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The Rural Road: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Advanced Placement Coursework and College Readiness in Louisiana

Willie Adelaide Louviere

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THE RURAL ROAD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING ADVANCED PLACEMENT COURSEWORK AND COLLEGE READINESS IN LOUISIANA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The College of Human Sciences and Education

by

Willie A. Louviere
B.A., Southeastern Louisiana University, 1999
M.S., Nicholls State University, 2018
December 2021
To the bold girls out there and the women who raise them…especially the Willies.

In loving memory of the staples in my life

who have gone before and still inspire me,

Dr. Milton O. “Doc” Holt

Betty Nevels Stevens
The notorious “Maw Maw Betty”

Montie Holt “Mugsie” Gonzales

Linda Holt “LindyLou” Sullivan
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Perhaps this the moment for which you have been created.”
Esther 4:14

God, I am most thankful for your plan for me and for preparing me to believe in
something that I could not see. Thank YOU for blessing me far more than I deserve and for
giving me gifts to share. I am grateful for this moment. This journey to Dr. Louviere has been an
incredible adventure and I am forever grateful for love, encouragement, and support that you
have all provided to me. To the little girl in the middle row—third seat, WE DID IT!
#foreverLSU

To my precious family and my personal cheering squad,

My Sam…my best friend, my partner-in-crime, my arm candy, my sounding board, the
realist that brings me back to earth during my grandest moments of big-dreaming, the engineer-
extraordinaire of my designs, and my all-time favorite “fix-it guy” who is just a natural rockstar
in all things—and always makes a way for my big dreams to become a big reality (even when he
looks at me crazy and takes his signature “deep breath”). Thank you for always being there to
give me exactly what I needed at that moment—for talking me back from the cardboard box,
hugging me, tough talking me when needed, or for simply bringing me on a late-night car ride
that always seems to include a Sonic drink. You are my person. For you Sam, I am grateful.

To the two greatest accomplishments of my life, my sweetest Logan, and my dramatic
songbird Addie Claire #epicaddie. To my LoLo, my avid fisherman, you are kind, peaceful, and I
am completely addicted to your laugh. Addie Claire, keep marching to the beat of your own loud
drum sweet girl—you live a beautiful life every single day that is full of dance, musical theatre,
Color Guard, and I hope that you celebrate the arts in as many roles as humanly possible. You
both represent all that is good in the world and you are both blessed and highly favored. Being your mom has, by far, been my biggest blessing. Thank you for always understanding when I “had to study,” and for always watching and for never allowing me to give up. For my little Louviere crew, I am grateful.

To my Mom and my precious Claymae, my biggest fans and loudest cheerleaders, thank you for the support and encouragement whenever I needed it. Thank you both for the late-night confidence calls, for always taking my side, and for the endless “You’ve got this!” I appreciate the example that you both have set for me. Mom, thank you especially for instilling in me to never settle and for raising a bold and opinionated me. For you both, I am grateful.

To my Cheree “Ree” Brown, the wearer of the red lipstick and the one who will always take my side until the end of time—even when I am wrong. Thank you for loving me and my little Louviere crew in the fantastic way that you do. You have been my personal pep rally since the beginning of this fantastic journey and for you, I am grateful.

To my LSU Committee,

Dr. Blanchard, I am so thankful that our paths crossed on the very first week of my journey at LSU. You inspire me and I miss our conversations in Ed Law and the infamous almond punch so much already! Thank you for always supporting me and for being my sounding board when I needed help to find my neutral. Your words seemed to always be exactly what I needed in the moment. For you, I am grateful.

To my absolute favorite Stats guy Dr. Kennedy, thank you for challenging me every single day and for drying my tears when I swore that Stats was going to be the death of me. I would not have made it through this journey without our standing Friday@3pm Zoom meetings.
Thank you for always being a phone call away. You are the best and for you (not Stats), I am grateful.

Dr. Clayton, thank you for serving on my committee and for the work that you do for rural students. I appreciated our class discussions and many of your classes helped to fashion my dissertation focus. For you and especially for the APA template, my writing and I are forever grateful. Dr. Cater, thank you for serving on my committee and for always being a steady source of encouragement to me throughout my dissertation journey. I appreciate your bold spirit for 4-H, and I am thankful to share such a love for the program and its impact on youth with you. For you, I am grateful. Mrs. Lois, the true Pit Boss of LSU, you are simply amazing and thank you for being the knower of all things purple and gold. For you, I am grateful.

My Colonel Family,

Dr. Stall and Dr. Breaud, you both have been so instrumental in inspiring me to strive to reach the next junction in my educational journey. I think that I am ready to get off the student bus now! Dr. Stall, thank you for urging me to earn my tiger stripes at LSU and even for the sardines! I will always value my time spent at Nicholls State University and appreciate your steadfast influence in supporting my endeavors in higher education. Dr. Breaud, thank you for nudging me to always be in search of the next big chapter. For you both, I am grateful. #Colonels

To my entire village and my tribe,

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answering the phone when I called. Just a reminder, color of peanut butter and 2 Splendas. For you, I am grateful. Lance Hutson, this is partially your fault; nevertheless, thank you for encouraging me to go back to school. I do not know if I would have taken that initial step on my own at that moment in time. For you, I am grateful.

To my Household of Faith Church family, thank you for the endless prayers throughout this journey and for the blessings that each of you are to me and my family. For each of you, I am grateful.

On the first day of my PhD journey, I met the most wonderful group of people who would become more than friends, they would become family. Our professor would spend the next hour describing what the doctoral process would look like and explaining the benefits of finding a group of people that you could connect with—I was sitting amongst my “Tribe” next to Alicia Whidden “My PhD Wifey,” the infamous Kimberly Davis, Blake “Rebel” Thomas, Melissa “Whit” Whitley, Gina “G” Castello, Relius “Rey” Johnson, and we would later adopt Meredith “Mere” Percy and Kristin Hollins. The years would include taking many classes together, proofreading so many papers, completing many projects, drinking all the coffee, laughing too much, crying a little more, and living so much life together. For each of you, I am grateful.

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There is hopefully that one teacher that stands out in every child’s memory and I was blessed with two instrumental teachers that made a difference in my life. Mrs. Nancy Aydell and Mr. James Grout, thank you for challenging me to be the best version of myself that the little girl in the middle row, third seat could be. You will never know the impact that you had on me and the impression that you will continue to have on the future me. You were both exactly the people that I needed, when I needed you. I became a teacher with the idea of preparing my students the way that you both prepared me. Mrs. Aydell, I will never drink a Fanta Orange or see a pack of Sixlets candy and not think of you. Mr. Grout, you stirred a fierceness and an undeniable confidence in me when I did not know how to believe in myself. For you both, I am grateful.

To my students—thank you for teaching me the true-life lessons. Each of you have left a mark on my life and you will always be “my kids.” For each of you along the way, I am grateful.
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ABSTRACT

Rigorous coursework is one of the necessary staples in establishing college readiness. Rural districts are much less likely to offer advanced coursework opportunities to students. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the equitable access to advanced coursework opportunities (Advanced Placement) provided to rural students (in-person and distance learning) in public rural high schools in Louisiana. Access to advanced coursework (Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, etc.) serves as an indicator of college readiness; however, a substantial gap exists in providing the programs to underserved student populations. Rural students face significant barriers that can hinder their ability to thrive on a college campus which begins with preparing for and applying to college, navigating the process of attending successfully, and completing higher education degree program (graduation). There is a great divide within the learning continuum that separates rural students, and their parent support groups from the information, strategies, and advanced coursework offerings that could assist students successfully transition onto the college campus by providing the necessary academic preparations.

The theoretical framework of this study was interpretive phenomenology with an emphasis on capturing the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants associated with providing Advanced Placement coursework in the rural educational setting through a compilation of qualitative interviews with educators actively engaged in the field. The research aimed to develop analyzing the experiences of rural AP teachers and the effectiveness of the coursework within the rural community. The researcher explored the phenomenon through the rural educator’s perceptions of Advanced Placement coursework, current supports (provisions and resources) that are employed within the social-cultural context to encourage college
readiness (access, academic preparation, and enrollment success) for rural students, and relationship between existing barriers and the rural educator’s ability to provide enhanced skills associated with advancing college readiness. The findings of this study add to the efficacy and scope of Advanced Placement coursework within the rural classroom by providing emphasis on expanding course access, reinforcing teacher efficacy within classrooms (providing advanced pedagogy), and creating academic incentives that serve rural students (providing support) in preparing for the transition to postsecondary learning.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Rural students face many significant barriers that can hinder their ability to thrive on a college campus which begins with preparing for and applying to college, navigating the process of attending successfully, and completing higher education degree program (graduation) (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Greenthal, 2009; Wakelyn, 2009). There is a great divide within the learning continuum that separates rural students, and their parent support groups from the information, strategies, and advanced coursework offerings that could assist students in making the successful transition onto the college campus by providing necessary supports and the essential academic tools. The drive for college and career readiness “pervades state and federal policy initiatives, reflecting a growing sense that an increasing number of high school graduates are underprepared for the demands of postsecondary education” (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015, p. 270). Access to advanced coursework (Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, etc.) serves as an indicator of college readiness; however, a substantial gap exists in providing and employing the advanced programs to underserved student populations.

