, intimate dialogues typically found in Latinx families and communities (Flores & Morales, 2021; Morales et al., 2023). Pláticas have been used in Chicanx and Latinx communities as informal conversations, but scholars only began to include them in research studies in the late 1970s, first to establish a rapport rather than to collect data (Delgado Bernal et al., 2023; Flores & Morales, 2021). Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) repositioned pláticas from entryway conversations to a methodological approach in educational research. Pláticas are based on Chicana/Latina feminist cultural practices, and embodied knowledge, intersectionality, and lived experience are central to understanding oppression and resistance (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

As a methodology, Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas challenge conventional research paradigms based on Eurocentric epistemologies by acknowledging vulnerability, emotional connectivity, and subjectivity as legitimate sources of knowledge (Flores & Morales, 2021; Morales et al., 2023). Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) have situated pláticas as a methodology that takes "into consideration the epistemological framing of the researcher and their relationship to the research inquiry and research participants" (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 107). Pláticas are grounded in five guiding principles that contribute to the methodology as outlined by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016):

1. Pláticas draw from Chicana/Latina feminist theory.
2. Pláticas center participants as co-collaborators and co-constructors of knowledge in the research process.
3. Pláticas use everyday lived experiences as part of the research inquiry.
4. Pláticas provide a potential space for healing.
5. Pláticas rely on reciprocal relationships, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity.

Pláticas challenge conventional methodologies that frequently omit or silence marginalized voices, thus providing healing, empowerment, and transformation within academic research. (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Additionally, pláticas have gained increasing visibility and significance within educational scholarship, highlighting their value in research practices and centering marginalized perspectives.

As a rural Latino male from the San Joaquin Valley, I found pláticas to be the best qualitative methodology for this study, as I shared the rural Latinx farm-working backgrounds of the students in this study. Each of the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students participated in two individual two-hour pláticas during the fall quarter of their second year at the university. The students had the option of having the pláticas via Zoom or in person; all students opted to have the pláticas via Zoom. All students created their pseudonyms to protect their identities.

At the beginning of the pláticas, the students and I reflected on our rural high school experiences and discussed rural communities' lack of educational resources. We spoke about our fears about the transition to college, including concerns about moving hundreds of miles away from our rural hometowns. We then discussed first-year experiences, sharing the emotions and challenges of navigating new social and academic worlds. Aligning with BMW, in our pláticas, we focused on students' family demographics, academic preparation, and the scarcity of resources in their rural communities vs. the urban university environment. Additionally, guided by LatCrit, we also critically examined how attending a PWI brought in new racial dynamics of racial isolation and microaggressions. These theoretical frameworks structured our pláticas and helped us understand how rurality, race, and institutional context influenced rural Latinx students' college transition experiences.

Research Collaborators Recruitment and Selection

Potential research collaborators were recruited via email solicitation. Emails with a background and interest survey were sent to various Latinx student organizations, student support programs aimed at serving low-income and first-generation students, and undergraduate student

advisors from academic departments on campus. The registrar's office also sent an email to all undergraduate students at the university. Eligibility was based on these inclusion criteria: (a) second-year student, (b) child of at least one farm-working parent, (c) self-identified as Latinx, (d) first-generation college student, and (e) from rural or small-town communities in California's San Joaquin Valley. For this study, I specifically recruited second-year students to provide a holistic account of their first-year experiences in college. Since the study focused on rurality and racial identity, I limited the participants to students from California's San Joaquin Valley, which has a large population of immigrant farm-working families. Adhering to the inclusion criteria ensured that participants shared similar experiences and could offer insights specific to rural Latinx students' transition to higher education.

Of 740 survey responses, 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students met the inclusion criteria and participated in this study (see Table 1). I used the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.) locale lookup map tool and local classifications to ensure that students came from communities designated as rural or town. Three students completed high school in a fringe town (locale code 31), a town inside an urban cluster less than or equal to 10

miles from an urbanized area (NCES, n.d.). Nine students completed high school in a distant town (locale code 32), a town inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area (NCES, n.d.). Although 12 students completed high school in a town community, as defined by NCES (n.d.) locale classifications, in the pláticas with the students, they all self-identified as rural individuals from the San Joaquin Valley.