Access to information and practical resources is necessary to address the current gaps in college access and choice, and institutions for rural high school students. The initiatives in place must provide opportunities to all learners regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic background (Morton et al., 2015; Wakelyn, 2009). “Nearly one-third of colleges and universities use AP as a criterion to determine scholarship recipients (Wakelyn, 2009). Advanced Placement courses motivate students and educators to challenge standards while increasing expectations; however, there is a disparity in providing this opportunity to all students. If AP courses provide the “open
door” to college-ready academic preparedness, then a greater and more balanced emphasis must remain on the pursuit of both excellence and equity.

The Advanced Placement Program, which “enables high school students to take introductory college-level courses, is the nation’s oldest example of a rigorous, common curriculum” (Wakelyn, 2009, p. 1). Wakelyn also noted that students who completed AP courses and did well on the exam were more likely to persist in college and earn a college degree. Many students can exceed college-ready expectations and score the coveted 5 on the AP exam; however, providing equitable access, building teacher capacity, implementing program initiatives, and prompting incentives to every student is where the disconnect occurs. Advanced Placement course enrollment and success serve as indicators to gauge college readiness and improve chances for college acceptance; therefore, a partnership must evolve that focuses on creating a comprehensive college-level curricular with an increased access to sustainable resources (Wakelyn, 2009).

**Statement of Research Problem**

Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) expressed that students from smaller and more isolated rural schools had much more limited access to Advanced Placement courses. “Remote rural districts with small populations are nearly 10 times less likely to offer access to AP courses than are larger rural districts on the fringe of urbanized areas” (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015, p.1). Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) would further confirm that nearly one-half (47.2 percent) of rural districts in the United States did not have secondary students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. Affording the benefits of engaging in rigorous coursework to all students is a commanding stride toward providing equal access to educational opportunities and provides most significant growth despite barriers (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015).
After controlling for student background and prior academic performance, students who participate in Advanced Placement courses and exams tend to “perform better on a range of college outcomes than their peers who do not take AP courses” (Cisneros et al., 2014, p. 21).

Great emphasis resides with choosing the right fit in a college-level program which will inevitably lead to the right college choice; however, the rural student does not always have the same access to the right tools and opportunities to succeed (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012).

“College-level programs can provide the target of high standards, but readiness comes from the mechanism through which students are supported and their efforts to teach college-level standards” (p. 66). Improving the access that rural students have to AP, Dual Enrollment, and early college coursework will improve the access that they have to the overall college experience and serve as a tool to overcome persistence issues (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012; Wakelyn, 2009).

Dual enrollment and the Early College High School model serve as a support system for first-generation college students. In contrast, AP provides a version of a “national curriculum” intended to educate a student population without the need to address individualized educational barriers such as a lack of resources or financial disparities (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012). Wakelyn (2009) sustained that Advanced Placement courses are “not just for the elite; it’s for the prepared,” and that preparation does not happen in a junior or senior year in high school.

Academic preparation occurs as the student successfully navigates the K-12 pipeline (de la Varre et al., 2014; Finn & Scanlan, 2020; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Perna, 2006; Wakelyn, 2009). Policymakers have “influenced education policies [by implementing] the use of AP in schools where dual enrollment may have been a better fit for students” (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012, p. 66).
AP is not readily accessible to all students and often requires reasonable proximity and accessibility to 2 and 4-year institutions (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012; Wakelyn, 2009).

Wakelyn (2009) disclosed that “approximately 65 percent of rural high school students attend schools that minimally offer or do not offer AP” (p. 3). Wakelyn (2009) also compared (nationally) that “while 51 percent of students from high-income households have taken Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate class, only 16 percent of low-income students have had the opportunity” (p. 3). Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) confirmed that students in more affluent districts have higher success rates than those in less affluent districts based on the common standards employed, curricula applied (content and rigor), and the quality and capability of educators available (qualifications). The disparities in AP access follow a “clear trend, with smaller and more remote rural districts exhibiting low rates of AP access” (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). Rural educators and administrators prepare students for the “next phase” while facing a multitude of issues that make the process challenging to navigate in environments with extremely limited resources, funding issues, have lower percentages of highly qualified teachers, etc. (Ayers, 2011; Brenner, 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015).

Many rural areas of the country contain concentrated poverty and continue to lag in technology initiatives (basic Internet) that limited the ability to offer advanced coursework like urban and suburban areas (Ayers, 2011; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). Rural schools and the research that can provide both insight and growth are often financially underfunded and not highly encouraged because emphasis resides in other areas of education that produce more significant returns (Ayers, 2011).
Purpose of Study

Rigorous coursework is one of the necessary staples in establishing college readiness (College Board, 2019; Cowan & Goldhaber, 2013; Croft & Moore, 2019; Cross & Burney, 2005; Finn & Scanlan, 2020; Wakelyn, 2009). Advanced Placement coursework and exams have been “touted as indicators of equity and excellence… and viewed as indicators of college readiness” (Cisneros et al., 2014, p. 21). The rural educational experience often cannot afford the same opportunity, resources, and access to advanced coursework; therefore, students from at-risk environments require an innovative and individualized approach to education to thoroughly respond to their needs.

The purpose of the study is to examine the equitable access to advanced coursework opportunities (Advanced Placement) provided to rural students (in-person and distance learning) in public rural high schools in Louisiana. Research will focus on analyzing the experiences of rural AP teachers and the impact of the coursework on college preparation (readiness), access, and choice within the rural community. In this study, I will interview educators who provide low-income, rural students with Advanced Placement coursework opportunities and explore how the state of Louisiana addresses program implementation and efficacy in rural communities.

The Advanced Placement (AP) program offers advanced coursework opportunities to students while they are still in high school that includes more intense academic training, access to rigorous curricula provided through a series of college-level courses and assessments (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). I am interested in analyzing the lived experiences of the AP educators through engagement, perceptions (sentiments) associated with the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition courses and Pre-AP coursework (course availability, resource availability, and the implementation in rural schools), and the AP test outcomes (course
completion and pass rates) in rural regions throughout Louisiana. I am also interested in identifying disparities in access to the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition courses and rigorous curricula specifically available to students in fringe, distant, and remote public high schools in Louisiana.

**Research Questions**

My central research questions examine the implementation and effectiveness of college readiness and transitional training delivered through Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework, the perceived barriers associated with enhancing college readiness and access in the rural community, and the effectiveness of supports employed to encourage college access (resources), choice (preparation), and enrollment. The research questions gauge teacher perceptions regarding Advanced Placement (existing program and pedagogy) and the effectiveness of college readiness techniques employed to provide students with adequate academic preparation for college in the future. The research questions also focus on supports provided while examining current curricula and available resources employed within the students’ social-cultural context.

1. What is the rural educator’s perception of the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework regarding program effectiveness in providing equitable access and college readiness in the rural public classroom (Louisiana) and to promote success in post-secondary education?

2. What supports (provisions and resources) are employed within the social-cultural context to encourage college readiness (access, academic preparation, and enrollment success) for rural students in Louisiana through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework?
3. What is the relationship between existing barriers and the rural educator’s ability to provide enhanced college readiness through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition courses?

**Significance of Study**

The findings of this study add to the expansion of Advanced Placement coursework within the rural classroom by providing emphasis on expanding course access, reinforce teacher efficacy within classrooms (advanced pedagogy), and creates academic incentives that serve rural students (providing support) in preparing for the transition to postsecondary learning. There is great value in evaluating the experiences of teachers who are active in the field.

In the United States, 36.7 percent of the high schools considered low income (1804 schools; 450,678 students with a high percentage of students qualified for free or reduced lunch), 13.1 percent of the schools qualified as high poverty (790 schools participated; 175,171 students), and 20 percent of the schools categorize as rural serving from 47 states (1581 schools; 195,752 students) (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019, p.18).