Context on The San Joaquin Valley and the University

All students came from rural and small-town agricultural communities in California's San Joaquin Valley. Known as one of the United States' largest and most productive agricultural regions, the San Joaquin Valley also faces significant challenges with high unemployment and rural poverty (Escriva-Bou et al., 2023; Flores-Landeros et al., 2022; Martin & Taylor, 1998). For example, rural families in the San Joaquin Valley mainly are involved in agricultural jobs, and many live below the national poverty threshold (Goodhue & Martin, 2014; Nock, 2009). Approximately 4 million Californians reside in the San Joaquin Valley, which has seen increased diversity due to Latino immigrants working in agriculture, predominantly

Table 1
Student Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Major	NCES locale classification of high school	Distance from university to rural hometown (miles)
Alicia	Woman	Sociology	Rural distant	271
Alondra	Woman	Psychological and brain sciences	Town distant	249
Annie	Woman	Economics	Town fringe	242
Blue	Woman	Communication	Town fringe	233
Catherine	Woman	Environmental studies	Town distant	248
Grace	Female	Sociology	Town distant	466
Isabella	Woman	Chemistry	Town distant	496
Jazel	Woman	Global studies	Town distant	265
Jose	Man	Biology	Town distant	244
Juan	Man	Biology	Rural distant	241
Maria	Woman	Economics and accounting	Town distant	265
Mimi	Woman	Biology	Rural distant	200
Sally	Woman	Communication	Town fringe	242
Sofia	Woman	Economics	Town distant	199
Taylor	Woman	Communication	Town distant	249

Mexican-born farmworkers (Rogers & Buttice, 2013; Thorman et al., 2022).

The university where the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students were recruited is a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) on California's Central Coast. In 2023, the university's first-year student demographics included 1,362 Chicano/Latino students. Furthermore, during the 2023–2024 academic year, 27% of all undergraduate students identified as Chicano/Latino, while White students constituted the largest group at 35%. In 2023, newly admitted first-year students had an average parent income of $177,194, and 31% were first-generation college students. Additionally, 9% of new first-year students came from Central California and 5% from North Central California, but many of the counties in these California regions are not part of the San Joaquin Valley. Moreover, individual county data do not provide a detailed geographical background of students (e.g., rural, town, city).

Data Analysis

All pláticas were audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature. I then carefully reviewed each transcript, listening to the audio recording for each plática, to check for accuracy. I used Transana to conduct all data analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process. The first phase involved becoming familiar with the data. I began to familiarize myself with the data by writing brief analytical memos after each plática to identify preliminary themes such as students feeling anxious about academic coursework, noticing significant shifts in racial demographics between their rural hometowns and the university, expressing financial instability concerns, and experiencing social isolation. These preliminary themes informed the first round of inductive coding.

The second phase involved coding the data. I generated data-driven initial codes using inductive and deductive approaches (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). After completing the initial inductive coding, I revisited the audio recordings, transcripts, and analytical memos to undergo a second round of inductive coding. The theoretical frameworks, BMW and LatCrit, guided the deductive coding process. Using the BMW framework, I identified patterns regarding how students' rural backgrounds shaped academic preparation and resource availability. LatCrit informed the analysis of racial microaggressions and experiences of racial isolation within this PWI.

The third phase included searching for themes based on the developed codes to generate separate categories for potential themes (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). For instance, some of the thematic categories that emerged from the third phase were (a) limited Advanced Placement (AP) and college-prep opportunities, (b) feelings of racial isolation, (c) social exclusion due to financial constraints, and (d) differences in rural and urban values. In the fourth phase, I conducted a second review of the themes to ensure they accurately reflected the students' experiences and effectively addressed the research inquiry. The fifth phase included redefining and creating theme names that synthesized the findings. The sixth phase involved writing the report and identifying quotes from the pláticas that best represented the findings. In addition, to ensure the study's trustworthiness, I employed member checking by providing each student with a copy of their transcript and my analysis of their experiences. All research collaborators reviewed these documents and confirmed that my interpretations accurately reflected their experiences.

Findings

Data analysis revealed three critical themes regarding the college transition experiences of rural Latinx undergraduate students in an urban research-intensive four-year university: (a) academic disadvantages from rural high schools, (b) navigating unfamiliar racial dynamics, and (c) social disconnectedness from wealthy and urban Latinx peers. These findings highlight complex challenges that rural Latinx undergraduate students face as they transition to an urban college environment.