Perna and Kurban (2013) declared that to improve college access and choice, a careful and deliberate analysis must review the current state of the postsecondary educational structure. College enrollment rates from low-income schools represent 55 percent of college enrollment, while higher income-based schools represent 69 percent (louisianabelieves.com).

National Student Clearinghouse (2019) noted that high school graduates representing the Class of 2018 from high poverty schools consist of 54 percent of college enrollment as compared to 76 percent in low poverty schools.
Table 1. College Enrollment Rates in the First Fall after High School Graduation, Class of 2018, Public Non-Charter Schools. Louisiana Believes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation Rates</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rural graduates represent 62 percent of the college enrollment which shows that despite obstacles that arise in educating underserved student populations, there is great interest and a push to attend college (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). The emphasis now shifts to helping at-risk students to successfully navigate (access) and provide them with the tools necessary to make the transition onto the right college campus (choice) regardless of past hardships.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Louisiana Believes (2019) reported a slight decrease of .3 percent in overall college enrollment compared to 2012. Students that represented a low socioeconomic status (economically disadvantaged) showed a 1.4 percent decrease in college enrollment between 2012 and 2019. The pathway to college for underserved and nontraditional students is often parallel and riddled with obstacles, but the college experience represents the opportunity to advance for the public and private good (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018; Sternberg, 2014). Students from underserved populations often understand the necessity to attend postsecondary training because of the
struggle they have experienced and the lack of opportunity to prepare for the transition adequately.

Table 3. Louisiana College Enrollment Rates. Louisiana Believes (2019).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Graduates Enrolling in College</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
<th>2017-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student with Disabilities</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>48.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Louisiana Believes (2019) reported an increase of 9.1 percent in cohort high school graduation rates from 2013 to 2018. The number of student graduates from underserved populations is on the rise; however, addressing barriers remains a steadfast challenge, and the interest in attending college is present. The graduation rates of the economically disadvantaged subgroup indicated a growth of 9.3 percent. Louisiana public schools’ socioeconomic status of economically disadvantaged students (percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch due to low socioeconomic standing) ranges from 49.64 percent to 100.0 percent (louisianabelieves.com).


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort Graduation Rates by Subgroup, 2012-2018</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>81.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>78.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>75.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Learners</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To respond to the various needs of an underserved population, policymakers, lawmakers, university administrators, and faculty must collaborate to create a learning environment that implements intentional, goal-oriented, resourceful programs that respond to the individual needs
of every student. In 2019, Louisiana graduates consisted of over 45,000 students facing the decision to either commit to a college or enter the workforce (louisianabelieves.com). Rural students often come from a background with limited course offerings that were academically rigorous and with lower academic achievement expectations. Sentell (2020) reported that “21 of Louisiana's 34 rural school districts — nearly half the state — are either experiencing a ‘financial crisis’ or expected to do so shortly” (advocate.com). For rural students to advance in postsecondary education, they must establish a sense of preparation and campus connectivity (resources), have access to purposeful guidance (academic guidance), and have their progress evaluated often (interventions readily available when necessary).

Educational attainment thrives in an environment that maintains focus on creating the most conducive learning community possible for the community in which it functions to serve. Perna and Finney (2014) indicated that the importance of educational attainment advances because of collaborative and proactive processes that offer learning opportunities that strive to provide “educational skills and training required to meet the workforce demands of a global knowledge economy” (p. 2). Efforts to promote workplace readiness serve as an active response to combating a poorly educated population. A shift in knowledge and skills must evolve to match the requests of an advancing workforce. Amid a substantial retirement of the Baby Boomer generation, workplace expectations have evolved to include a more highly skilled worker (Perna & Finney, 2014).

The need for a college education now serves as a baseline to acquire this advanced training for the more highly skilled worker and simply equates to a higher pay scale. Perna and Finney (2014) considered the argument that “the United States suffers from an over-supply of college-educated workers, others counter that the growing wage premium paid to workers who
have a college education rather than a high school diploma” (p.2). To nullify the claim, Perna and Finney (2014) stated that “if a college education did not improve workers’ productivity, employers would not pay college-educated workers higher wages” (p.2).

The United States has endured angst in providing a highly educated workforce when compared to other countries because it simply does not start the process of producing that needed talent at a young age. Perna and Finney (2014) established that “a nation or a state within a nation cannot prosper without a highly educated population” (p. 3). Perna and Finney (2014) expressed that to create a more highly educated and competitive working population, the call to reduce the profound gaps in attainment that persist across groups and improving the educational attainment of Blacks and Hispanics, individuals from low-income families, and individuals living in countless underserved areas within states across the nation, including many inner cities and rural areas (p. 4).

A competitive and highly motivated workforce focused on achieving a higher level of educational attainment requires resources that are accessible, obtainable, utilized efficiently, and initiatives designed to create effective means in response to the need.

**Definition of Key Terms**

Advanced Placement (AP): The Advanced Placement (AP) program offers high school students with college-level coursework and grants college credits from participating institutions upon completing the coursework and passing the placement exam by earning a score of 3 or higher (Kolluri, 2018).

Student Poverty: This group of students identifies as “‘economically disadvantaged,’ which includes students eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance
for Needy Families, Medicaid, awaiting foster care, migrant, and incarcerated children” (Louisiana Believes, 2015, p. 6).

Rural Ratings

Rural is “any population, housing, or territory not in an urban center” (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

Urban Center is an area that “consists of two types of geographies: Urbanized Areas have a population of 50,000 or more. Urban Clusters have a population of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000” (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

Rural Fringe is an area that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

Rural Distant is an area that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area.

Rural Remote is an area existing more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

Teacher Value Rating System ranges from 0 – 5. No rating (0) notes teachers that are not active in the evaluating period or year; Ineffective (1.0-1.9); Effective Emerging (2.0-2.6); Effective-Proficient (2.7-3.3); Effective-Accomplished (3.4-4.0); Highly Effective (4.1-5.0) (louisianabelieves.com).

Highly Effective Educators (Rating): A Highly Effective-rated teacher is a teacher who has received an above-average transitional student growth rating of Highly Effective.

Effective Educators (Rating): A teacher earning an effective rating has received a transitional student growth rating of Effective: Proficient or Highly Effective.
Inexperienced Educators: An inexperienced teacher is any teacher in their first year of teaching in the classroom.

Out-of-Field Teachers: An out-of-field teacher does not hold a license in their current teaching assignment. Teachers who work in charter schools (Type 2 and 5) are not included in this category because charter schools are not required to hire certified teachers.

Unqualified Teachers: An unqualified teacher does not hold a standard certificate. Standard certificates include A, B, C; Level 1, 2, 3; Practitioner Licenses (PL 1-3) and Out-of-State Licenses (OS). The category does not include teachers who work in charter schools (Type 2 and 5) because charter schools do not have to hire certified teachers.
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The construction of a brick-and-mortar building or putting up a welcome sign is not enough to ensure access to all students and address the access barriers that rural students face in preparing for college. Every student brings with them unique challenges as they emerge onto the college campus; however, rural students are significant because they represent “nearly 30 percent of American public schools, serving nearly one-fifth of all public school students” (College Board, 2017, p. 1). The decision to apply, enroll, attend, and graduate from college is overwhelming for even the most well-prepared and well-resourced students (Daun-Barnett et al., 2014; Jaeger et al., 2015; Perna & Finney, 2014). Every student deserves equal access to an education that prepares them for a successful transition to college and the workplace.

The term underserved is most often associated with students of color, low-income students, rural and first-generation students who are inexperienced and are most often ill-prepared; however, it does not mean incapable. Not one of these classifications determines worth or capability, but each does denote a separate degree of struggle. Daun-Barnett et al. (2014) acknowledged that while a quick Internet search of “going to college” can yield more than 12 million hits, for the underserved population, it can characterize endless confusion and overwhelming defeat in an instant. While there is no lack of information regarding the college choice process on the Internet, the issue surfaces when families simply do not know what to do with the information once they have accessed it and students are not prepared to confidently move forward.

The primary barrier that rural students face is limited access to resources (Ardoin, 2017; Daun-Barnett et al, 2014; Means et al., 2016) and the information needed to effectively research,
plan for (access), attend (choice), and succeed in college. The second barrier is the lack of student preparedness (social and academic) (Conley, 2013; Elkins, S., 2014; Jaegar et al., 2015; St. John et al., 2018) for the college-going experience. The third barrier is a lack of persistence (Castleman et al., 2015; Conley, 2013; Perna & Jones, 2013) due to the inconsistent or absent guidance that “at-risk” student populations experience throughout the college choice process (both at home and school). Students will not thrive in a postsecondary educational setting until the gaps in college access will minimize when the right information reaches the right hands at the right time.

To effectively address inequities on the college campus, college administrators and faculty must be ready to actively address the varied plethora of challenges that diverse student populations bring with them. Responding to the implicit needs of an underserved population requires an open and forward-facing dialogue aimed at providing connectivity between students and their family support with the right information sources (Daun-Barnett et al., 2014; Elkins, 2014; Means, 2016; Perna & Kurban, 2013). Colleges and universities must identify and actively prepare for the potential gaps (academic, social, and cultural) that come with educating students from underserved populations.

Perna (2006) regarded that “college-choice outcomes are part of a broader educational pipeline” (p. 148). For the conversation to include all working aspects of the college process and choice, the college discussion must begin early. Perna discussed the point of weakening as being where the emphasis is achieving success in college over the need to teach critical skills associated with the process of how to be successful in college. Research shows a “positive relationship between SES, a composite of family income, parents’ education, and parents’ occupation” (Perna, 2006, p. 132), and educating students and their support systems will only
strengthen the pipeline to comprise higher educational opportunities. Perna (2006) maintained that “college completion is critical to fully realizing the public and private benefits of higher education and achieving equity in higher education opportunity, degree attainment is not possible without ‘college choice’” (p. 148).

To actively respond to the gap in program equity and opportunity, the process of educating all parties (parents and students) associated with the college choice process must develop at an early stage and with consistency. Many rural students face challenges at all stages of the application process because they are low-income households, and many are first generation, college students. Jaeger et al. (2015) noted that just “being rural” is not easy and these students “have historically faced, and continues to face, more challenges and greater inequalities compared to its urban and suburban counterparts” (p. 615).

The National Clearinghouse (2019) defined low-income schools as an institution with more than 50 percent of their student population that qualifies to receive free or reduced lunches. The terms rural and low socioeconomic status (poverty) are closely related and often interchangeable, but it does not have to mean obsolete. The educational attainment of people living in rural (nonmetropolitan) areas has increased markedly over time but has not kept pace with urban (metropolitan) gains, especially in college and postgraduate education. Although rural students do not go to college as often as high school graduates in larger cities, they are equally as capable. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows “rural students not only score better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress than students in cities, but small-town graduation rates are higher than the national average” (Lisa, 2019).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Characteristics</th>
<th>Enrolled Students (Class of 2012)</th>
<th>Enrolled Students (Class of 2018)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NSC</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=1,334,425</td>
<td>N=3,094,414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Income Schools</td>
<td>24.98%</td>
<td>29.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Income Schools</td>
<td>75.02%</td>
<td>70.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Minority Schools</td>
<td>39.52%</td>
<td>34.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Minority Schools</td>
<td>60.48%</td>
<td>65.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Schools</td>
<td>34.84%</td>
<td>25.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban Schools</td>
<td>40.94%</td>
<td>34.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Schools</td>
<td>24.23%</td>
<td>39.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Poverty Schools</td>
<td>7.69%</td>
<td>7.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Poverty Schools</td>
<td>38.98%</td>
<td>31.67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*National numbers were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics. Elementary and Secondary Information System.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019) reported that from a national sample (over 3.2 million students from all 50 states), 31.94 percent of students represent rural schools.

Table 6. The number of public, non-charter high schools, and public, non-charter high school graduates included in the report by category of high schools. National Center for Education Statistics (2014).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rural Public High Schools: Graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The NCES Census Codes provides guidelines for defining rural territories as rural fringe that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster; rural distant is more than 5 miles but less than...
or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area; and rural remote as existing more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (Brenner, 2016).

Students from underserved populations require connectivity and this initiative could serve as a strong informational portal that provides a support system designed to guide and retain at-risk students with programs and tools that leads to college degree completion. The successful partnership that exists between the institution and community is critical in shaping future aspirations of the rural student; nevertheless, two questions realistically emerge when the discussion of college is at stake: How much? devours the cost concept associated with backing the college experience (sticker shock can be a critical component here) and the second question, Now what? (lack of advanced coursework and educational direction) rises due to a lack of preparation that would reduce the anxieties associated with the high school to college campus transition.

**Resource Divide**

Barriers exist for rural students because of “low family income and parental education, fewer school resources, less academically-rigorous courses, lower academic achievement and postsecondary aspirations, and lower college attendance and completion rates” (Means et al., 2016, p. 544). Students from underserved populations often do not know how to go to college (Ardoin, 2017; Daun-Barnett et al, 2014; Means et al., 2016). The leading cause of concern in college access and choice for the underserved student population exists in the lack of resources ranging from limited to no access to advanced course offerings to a grave lack of technology (basic internet access) that fails to pave the way to postsecondary education success (Jaeger et al., 2015; Means et al., 2016).
Means et al. (2016) employs the four levels of Laura Perna’s Conceptual Model of Student College Choice (2006) to explain the factions that exist for the emerging college student as the individual habitus, the school and community context, the higher education context, and the broader social, economic, and policy context. To frame the barriers associated with underserved student populations, the rural community “lends itself to the first two layers; however, falls short in providing opportunities that yield high interest in postsecondary education due to limited resources (third and fourth layer)” (Means et al., 2016, p. 547).

Jaeger et al. (2015) identified the potential sources of college access barriers for rural students as stemming from limited college-going support and resources (which yields inadequacies in academic preparedness), affordability issues, weaker understanding of academic jargon in context, and the lack of knowledge associated with the transfer option. Croft and Moore (2019) identified that the limited insights in education and work of rural students result from minimal access to technology and rationed advanced coursework; nevertheless, rural students did have greater access to extracurricular activities that did aid in academic growth. The social and cultural capital gains associated with increased accessibility by introducing community college as a pathway to postsecondary education for rural students. Responding to the challenges surrounding college choice and establishing a clear literacy perspective of the material available can determine the thin line between success and failure (Jaeger et al., 2015). Brown et al. (2015) identified that “[n]ew and emerging literacies are composed of the ‘skills, strategies, dispositions and social practices’” (p. 106) that can serve as a primary barrier for a student who has experienced limited access to technology.

Access to information is the necessary tool for addressing gaps in college access and choice, and institutions must provide equitable learning opportunities to all learners regardless of
Means et al. (2016) employed Perna’s use of the human capital theory by suggesting that “individuals accumulate productive capacities (e.g., knowledge, skills) through investments in education, which can be exchanged for increased earnings, power, and status” (p. 547). The misguided rural student, because of limited resources, is much like a driver sitting in a car without a set of keys (lack of knowledge and direction to navigate the winding roadmap associated with postsecondary learning). Underserved students will often readily respond to the information afforded and the labor of the school and community is critical in shaping future aspirations (Ardoin, 2017; Means et al., 2016).

For rural school environments to prosper in providing college-ready learners, educational policy must directly address ongoing deficits (necessary resources, advanced coursework, etc.) that further propel the widespread struggle to provide equitable learning environments (Ayers, 2011). Rural systems must have the ability to compete, receive, and continuously provide students with the direct benefits of federal and state educational funding initiatives. The creation and implementation of school-based wraparound services available to rural students would recognize the unique circumstances and often limited capabilities of rural schools and the direct impact that supplying critical aid and resources could have on the classroom. The successful turnaround of low-performing schools is associated with the accessibility of resources that provide critical enhancement support for constructing a strong teacher and principal workforce-partnership for rural schools (Ayers, 2011).

College Board’s Advanced Placement Program allows students to take college-level courses while in high school and is historically noted for advancing superior, suburban white students most often in the private sector (Klopfenstein, 2004; Kolluri, 2018). Advanced Placement (AP) courses are the “most rigorous courses available” (Klopfenstein, 2004, p. 1) to
high school students; however, equitable access is a noted challenge of opportunity for all students to demonstrate gained knowledge and indicate college readiness. College Board’s Advanced Placement “equity policy statement which ‘encourages the elimination of barriers that restrict access to AP courses for students from ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in the AP Program’” (p. 2). The “lack of systematic data has heretofore prevented a thorough analysis of the extent to which the recent expansion of the AP Program benefited the traditionally underserved groups of rural, low income, black, and Hispanic students” (p. 2).

Klopfenstein (2004) examined the expansion of Advanced Placement opportunities provided throughout the 1990s and how traditionally underserved populations fared because of the program’s development. “Despite overall growth, small rural schools and high poverty schools continue to offer relatively few AP courses, and black, Hispanic, and low-income students remain grossly underrepresented in AP classes” (Klopfenstein, 2004, p. 1). She also noted that the fee subsidy program, provided by AP as an initiative to increase program participation in the 1990s, would not incentivize low-income students to participate and rural schools to expand in AP course offerings as expected. Federally funded programs would help further improve the program’s impact by “supporting a comprehensive approach to increasing the AP access and participation of traditionally underserved students” (p. 1).