Academic Disadvantages from Rural High Schools

The rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study were confronted with the realization that coming from rural, underresourced school districts and enrolling in an urban research-intensive four-year university placed them at an academic disadvantage. Jazel explained her academic transition to the university as coming from a rural background:

> I feel like I am still discovering things people have discovered in high school. I feel like I did not get that from my high school and being from a small town while other [students] who come from bigger high schools with more resources are putting students into college with internships or like a lot of scholarships and a lot of resources…. You definitely feel how much your high school lacked the resources others did and like how calm those other students are with their transition to college. I feel like it was not such a big change for them as it was for us.

Throughout her first year at the university, Jazel observed that students from urban regions, such as Los Angeles or San Francisco, were afforded more resources in their high

schools. As Jazel reflected on the educational disparity in resources between rural and urban students, she concluded that students from larger urban high schools had a "calm" college transition. In contrast, for Jazel, her college transition was a "big change" due to her rural background. Jazel's college transition experiences highlight how rural resource gaps affect academic preparedness and rural students' academic, emotional, and social transitions.

Similarly, Jose described difficulties in his academic transition to the university in that his rural high school did not provide the same resources compared to high schools located in urban regions. He explained,

> Rural communities do not have the same services as in a big city. So, in terms of being prepared to come to a big university like this, you know, more challenging classes than in high school and stuff like that, there was definitely a lack of those challenging classes, lack of the resources and opportunities to prepare me for this type of education that I'm receiving here. So, at first, it was definitely a challenge, right? Trying to adapt to the material here.

Jose believed that the academic challenges he experienced as he transitioned to the university were because he graduated from a rural high school that lacked resources that would have prepared him to succeed at a "big university." In the plática, Jose shared how his rural high school offered limited AP courses, which meant that he had "not been exposed to the type of rigor expected [at the university]." Jose's academic transition into college reveals how underinvestment in rural education limits students' exposure to rigorous academic content, creating an academic preparedness gap upon entering higher education.

Grace also became aware of the lack of resources that her rural high school provided compared to students from larger high schools in urban regions. For Grace, this realization came during her summer orientation session prior to starting her first year at the university:

> I did not realize how messed up our education system was until I graduated, and I was like, "Damn, I literally am out in the real world, and I feel like I know nothing." I remember being at orientation when everybody was like, "Oh yeah, I took 30 AP classes, like summer internships, I have extra credits from community college." I have never felt more stupid in my life. I was very nearly like telling my parents, "I do not want to come here, I am not gonna like it, I am gonna get eaten alive, like this place was gonna be horrible for me." I still feel like that sometimes, like a

voice in the back of my head being like, "Oh, this is so hard. You are not smart enough."

Grace's reflection on how she felt academically unprepared to transition to the university shows the psychological and emotional toll that educational inequities take on rural students, exacerbating feelings of self-doubt in academic settings. Her internalized doubt about her academic merits was rooted in unequal education resource distribution, highlighting how systemic educational disparities can manifest as personal struggles that may persist beyond initial college transitions.

Like Grace, Catherine noticed the disparity in educational resources between students from rural and urban backgrounds before starting her first year at the university. She shared,

> At orientation, before coming here, people from bigger cities would tell me their stats, and they would say, "I took 12 AP classes, and I did all this, and I did all that, and like, my SAT score was like a million or whatever." I was like, "Oh my god, these are the people I am competing with. These are the people that I'm going to school with." You did not feel like you were going to make it. So, I definitely had concerns that I was not prepared academically just because people had so many opportunities that I did not have and so many resources that I did not have.

Catherine's first exposure to the university consisted of having concerns about the students she would be "competing with," who came from bigger cities that offered more academic opportunities and resources than her rural community did. Catherine's college transition experience was composed of comparing herself with urban peers, which intensified her feeling of academic unpreparedness. Awareness of academic resource disparities can trigger anxiety and self-doubt, influencing rural students' perceptions of their ability to thrive academically in higher education.

Navigating Unfamiliar Racial Dynamics

The rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study noticed differences in the racial composition and dynamics of the university as they transitioned from their rural communities. Jazel explained that her rural community is predominantly Hispanic: "A lot of the Hispanic people that are moving in is usually because their parents are coming in to work in the agricultural fields." In contrast, the rural Latinx undergraduate students noticed that White students make up the highest percentage of the student body at the

university. On campus, they noticed the dominant presence of White students, as Alicia shared:

> You walk into your lecture hall, and you see a sea of White people. You are walking through the [student center], and you see a sea of White people. You are sitting in the library, and all around you, there are White people everywhere. I worked on one group project in my first year that had two other People of Color. I did not feel like there was a whole lot of diversity.