The initial goal of the Advanced Placement Program was to provide college-level knowledge and skills to high-performing, qualified, and prepared high school students that were ready to conquer more challenging coursework aligned with university standards and expectations (Kolluri, 2018). Since that time, the AP Program has “expanded to serve more students from marginalized backgrounds, equitable access has become one of its core objectives”
The rapid expansion of the AP Program left the system facing three primary challenges of

1) Accessible and effective AP programs for low-income students may be an extension of the hardships endured by many low-income students and their families.

2) AP access and effectiveness for students from marginalized backgrounds… stem from the ineffective and culturally misaligned pedagogy available within the underserved educational environment.

3) From a structural lens, schools priming working-class students for working-class jobs, valuing cultural knowledge and dispositions over others, or contending with parents from elite families who continually seek new means to distinguish their children, and in so doing, “effectively maintain inequality” (p. 673).

College Board Advanced Placement Program is “yet to achieve its dual goals of equitable access and effective college-level skill development” (p. 698). Inequalities will continue to exist because of the limited resources available in at-risk learning environments because low-income school districts are “struggling to match the breadth of AP course offerings of middle- and upper-class districts” (p. 690). There are significant inequities in the AP Program regarding class and race (by AP subject area), course offerings (teacher certification and availability), access to AP coursework, school quality and achievement, rigorous program implementation and maintained effectiveness, AP test performance, and providing overall college readiness (Ardoin, 2017; Daun-Barnett et al., 2014; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Kolluri, 2018). Kolluri (2018) affirmed either excellence or equity will emerge unless a shift takes place in the AP conversation from the
statistical patterns toward one that is grounded in theory, investigates causal mechanisms, and includes the attributes and idiosyncrasies of actual schools and classrooms, our understanding of a program so salient to the lives of high school youth will be inadequately understood (p. 705).

“Completing Advanced Placement coursework is an important part of the selective college admissions process, and access to AP coursework can be viewed as a measure of equal opportunity” (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016, p. 266). Gagnon and Mattingly (2016) declared that “rural schools are at a particular disadvantage in promoting AP success due to a lack of sufficiently prepared students, teaching constraints, and other logistical challenges” (p. 266). Disparities exist in AP enrollment and program completion, but it is “unclear how rurality, remoteness, school size, and student demographic compositions are related to AP access… because such data is not made readily available” (p. 269).

Gagnon and Mattingly (2016) maintained that little research has examined how school characteristics intercede with AP coursework and associated outcome variables (AP access, AP enrollment, and AP success) with predictor variables (urbanicity, low enrollment, rural remoteness, district poverty, and high minority). Even in rural schools that do offer AP coursework, a substantial lag in program participation and completion exists when compared to more urban and affluent schools (Gagnon and Mattingly, 2016). Descriptive analyses from the study suggest that “rural districts are less likely to support AP programs: Only 51.4% of rural school districts enroll at least one student in an AP course, compared with 78.3%, 93.8%, and 97.3% of town, suburban, and urban districts” (p. 272).

Louisiana Believes (2020) reported AP participation numbers of 20,819 in 2018-2019 and a passing rate (those who took that earned a score of 3 or above) of 7,305 (35.1 percent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School System Code</th>
<th>School System</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Total Students Taking AP Exams</th>
<th># of Students Scoring 3+</th>
<th>% of Students Scoring 3+</th>
<th>Total Students Taking AP Exams</th>
<th># of Students Scoring 3+</th>
<th>% of Students Scoring 3+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Louisiana Statewide</td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td>17,177</td>
<td>7,982</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
<td>20,819</td>
<td>7,305</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Louisiana Statewide</td>
<td>Economically</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>≥5980</td>
<td>≥2090</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>≥8190</td>
<td>≥1750</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2019-2020, Louisiana’s overall AP participation showed a slight decline to 17,177 with a passing rate of 7,982 (46.5 percent). Rural learning communities often represent the economically disadvantaged subgroup because a rural classification (distinction) is currently unavailable (Ayers, 2011; Burney & Beilke, 2008; Elkins, 2014; Finn & Scanlan, 2020; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Jaegar et al., 2015).

**Academic Preparedness**

Many students representing underserved populations are “underprepared—academically, socially, and/or culturally” (Elkins, 2014). To address the overarching needs associated with providing college access for all, higher education administrators and educational policymakers must examine the realm of contextual factors that influence a student’s choice in education (Elkins, 2014; Jaegar et al., 2015; St. John et al., 2018). Disadvantaged students often have “not received sufficient academic preparation to adequately prepare them for AP coursework once they reach high school” (Finn & Scanlan, 2020, p. 16). Rural students can take advantage of and demonstrate success in AP opportunities, enroll, and persist in college at rates comparable to their urban and suburban peers (College Board, 2017). The goal to serve rural students revolves
around providing the most conducive learning environment paired with the most effective and equitable resources and the most relevant curricula.

College Board (2018) reported score distributions for over 5 million exams completed by over 2.8 million students in over 22,612 secondary schools. Advanced Placement courses represent the opportunity to connect rural students to college opportunities (College Board, 2019). Burney and Beilke (2008) discussed that although the numbers of courses completed and tests submitted continue to climb, academic preparation still dwindles tragically in high poverty areas and does not deserve comparison because the characteristics are vastly different. To continue to narrow the access gap for underserved student populations, access to opportunities for advanced coursework must improve, and early college readiness-academic preparation is occurring at a slower pace in rural communities (Ayers, 2011; Burney & Beilke, 2008).

Addressing the family context, school and community impact, socioeconomic status, college access and opportunity, and social capital (challenges and barriers) are equally significant; however, the primary emphasis must be improving academic preparation in the rural classroom (St. John et al., 2018). Each student population on the college campus brings a new set of challenges that require a tailored approach to respond to the needs appropriately. College access initiatives designed to support the at-risk student include implementing a systematic approach that implements structured pre-college programs, individualized assistance designed for the student (program supports), and intensive college advising.

Underserved populations, in most cases, have not received adequate preparation in the process of making the successful transition to the college campus (social and/or academic); furthermore, the divide will only intensify unless programs evolve to directly address the gaps (Ardoin, 2017; Daun-Barnett et al., 2014; Jaeger et al., 2015). The Internet has “great potential to
serve as a democratizing force in the college choice process… [yet] students and families know little about the costs of college or the availability of financial aid, and the problem is worst among low-income families’’ (Daun-Barnett et al., 2014, p. 131). The introduction of web-based access to college choice opens the door to attract a larger group of students. It offers institutions the opportunity to improve efficiency to reach and respond to the various needs of a more diverse student population. The function of technology within the college access process yields the means to sell the college experience, apply to college online, and apply for financial aid (Daun-Barnett et al., 2014). While college access marketing or selling the idea of college to all students remains highly lucrative, students and parents in underserved populations can remain lost in translation and unprepared.

Burney and Beilke (2008) discussed the limited factors of opportunity in schools with a higher minority and low-income student population as being less likely to offer rigorous curricula and very few have the resources or opportunity to provide Advanced Placement courses. St. John et al. (2018) proposed the need for an ongoing review of student enrollments (state indicators from a blend of fixed effect models and hierarchical models), statistical reports that indicate trends in enrollment patterns, educational research examining social attainment, and economic studies (financial impact on access and choice) to systematically improve academic preparation for underserved student populations.

Academic preparation thrives in an environment that fashions informed students who have had access to a quality educational program and have been both taught and required to respond to heightened levels of accountability and expectations. Underserved populations require the call for productive educational and economic research that engage the impact of academic preparation (pre-college), state subsidies and tuition policy, both need-based and merit-based aid,
the financial effects of federal and state policy on college choice and access, and institutional policies that address the barriers associated with achieving success on the college campus (St. John et al., 2018).

Byrd et al. (2007) recognized that for many people “committed to strong academic standards, the ‘advanced’ high school courses offered through the College Board’s Advanced Placement program and, increasingly, the Diploma Programme of the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) represent the curricular gold standard for secondary education” (p. 7). Federal and state-level program supporters have become believers and have instituted educational initiatives to advance coursework offerings but providing the program to all students has proven to be the overarching challenge of policymakers and overall program expansion (Byrd et al., 2007). Byrd et al. (2007) identified that the key factor to appraising advanced coursework programs in schools is to establish the gold standard for creating a college-ready environment for students to experience advanced learning from the comforts of their high school campus and before emerging onto the college campus. The study evaluated the AP programs provided for the four typical U.S. core-content areas for high school students (English, history, science, and math).