Alicia felt a lack of diversity on campus, feeling surrounded by White students in various campus settings such as lecture halls, the student center, and campus libraries. Moreover, Alica recalled only having two other Students of Color in one of her classes, furthering her perception of a lack of diversity in the university.

Participants also faced challenges navigating the unfamiliar racial dynamics of the college campus. Maria recalled, "I am definitely used to seeing a lot more Hispanics around, and coming here, it definitely has been a challenge just involving yourself like in classes." Maria experienced challenges adjusting to the lack of racial familiarity on campus. This became particularly difficult when she tried to participate in her classes, where she was often the only Student of Color. She explained,

> I have not even met any other Latina who is in economics..., and I do notice, when I'm the only brown person in the [class], how people look at me and ignore me and talk to the people around them that look similar to them. So, I definitely feel the pressure of being the only brown person in the room, right? Or like having the darkest skin in the room which is like a very weird feeling to me. It is like they want me to notice that. Like if I did not notice before, like they will make sure I notice.

Maria was very aware of her brownness when she entered her economics classes, where she "would look around the lecture hall and did not see Hispanic girls." Instead, most students in her economics classes tended to be White men, and "few White women sprinkled here and there, and then a lot of like Asian people." Maria felt that her White peers intentionally made her feel isolated so that they could make "sure" that she "notice[d]" her brownness in a higher education space dominated by whiteness. Maria's experiences highlight how racial isolation in predominantly White academic spaces reinforces feelings of marginalization and exclusion among Students of Color. Her experience emphasizes the nuanced

forms of racialized interactions that can exacerbate a sense of hypervisibility and discomfort, which impacts rural Latinx students' engagement in higher education environments.

Mimi shared similar experiences as she transitioned to the university as a STEM student. Mimi shared that "my race is a challenge because there are not a lot of Latinos in STEM," which led Mimi also to experience racial isolation from her peers in her STEM courses:

> There is no sense of communication with me whatsoever. No one tries reaching out to me. I try reaching out to a few people by asking them a question. So, it is hard because I am Latina because you can tell I am Latina based on my last name…. Everyone knows that Sanchez and Gonzalez are Latinx last names. So, they knew right off the bat, based on my last name, that I was Latina. So, I feel like they would hear it, and they would be like, "Oh, she definitely does not know what she is doing," so I felt that they do not even bother trying to reach out. So, it is just hard.

Mimi's racial background as a rural Latina in STEM has subjected her to feeling excluded by White peers. Mimi felt that her racial background, alluded to by her Spanish last name, exposed her to racialized stereotypes where her White peers perceived her as someone who "does not know what she is doing," alienating her by not responding to her attempts to communicate with them. Racialized assumptions in STEM fields perpetuate exclusionary practices, creating an isolating academic environment for rural Latinx students. Mimi's interactions with her White peers emphasize the ongoing presence of racial stereotypes that underestimate the intellectual abilities of rural Latinx students, hindering their opportunities for collaboration with classmates and integration in academic settings.

Coming from rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley and being Latinx has made participants in this study feel isolated and not accepted by their nonrural White peers. For example, Annie shared that her White peers did not admit her of their social groups, based on her racial and rural background:

> I remember telling someone that I am from the [San Joaquin Valley], and she gave me like a face, and this girl was from LA, you know, she comes from a very privileged background. In the beginning, it was a little bit weird, like they were not accepting me like "This girl cannot be smarter than me," you know, like, "She's Hispanic." You know, but I feel like I have proven myself to them, so maybe they would accept me, but you

know, it's not even about "Will they?" It is just more like, "Would I even want to be accepted by them?"

Annie felt that her White peers were not accepting her because they could not fathom the idea that a Hispanic woman from an agricultural region could be "smarter" than them. Annie then felt that she had to prove herself academically to her White peers from urban backgrounds before they would accept her into their social groups, although ultimately, she questioned whether she wanted to be involved with them. Annie's experiences highlight how intersecting stereotypes about race, rurality, and socioeconomic status interconnect to marginalize rural Latinx students within PWI spaces.

Social Disconnectedness from Wealth and Urbanicity

The rural Latinx undergraduate student participants in this study described social disconnectedness in two ways. First, they could not connect with their non-low-income peers who came from wealthier backgrounds. Second, although students made friendships with nonrural Latinx students, they still felt disconnected based on rural and urban differences.

Social Disconnectedness from Wealth

Family income polarization among students at the university had a negative impact on the rural Latinx students who came from low-income families as they transitioned into the university. The students expressed that they experienced difficulties trying to maintain friendships and fit in with friends who were not from low-income backgrounds. For example, Catherine explained,

> I would search up the average income of a student that goes to [the university] and their family or whatever, and I would be like, "How am I supposed to keep up and do what they are doing and fit in when I am on of budget and a lot of people are not?" The transition was super difficult because people just have so much money and leisure time here. I did not know how I would ever be able to bond with people when I have two jobs or do not go out on the weekends. So, I think it has been pretty hard just because I feel like I do not have time for anything, and people say like go to clubs, go to this, go to that, and it is like, "What if I have to work?" Like I do not have time. It is just hard.

As a low-income student "on a budget," Catherine experienced instances where she felt she would be unable to "keep up" and "fit in" with her friends who did not come from low-income backgrounds. The disparity in income between her and her wealthier peers prevented her from participating in weekend social events. At the same time, other students from affluent backgrounds went to "clubs" and engaged in leisure activities. Socioeconomic disparities exacerbate social isolation among low-income rural Latinx students, creating barriers to integration within the larger campus community. These financial constraints can increase emotional strain and restrict opportunities for meaningful engagement in campus life.

Sally also experienced being left out of social activities when her wealthier friends made plans to travel away from the university:

> A lot of my friends would like to go to LA or San Diego for the weekend, but I would like to have to stay back because I have other things I need to pay for or that restrict me from doing that. I also need to focus on my grades because my grades also supply me with money through scholarships.

Sally shared how she closely managed her budget to pay for bills and rent, which often left her with no extra funds to spend on social activities. Furthermore, Sally also prioritized her time to focus on her coursework and grades, as she needs to maintain good grades to continue receiving scholarships to pay her tuition. Such socioeconomic constraints impacted rural Latinx students' social interactions on campus, often leading to feelings of exclusion from peer activities.

Grace also reflected on how her wealthy sorority friends excluded her from social activities:

> In terms of the sorority, it has actually been a little hard and rough because a lot of them come from wealthy families.... They would be like, "Oh my god, let's go get like $8 coffee from Starbucks." Like I cannot do that every day, so then next time everyone is like, "Oh, well, let's not invite her because she does not want to go anyways" sort of thing, and then I am like, "Guys, it is not like that. I totally want to hang out with you, but, you know, I do not really have the same accessibility as you do."

Grace joined a sorority during her first year at the university to ease her social transition and noticed the familial income gap between herself and the other sorority members. She recalled having to turn down going to Starbucks every day to buy coffee with her sorority friends. They misinterpreted her decision as not wanting to "hang out" with them, and they began to exclude her from their coffee social gatherings. Grace's experience highlights how socioeconomic

disparities within college social groups, such as sororities, can inadvertently reinforce social exclusion. Moreover, it emphasizes that normalizing affluent lifestyles within campus culture can alienate low-income rural students who lack similar financial resources, complicating their efforts to develop genuine peer relationships.

Sofia also described her difficulties with forming social connections with students from wealthy backgrounds:

> I think it's definitely hard at some points, you know, having certain conversations and kind of bringing up my challenges. If I am like just talking about something that I am going through, they definitely do not know where I am coming from. A lot of my roommates and a lot of my friends come from high middle-class and higher-income families. So, obviously, they do not relate; I could say it is hard to connect at some points in some aspects. If I am filling out my FAFSA form, they have never filled out a FASFA form, you know? So, I think that is one example of a way that we cannot really connect.

Sofia shared how many of her roommates and friends were not from low-income backgrounds, which made it difficult for her to share her challenges, and they could not related to her college experiences as a low-income rural student. Sofia also experienced a disconnection from her wealthy friends when she had to submit a FAFSA form—something they did not have to do. Sofia's experience highlights the emotional and social disconnect experienced by low-income rural students when engaging with affluent peers who lack shared experiences.