Byrd et al. (2007) also conducted a comparative analysis of the AP and IBO courses provided in Arizona based on content representing 60 percent of the grade, rigor representing 30 percent of the grade, and course clarity representing the remaining 10 percent of the overall grade. The program grades varied from A- to C, while the strengths and weaknesses of the AP and IBO courses ranged from rigorous, demanding, and comprehensive to missing abridged topics of importance, overreliance on technology, and tentative program expectations that must be “discovered by the teacher” (Byrd et al., 2007, p. 13).
Navigating the college process is often overwhelming to the students and their family support from the start. Shaping the college opportunities of an at-risk student population must revolve around preparing the whole student to navigate the process from the point of choosing the “right” college and scrutinizing college websites, maneuvering through the application process (facing an inexperience with academic jargon), addressing the shocking price tag (expense of college and financial aid-based responsibilities and terminology) to simply scheduling courses (Ardoin, 2017).

Immense value exists (in the college choice process) when institutions and recruitment efforts build upon the face-to-face visit and develop a sustainable relationship with potential students. While remaining focused on attracting the “right customers” and establishing that access to opportunity, college choice remains accessible to all while maintaining the highest efficiency level (electronic applications and the process of submission). Daun-Barnett et al. (2014) discussed the intensive assistance available to “at-risk” students to finish high school, secure financial aid (understanding the information), and the confidence to push the submit button when the time comes. Daun-Barnett et al. (2014) outlined the assistance opportunities available to underserved student populations provided by state agencies, loan guaranty agencies, testing agencies, advocacy agencies, campaigns (Know How 2 Go Campaign), and various websites. Access to college choice is “knowledge” defined by the student’s initiative paired with the student’s ability to navigate through the college process (Daun-Barnett et al., 2014). The key to the college access process resides with the high school counselor. Paper to screen transition often requires additional time investments focused intensely on college choice and career readiness.
Colleges and universities of today must respond to an underserved student population’s evolving needs while addressing innovation. The diversity presented by underserved populations that emerge onto the campus quickly discover that they are grossly unaware and ill-prepared to navigate the system once they have arrived. To effectively respond to the multitude of needs that underserved student populations embody, college administrators, faculty, and counselors must engage by designing and implementing a seemingly individualized tailored approach to education to construct the most productive learning environment possible.

Information is only valuable if students (and parents) can put what they have learned into motion. The academic issues that must be acknowledged and actively addressed for the underserved population must include responding to the individualized needs of the population. Establishing contact with at-risk students early (access to information), conducting consistent and timely checkpoints, and providing intentional guidance will positively impact the learner. College aspirations and access for the working-class in rural communities face many mixed signals and challenges tied to the new academic language of postsecondary education. To strengthen academic literacy and terminology for rural students, the timely introduction of the concepts provides students with the opportunity to become familiar with the working vocabulary. The introduction and implementation of practical “academic talk” can serve as a tool used to combat barriers in the at-risk student’s journey to higher education.

The college choice process could be most productive for rural students through the strengthening of their college knowledge skill base: 1) becoming aware and versed in the use and meaning of college jargon, 2) gaining the ability not only to recognize but actively define terms, and 3) establishing productive processes of seeking and understanding academic information (Ardoin, 2017). Access to information and resources is valuable; however, rural families can
quickly experience information overload, which does not achieve any degree of the intended goal. Rural students face a sizable hurdle during the navigation of the college decision process; nevertheless, they find themselves facing an immediate struggle with the lack of experience and academic jargon that emerges. Disadvantaged and at-risk students who enter academia tend to struggle early due to a substantial lack of academic language proficiency and familiarity, making academic decisions more challenging from the start.

The road to college should involve the implementation of educational initiatives designed to increase academic rigor while regulating the minimum curricular standards and requirements intended to bring all learning environments to the same starting point (equitable baseline) (Daun-Barnett et al., 2014). School-level expectations and accountability would experience a consistent increase starting with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the implementation of exit exams (2008) to the course alignment introduced with the Common Core State Standards Initiative in 2010 (Daun-Barnett et al., 2014). The core of early learning initiatives is aiding students in their strive towards high school completion (graduation) and applying to college; however, limited provisions are available for the underserved student populations that are already facing adversity.

Louisiana Believes (2019) reported that “historically disadvantaged students are attaining college and career credentials at a lower rate than their peers” (louisianabelieves.com). Daun-Barnett et al. (2014) identified that the best practices for improving academic preparation were to implement a variety of advanced initiatives (Advanced Placement, AVID College Readiness, College Summit, International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, and Dual Enrollment) that ranged from focusing on the students while some resolved to reform the learning environment provided
in the school. The issue of limited resources surfaces again because rural schools often face limited access to advanced coursework.

Students that represent underserved populations simply are not ready for the stern structure, rigorous expectations, and amplified accountability that define postsecondary education. Conley (2013) resolved that assigning a “grade” to a school does not mean that the students that emerge are any more prepared to succeed than others. Efficacy in the program curriculum and consistency in implementation are key to regulating college and career readiness (lack of funding and resources does surface as leading factors at this stage) (Ardoin, 2017; Conley, 2013; Daun-Barnett et al, 2014; Means et al., 2016). The Proficiency Approach is a suitable response to regulating the deficiency associated with college and career readiness because

a proficiency-based college and career readiness system can serve to raise academic expectations across all high school classes by making explicit the standards to reach and addressing any gap that may exist between a student’s performance and what is necessary for college readiness (Conley, 2013, p. 61).

Developmental education can effectively fill gaps in student learning; however, the lack of funding has caused most colleges and universities to abandon this initiative (Long & Boatman, 2013). The cost of remediation is prohibitively expensive for both students and institutions ($1.9 to $2.3 billion nationwide at community colleges and another $500 million at four-year colleges) (Long & Boatman, 2013). Various levels of effectiveness associated with remedial and developmental programs and reported mixed reviews. The primary source of concern within the data highlighted the need to address academic deficiencies. Students incur the additional debt of taking a developmental course that would not grant credit towards their degree, only their GPA, based on the data provided through a standardized test. Remediation and
developmental programs are the current response to assisting students and “improve college success for academically underprepared students” (Long & Boatman, 2013, p.84). Underprepared students often face academic deficiencies that reach far greater than the scope of the program can provide (Conley, 2013; Long & Boatman, 2013).

The use of early placement exams serves as an early signal warning to assist students before reaching the postsecondary level; furthermore, by reducing the number of students who require developmental coursework, the costs associated with attendance would decrease. Limiting access to developmental coursework will limit program success for the students who are asking for additional assistance at a critical junction (Long & Boatman, 2013). Programs designed to institute college-based learning into the high school learning environment must employ an increase in academic standards and expectations while preparing students for the postsecondary experience and to shorten the time to complete a degree program (less expense incurred via tuition) (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012).

Klopfenstein and Lively (2012) conducted a study that compared the program efficacy presented in the Advanced Placement (AP) to Dual Enrollment (DE) at the high school level. Program perceptions and cultural popularity for the AP program incorporate “factors [such] as a school’s geographic location and a student’s academic profile and postsecondary aspirations” (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012, p. 59). Advanced placement is not the only choice in early college preparation; however, it is the most widely advertised despite its limitations (availability). Underserved student populations encounter limited access to advanced coursework in high schools due to lack of program funding, limited staff (course availability), and a lack of certified course instructors (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012).
Walsh (2016) avowed that even though the cost of college weighs heavily on the minds of students and parents, the intention of Advanced Placement coursework was not to “replace the learning that takes place in college-level honors classes” (p. 37). Maintaining the vision and purpose of motivating students did not rest on providing means to save money on future tuition, but on expanding more diverse learning opportunities. Although reducing the price tag associated with postsecondary learning serves as an incentive, maintaining the integrity of the AP program, providing equitable access to all students, preparing all students with the opportunity to thrive in the pre-college experience, while reinforcing self-perception and learner engagement (Walsh, 2016). In many instances, the design of AP courses relies upon a standardized recommended curriculum that does not address the various academic student experiences and limitations of the students that it aims to serve. Test prepped and primed simply does not equate to being college-ready (Marcel, 2003; Walsh, 2016).