Social Disconnectedness from Urban Latinx Peers

Though the rural Latinx undergraduate students formed friendships with Latinx students from urban regions, they still felt a disconnection with them, given the differences between rural and urban communities. Alondra described her experiences with urban Latinx students:

> I feel we are different in a way. Yeah, we are both Latinas, but I was raised differently than they did. I feel that rural values are different than theirs. I feel if I had someone that was exactly like a similar background as me, I feel like I would be able to relate to them more and connect with them more on a deeper level.... They do not come from a small town. They were big city girls, unlike me and my parents [who are] immigrant farm workers. I still have not met someone who is like me, who has undocumented parents who work in

agriculture, who are in the same boat as me, and who comes from a small town.

Alondra described meeting other Latina students at the university, to whom she can relate based on their racial background but not beyond. She shared how all the Latina friends she has met come from big cities, and she has yet to meet another Latina student from a small town in the San Joaquin Valley. Aside from sharing the same racial background, Alondra felt that she was raised with different values to which Latina students from large cities cannot relate. Therefore, she cannot connect with them on a "deeper level." Her experience highlights the nuanced diversity among Latinx students, illustrating how particular lived experiences linked to rural upbringing and family immigration background significantly shape higher education students' abilities to build meaningful, supportive relationships beyond racial similarities.

Juan shared a similar experience to Alondra in that he did not form strong connections with his Latino friends who come from large cities. He explained,

> I do have Latino friends, and I am very appreciative of having them with me on campus, but they all come from Los Angeles or the Bay Area, and I am the only one from the San Joaquin Valley. They also come here with different city values and norms that we do not have in my small town.... They also do not relate to or understand what it means to come from a rural town. For them, they are here to party and have a good time, and I am here trying to graduate to support my family. That is how I cannot fully connect with them.

Juan found it challenging to connect with his Latino friends at the university due to differences in rural and urban values and norms. Among his Latino friends, he is the only one from a small town in the San Joaquin Valley, while the rest come from large cities. Juan's experiences highlight rural and urban distinctions within the Latinx student community, contributing to feelings of social isolation and cultural disconnection.

Blue also was unable to connect with her urban Latinx friends at the university primarily because she is the only one in her friend group from the San Joaquin Valley. She stated,

> I feel like I cannot connect with anyone here. I do not relate to anyone, even though we are all first-generation and we are all Latinx; it does not matter because if you are not from the same place, no one is gonna relate to you. No one is gonna relate to fields upon fields and cows and manure

everywhere…. I feel very excluded when Latinx and first-generation students connect with their hometowns. It is usually people from the Bay from LA. So, no one is from the [San Joaquin Valley]. So, it is hard to make friends based on where I am from.

Like other students in this study, Blue has formed friendships with Latinx students who come from larger cities, but within her friend group, she is the only one from a rural migrant farm-working background in the San Joaquin Valley. Blue explained that despite sharing the same racial and first-generation college student backgrounds as her Latinx friends from urban areas, she feels that they cannot relate to her rural farm-working background. Blue's experience highlights how intersecting identities such as rurality and farm-working can significantly shape social connectedness, even among students who share racial identity and first-generation status.

Discussion

This study on rural Latinx undergraduate students' transition to an urban college environment addresses a critical gap in the higher education literature. Recent scholarship has examined how race and rurality may impact the college decision-making processes of rural Latinx and other rural Students of Color, challenging deficit-based narratives about rural communities and emphasizing the social and cultural assets these students utilize in higher education (Boetcher et al., 2022; Colvin et al., 2023; Freeman, 2017; Puente, 2023; Rios Arroyo, 2025; Stone & Serrata, 2023). This article expands this limited scholarship by exploring the interconnectedness of race and rurality and their effects on rural Latinx students' college transition as they adapt to university life in an urban environment with a predominantly White population. The rural Latinx undergraduates who participated in this study underwent a significant transition between their academic worlds from high school to college. Before arriving at the university, these students were high achievers and did not anticipate encountering academic challenges. In the pláticas, the students shared that their two main concerns before entering the university were financial and social, not academic.

The findings on academic unpreparedness aligned with Ganss's (2016) and Heinisch's (2017) findings on how rural students felt academically unprepared once they began postsecondary coursework. This study builds upon this finding by demonstrating that while rural Latinx undergraduate students felt academically prepared upon entering the university, their perceptions changed as they compared the precollege academic resources of students from rural and urban backgrounds. It was then that the rural

Latinx students realized that their urban peers "had so many opportunities," as Catherine stated, compared to students from rural backgrounds. The rural Latinx undergraduate students developed feelings of inadequacy because of unequal educational resources, which caused them to blame themselves when they compared their abilities to urban students. This finding links to BMW theory, which suggests that students' educational paths are influenced by cultural resources and challenges across their multiple social worlds (Cooper, 2011). Although the rural Latinx students identified differences in academic resources between their high schools and those of urban students, their perceptions do not necessarily apply to all students from urban backgrounds. Their perceptions should not imply that all urban students have access to greater academic resources, as urban communities, like rural ones, are not homogeneous. Urban educational contexts also are very diverse, and the resource allocations and opportunities vary among urban school districts.

Additionally, the rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study encountered racial challenges as they transitioned into a new social world characterized by vastly different racial demographics. The students described the shift into an environment in which they often were "the only brown person in the room," as Maria stated, and where they experienced isolation and racial microaggressions from their White peers. This finding is similar to previous research that showed that rural students experience cultural shock upon entering college when exposed to new diversity (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; McNamee, 2019). These studies, however, were based on a predominantly White rural student sample. Previous literature showed that White students from rural areas were open to the diversity on the college campus and had positive experiences with new cultural and ethnic diversity (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; McNamee, 2019). In contrast, using a LatCrit framework, this study showed that rural Latinx undergraduate students experienced racism in the form of racial microaggressions from their White peers.

Despite attending a university designated as an HSI, rural Latinx undergraduate students noticed differences in racial demographics compared to their rural hometowns. The university's HSI designation was not reflected across all academic disciplines and majors, leading many rural Latinx students to experience racial isolation and racial microaggressions. Findings from this study reflect the broader body of research on Latinx students' experiences with racism and racial microaggressions when attending PWIs, which causes Latinx students to feel isolated and marginalized (Clayton et al., 2018; Garcia & Hurtado, 2011; Ramirez et al., 2023; Serrano, 2022). These studies use Latinx student samples from urban backgrounds or do not specify students' geographic backgrounds.

This article adds to the existing literature on Latinx students' college transition experiences by expanding it to include spatial geographic impacts. The rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study formed friendships with urban Latinx students, but their perceived disconnectedness from their urban Latinx peers came from their observations of distinct differences in values, norms, and lifestyles between rural and urban settings. The rural Latinx students formed these perceptions during their first exposure to urban lifestyles on a college campus. Their perspectives should not be generalized as representative of all urban Latinx students. It is still important to discuss such experiences, however, since these rural Latinx students' perceptions of difference significantly affected their college transition and contributed to their social disconnectedness from the campus community. In the pláticas, most rural Latinx undergraduate students mentioned that coming to the university was their first time leaving their rural hometowns, and they had no connections to urban environments. Cooper (2011) argued that students' educational pathways are influenced by different social environments, which can present students with obstacles or resources. The rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study moved from a rural social environment in the San Joaquin Valley, where most rural residents shared similar characteristics (low-income, immigrant, farm-working families from Latin America), to a new urban environment where their rural Latinx identities were uncommon. These students "have not met someone" with the same background as them, as stated by Alondra. They appreciated having urban Latinx friends but felt they could not connect with them beyond sharing the same racial background.

Moreover, rural students have been described as coming from low-income families and tend to be first-generation college students (Byun et al., 2012; Puente, 2023; Wells et al., 2019). The current literature addresses rural students' social disconnectedness, primarily due to the transition from small rural communities to large urban environments and lifestyles (Ganss, 2016; Heinisch, 2017; Tran and DeFeo, 2021). Using LatCrit and BMW as frameworks, this study found that the social challenges rural Latinx undergraduate students face go beyond adjusting to a larger campus environment and are also linked to their migrant farm-working backgrounds. The rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study experienced an unwelcoming college environment that impacted their socialization with students from wealthier backgrounds. The rural Latinx undergraduate students could not "keep up" and "fit in," as Catherine stated. They often felt excluded from social activities as they could not financially afford to participate in the lifestyle of students from wealthy backgrounds.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research on rural students has increased over the years, but much of it still concentrates on rural students' college access and choice processes (Means, 2018; Nelson, 2016; Puente, 2022; Puente et al., 2023; Sowl & Crain, 202). While existing research on access and choice is crucial for understanding rural students' barriers to pursuing higher education, new studies should focus on rural students' transition into college. This shift in focus will provide a more comprehensive view of the challenges and support systems that rural students need to navigate higher education environments successfully.