In addition, Elue and Martinez (2019) echoed that “while some colleges have made concerted efforts to reduce financial barriers for their students by developing institutional scholarships, others have not” (p. 382). Financing the college experience is one of the largest barriers that underserved populations face and require vital assistance to procure funding to attend postsecondary learning. Financial aid and the use of programs designed to specifically aid underserved students and represent the fine line between success and failure. In many circumstances, the response to a simple question of how much? can signify the difference between a student choosing to attend college and or walking away. Family wage versus living wage must remain balanced and, in many instances, the student and their parents cannot see past the sticker shock of the price tag associated with attending college.
Rural students enter college and often face a lack in academic preparedness from the start (Finn & Scanlan, 2020; Wakelyn, 2009; Walsh, 2016). The implementation of remedial and the role of developmental education programs and the concept of program affordability blend with the role of community colleges as a source of groundwork. Predictors of retention, persistence, and completion surface and their alignment to state perspectives with higher education. Last, critiques of programs currently in motion in K-12 and higher education programs and the evaluation of what has posed both success and failure regarding the assistance that students receive while improving program retention and completion in postsecondary education.

Finn and Scanlan (2020) outlined that for AP to operate at full capacity and serve the largest diversity of students, state and federal lawmakers, state and district educational leaders, administrators, and educators must maintain consistency in responding to gaps in excellence that exist because of geographical limitations, race and ethnicity, and income barriers.

Finn and Scanlan (2020) proposed that AP has the potential to narrow gaps within the educational pipeline; however, educational reform must prompt open access, increased participation (student and educator-based learning incentives) and demonstrate consistency in learner outcomes (increased student enrollment, retention, and graduation at postsecondary institutions). Finn and Scanlan (2020) reported that the percentage estimate of all U.S. public schools that offer AP exams showed an increase of 52 percent in 1997 to 71% in 2017 and the percentage of students that took the AP exams increased from 7.7 percent in 1997 to 33.9 percent in 2017. Of the total number of AP test-takers from public high schools in the U.S. receiving a score of 3 or higher, 48 percent were low-income students and 65 percent were non-low-income (Finn & Scanlan, 2020).
Persistence

Students from a low socioeconomic background may bring a different set of preconceived notions that college is simply not for “their type” and only students with a certain amount of money can go to college. Programs designate substantial amounts of money to support school systems who specifically serve students in at-risk populations; however, convincing the students that college is both a reachable and affordable goal will simply not suffice (Castleman, 2015). Parental engagement and involvement in the college choice process is equally important to influence the student’s educational outcome. Through active instruction, a working conversation initiates both parental and student buy-in to the college mindset and avoiding detrimental behavioral economics that can limit postsecondary access. Students and parents who have experienced at-risk existences must clutch the concept that the lack of opportunity experienced during youth does not have to define the rest of their lives.

All learning opportunities are not equal, nor is the environment (resources) in which they are present. The private sector does not face the lack of resources and increased levels of state-mandated accountabilities, so the students benefit from more time directed at developing a sense of determination and a college-persistent mindset. Students from underserved populations require more attention; however, they tend to receive a lesser concentration at this critical junction due to reduced staff and the driving influences of career and college counselors involved in the college access process.

Conley (2013) identified the four keys to college and career readiness as being able to 1) think (cognitive strategies); 2) know (accumulation of “foundational” content knowledge); 3) act (skills associated with student “ownership” of learning and fundamental techniques); and 4) go (transitional knowledge and skills that must exist “beyond high school”). A fluid relationship
must exist between the federal, state, and local (high school) governance to focus on learning initiatives that concentrate on creating systems alignment (emphasis on college readiness and success in college) at all policy levels.

Perna and Jones (2013) proposed the need for continued growth in the domain of higher education to further “expand the nation’s economy, meet workforce needs, improve the financial and social mobility of individual families, reduce discrimination and inequality, and develop a better-educated citizenry” (p.1). The college experience emerges as a common and attainable goal that implements a pipeline of preparation, affordability, persistence, and completion that expands past of a letter of acceptance. The challenge that immediately rises is ensuring that the goal is realistically attainable for all. A separate discussion proposes that investigation into the continued inequalities and stratification of college access, analysis of the subgroup of students served, mindsets required to succeed in postsecondary coursework, and persistence measures implemented to assist students in achieving academic success.

Persistence has much to do with endurance and the United States lags in degree completion. By addressing the rigor of educational programs that prepare students for postsecondary study and realignment of producing a well-rounded thinker rather than just a pristine test-taker, students enter higher education with a higher awareness of what it takes to achieve success and the skills necessary to obtain program completion. Public policies and programs have strengthened the opportunity for student access to college through the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) and TRIO programs (focused response to address financial needs and ban discriminatory practices) (Perna & Jones, 2013). Policymakers (federal and state) and educational leaders must work simultaneously to increase educational attainment and decrease the societal gaps that prevent students from crossing the finish line. What does this look like?
Perna and Jones (2013) affirmed that an ongoing discussion must address the spectrum-changes in the “college completion process, spanning awareness of college and financial aid, academic readiness and preparation, access and choice, persistence and transfer, and completion” (p.4).

The efficacy provided in a learning environment does matter; moreover, the value of the at-risk learning environment does not provide the balanced support and opportunities of its more privileged counterparts. The trifecta of persistence for underserved populations intensifies due to the student strain caused by inadequate resources and lack of preparedness. On many occasions, in at-risk learning environments, the resources are extremely low while the accountability and expectations are higher than ever which often leads to defeat and creates a warped sense of persistence for the student. Simply stated, the students who need the most are receiving the least.

There is a considerable need to advocate for high ability students who emerge from impoverished learning environments. Project Aspire is a “federally funded initiative that attempts to improve the lives of impoverished, academically able students in rural middle and high school” (Cross and Burney, 2005, p. 148). Cross and Burney (2005) disclosed that the findings of the program were based on a study primarily established by Adelman (1999), who wrote persuasively about the critical importance of rigorous coursework serving as a prognostic indicator of college success. Access to advanced coursework is critical, but the guidance afforded is equally significant. Cross and Burney (2005) outlined the primary goal of Project Aspire as creating and maintaining an elevated sense of persistence by implementing five components into the rural learning environment:

1) delivering AP courses through distance learning;

2) using vertical teams of middle and high school teachers to prepare students of AP courses;
3) increasing the number of low-income students enrolled in AP courses;
4) implementing effective strategies to facilitate student mastery of pre-AP curricula; and
5) providing the tutoring and counseling services necessary to help students succeed in selected math and science courses (p. 148).

The lack of access to college counseling services available to students in rural educational settings by qualified counselors would pose as the prevalent issue in the study (Cross & Burney, 2005). The bulk of the program relied heavily on academic counselors who would maintain focus on “concerning the value of Advanced Placement courses for low-income enrollees while seeking to raise student and parent expectations;” reduce the fear associated with advanced academic coursework (developing necessary study and organizational skills, address stress, etc.); and provide necessary college counseling connections to the campus (p. 148). The study would outline the themes associated with poverty and its effect on the rural learning environment as the students’ view of rigorous coursework as too much work or too time consuming, the school climate or “attitude” can serve as discouraging participation in advanced learning, the overstretch of educators and their heavy course loads, and the overall need to address the constraints of generational poverty (Cross & Burney, 2005).

Klopfenstein (2003) deliberated a multitude of necessary recommendations for maintaining the quality of the Advanced Placement Program while outlining emerging trends that have the potential to undermine the mission and vision of College Board. Klopfenstein revealed how often in at-risk learning environments, AP teachers are placed out-of-field without adequate support for professional development, applying narrow enrollment criteria for students entering the program, using AP exam scores for program assessment, and communication
failures between teachers, parents, and administrators about the unique demands of AP can diminish the effectiveness of a school’s AP program and the impact that it can have on the underserved learner. Klopfenstein disputed that if AP is going to serve as a national standard used to declare academic excellence and college readiness, there must be little tolerance for allowing inequities to subsist in the classroom. Advanced Placement exam scores serve as an instrument to assess program quality; nevertheless, by placing an increased emphasis on the outcome (exam results) over the process, a shift takes place that redirects the attention of advancing all students who choose to participate including only those “academically superior” learners who can make the mark (Klopfenstein, 2003).

Marcel (2003) examined the experience of low-income students’ experiences with advanced courses in two Western states. The study focused on the positive sentiments associated with implementing Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement courses in low-income schools. Marcel (2003) highlighted that the positive comments would emphasize use of computers and the Internet, ease of program navigation, vendor support, increased student collaboration, and an enhanced sense of a student’s self-direction. One of the main concerns of the study was the extremely low rate of students who passed the exam at the conclusion of the course (Marcel, 2003). Critical issues that would lead to a decrease in persistence would develop from inconsistency in strategies employed, course selection, lack of preparation, isolation, lack of incentives, problems with group work, access to course texts, mentor issues, instructor limitations, attrition, and performance-based success (Marcel, 2003).