Rural communities are not monolithic and are becoming more diverse (Lichter, 2012). Despite this demographic shift, research has predominantly focused on rural White students, with very limited attention given to rural Latinx and rural Students of Color (Boettcher et al., 2022; Means, 2018; Puente, 2022, 2023; Puente et al., 2023; Rios Arroyo, 2025; Stone & Serrata, 2023). Research that examines the higher education experiences of rural students but omits analysis of rural Students of Color disregards the likelihood that these students experience college campus environments differently than their rural White counterparts do. Additionally, just as rural students are not a monolithic group, rural Latinx students also represent diverse, intersectional identities that shape their unique educational experiences. Future research must intentionally explore further intersectional dimensions among rural Latinx students, including the experiences of rural queer and trans Latinx students and rural Afro-Latinx students, to offer a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of rural students.

Conversely, as Latinx student enrollment in higher education has surged, research on their college experiences has increased (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Duncheon, 2018; Hurtado et al., 2020; Ramirez et al., 2023). HSIs are enrolling the rapidly growing Latinx student population, prompting current research to investigate whether these institutions are fulfilling their mission of providing Latinx students with higher education opportunities and the necessary resources for their success (Franco & Hernández, 2018; Garcia, 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2020). Literature on Latinx students at HSIs focuses on students from urban regions, however, excluding rural Latinx students' experiences. Given that Latinx students are not a monolithic group, research must examine their higher education experiences by including the intersection of race and place-based factors that impact their college experiences and transitions. The experiences of the rural Latinx students in this study highlighted that Latinx undergraduate students from urban regions are different

from rural Latinx undergraduate students. Recognizing the distinct experiences within the Latinx college student population by examining their geographical backgrounds will provide a more nuanced and accurate analysis of their higher education challenges. Although rural Latinx undergraduate students faced challenges in navigating their college transition, they leveraged their rural Latinx identities as sources of cultural wealth, drawing strength from their lived experiences, family backgrounds, and community ties to persist beyond their first year in college (Rios Arroyo, 2025).

Recommendations for Higher Education Practice

The recommendations for higher education practice presented here are rooted in the experiences of the 15 rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study. The BMW framework (Cooper, 2011) suggests that cultural research partnerships from K–20 are crucial to providing early college access resources to students, thereby increasing their college and career aspirations. Colleges and universities should invest in increasing efforts to reach students from rural regions. The rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study transitioned to the university without knowing much about academic and social expectations. Universities must take the initiative to reach out to rural secondary schools and create strong partnerships to recruit and enroll rural students in their universities. This strategy may alleviate rural students' social challenges as more students from rural backgrounds would be present on campus. Partnerships between rural school districts and universities should introduce rural students and their families to four-year universities and organize workshops on how to apply to college and for financial aid. They also should facilitate campus visits to give students firsthand experience of campus life.

Additionally, universities must commit to creating resources that support rural students' persistence and retention in college. As second-year students at the university, the rural Latinx students in this study have not adapted socially to the university, nor have they connected with other students from rural migrant farm-working backgrounds. These students came from migrant farm-working families who cannot provide financial support to their children. According to the rural Latinx undergraduate students in this study, being full-time college students and working part-time has caused them to feel isolated from the college community. To lessen the financial burden of rural Latinx undergraduate students, universities should provide more financial aid assistance to cover tuition and housing fully. The university also should invest in creating a campus program designed to serve rural Latinx undergraduate students' academic and social needs. Having a campus program of rural Latinx undergraduate students would allow the students to develop connections with rural Latinx peers and identify more strongly with the university.

Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to the existing higher education literature by expanding research on Latinx and rural students. The study revealed that rural Latinx undergraduate students are enrolling in selective, research-intensive universities but face challenges due to the mismatch between their rural Latinx identities and urban-centric campus norms. The findings highlight that these students often struggle academically during their transition to college because their rural high schools did not adequately prepare them for the rigor of a four-year university. Additionally, they experience racism and racial microaggressions from their White peers. The social transition was also difficult for these students, as their low-income backgrounds presented challenges that prevented them from connecting with students from more affluent backgrounds. The rural Latinx students in this study also failed to establish strong connections with their urban Latinx counterparts. Universities should develop targeted programs for rural Latinx undergraduate students to address academic preparedness and social integration to facilitate their transition to urban college environments. This attention is crucial, as rural Latinx students will continue to enroll in urban universities, and these institutions must meet them with the resources necessary to ensure their academic and social success.

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