Marcel (2003) concluded that “while the Internet is effective for disseminating information, the mere experience of students reading and then being tested on their review of vast quantities of material over the Web—or in any other format—does not ensure that learning
has occurred” (p. 9). The study concluded by stating that the implementation of advanced coursework (in its current state at that time) did not holistically support the advancement of college-style learning but only served to further complicate an already challenged environment for both students and educators. Great attention from key educational stakeholders would address the lack of resources and support provided to yield a higher rate of persistence in program completion and in claiming success in online-based advanced coursework. Marcel (2003) mandated that online coursework should “promote active learning, student interaction, and group interaction” (p. 7).

Hendrix and Degner (2016) conferred that for AP and advanced coursework to support online learning for rural students and to a higher rate of persistency, students and educators require consistent and intentional support (resources and curricula). Hendrix and Degner (2016) examined the call for necessary training and guidance support as a response to the teacher scarcity (highly qualified) that exists currently in rural schools. Rural schools often struggle to hire qualified teachers with training in specialized AP content areas (Cross & Burney, 2005; Hendrix & Degner, 2016; Irvin et al., 2009). The study examined the implementation of online courses supplemented by on-site facilitators, their role in AP courses, and individualized professional development (training needs) needs to better serve students in rural classrooms. The role of the facilitator focused more on providing educational support and would outsource instruction, allowing for a broader array of course offerings (Hendrix & Degner, 2016; Irvin et al., 2009).

An educator serving in the role of an online facilitator fulfills a variety of needs within the classroom as an exam proctor, assists students in organizational strategies, troubleshoots technical difficulties, provides necessary educational supports, and monitors student progress
(Cross & Burney, 2005; Hendrix & Degner, 2016). Online learning facilitators fulfill the role of providing the support link between teacher and student directly without the added weightiness of classroom responsibilities (Cross & Burney, 2005; Hendrix & Degner, 2016). Campus facilitators often offer supportive learning environments with a culture of connectivity (already well established) because the facilitators fulfill multiple roles on the campus (Hendrix & Degner, 2016).

“One third of the public schools in the United States are rural and they serve approximately 10 million students” (Irvin et al., 2009, p. 29). Rural schools, traditionally smaller in size, face persistency issues because they have trouble staffing highly qualified teachers capable of providing advanced curricular courses. “In an effort to circumvent staffing difficulties, online learning programs have been viewed as a way to provide advanced placement coursework for high achieving students in small rural districts” (p. 29). Irvin et al. (2009) immediately addressed the number of students who complete the advanced coursework and the inconsistent match with the number of students who pass the comprehensive examination at the conclusion of the course.

Advanced program success in rural communities is not well documented and that there is a great need for additional programs that “support rural students as they participate in online distant learning classes” (p. 29). The Facilitator Preparation Program (FPP) addresses the unique needs for online distance education in rural schools, concentrates on the individualized issues that exist within the rural classroom, provide conceptual foundations, and focus on providing instrumental delivery (connectivity) that best serves rural learners and educators (Irvin et al., 2009).
According to Irvin et al. (2009), success in advanced coursework and persistency in college readiness emerges from the overlapping of four holistic domains: cognitive and metacognitive factors, motivational and affective factors, developmental and social factors, and individual-differences factors. Irvin et al. (2009) identified the first domain, which refers to thought processes (cognitive factors), involving a variety of learning strategies used to reflect on the information obtained during a learning experience (metacognitive factors). The second domain addresses “students’ efforts (motivational factors) and emotional states, beliefs, and interests (affective factors) influence learning” (p. 32). The third domain refers to the “previous experiences and learning (developmental factors) and interpersonal relations between students and teachers or facilitators (social factors) that affect current learning” (p. 32). The final domain refers to the “differences between and within students (individual-differences) that influence learning” (p. 32). By implementing a series of applicable learner-centered principles (LCP), individualized strategies and skills for learning can provide direct intervention influence on the learner while actively compensating for differences in strategies, skills, culture, and background in the rural classroom (Irvin et al., 2009).

Advanced coursework has gained its notoriety in providing a viable pathway to college for all students; likewise, he challenged whether the outcome signified its true intention in serving talented minorities (Kyburg et al., 2007). The study examined how urban schools specifically implemented Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) and the “extent to which optimal learning environments were created for highly able learners from multicultural backgrounds” (Kyburg et al., 2007, p. 172). The study outlined universal skills necessary to gain the perceived opportunities and benefits that advanced coursework can offer through a readily available curricula, providing an option for gaining college experience at a
greatly reduced rate when compared to traditional tuition, developing applicable study skills to successfully complete college and fashion the college frame of mind (Kyburg et al., 2007).

The urban barriers to achievement and persistence would considerably parallel that of rural counterparts through constraints resulting from prolonged poverty and an absence of cultural capital (Kyburg et al., 2007). Kyburg et al. (2007) conferred that “students who came from families where neither parent had completed college were more likely to lack the ‘cultural capital,’ making them more vulnerable to the negative consequences of educational risk” (p. 186). The study defines culture capital as a means of providing persistence and direction as an “educational background, resources and information networks, the types of ‘how-to’ prerequisite knowledge students need in order to navigate the academic pathways to higher education” (Kyburg et al., 2007, p. 186).

Examining the effects of a student’s rurality (receiving an education in a rural setting and the environmental challenges that are involved) and socioeconomic status have great influence on the college access and choice process. The educational experience that a student receives can differ greatly due to the resources and program initiatives that were readily available to assist in the student’s access to opportunities, academic progression, and development. Educational attainment, in a rural setting, comes with its own distinct set of challenges and on many occasions, does not rate very high. Postsecondary educational attainment falls to the instant gratification of the workforce due to the sense of financial urgency that the opportunity fulfills. Disadvantaged populations cannot be classified with the bundle approach because each represents a diverse culture and presents special challenges that require a specific design tailored in response to individualized needs.
When addressing diverse cultures, such as rural communities, a prepackaged plan simply will not do. Postsecondary access challenges exist in rural populations due to a lack of resources and in many instances, rural readily rivals poverty. Korich et al. (2018) affirmed that “the term ‘rural,’ these communities and their residents often experience greater levels of poverty than urban areas, and such gaps are only likely to increase as rural communities become more racially diverse” (p. 283). Educational attainment in rural communities is critical because this yields the social outcomes and opportunities connected with “employment, income, and civic participation” (Koricich et al., 2018, p. 284). Students who experience education in a rural setting benefit from the realization of the opportunities that postsecondary education has to offer, but they must be willing to leave their community.

**Theoretical Framework**

St. John et al. (2018) stated that “sociological, economic, and educational theories have been widely used for research on college enrollment and attainment in higher education… frameworks derived from these theories focus on [expanding] students’ education choices” (p. 44). In theory, educators encourage students to make their own decisions; however, under many circumstances, those decisions are often steered by current educational policy, academic pathways, and higher education services provided to the student (St. John et al., 2018). St. John et al. (2018) utilized the Academic Pathways Theory of Change to link Pathways to College Framework to the guarantee of student aid and support costs associated with student academic preparation prior to the transition to the college campus (access to advanced coursework that promotes college readiness) and with the costs of attending college (linkage 1). St. John et al. (2018) discussed the need to align high school curriculum and graduation requirements (linkage 2) with postsecondary encouragement programs that influence academic preparation and provide
additional funding (linkage 3). St. John et al. (2018) avowed that academic preparation can be
directly linked through student financial aid to enrollment (linkage 4), persistence and degree
attainment (linkage 5), successful college transitions (linkage 6), and the connectivity that exists
between high school resources, curriculum mandates, and graduation requirements to college
success (linkage 7).

Koricich et al. (2018) identified many traits that structure the decision-making process
that is associated with the college access and choice development of a rural student. Perna et al.
(2008) identified four critical layers that would serve as the foundation for the Conceptual Model
of Student College Enrollment with Policy Linkages. Perna et al. (2008) declared that each layer
that exists in a student’s decision-making process serves as a factor that actively influences some
aspect of the on-going process associated with college access and choice. Each layer mandates a
certain level of personal and societal expectation and accountability while setting demands for
higher education (solidifying the supply of resources, aligning, and regulating K-12 standards
with college-readiness expectations, fortifying financial aid policy, and affirmative action)
(Perna et al., 2008). Perna and Jones (2013) model “identifies four nested contextual layers that
influence students’ college enrollment and choice” (p. 12). Perna and Jones (2013) described the
model concept as working from the inside and moving outward and identified the four layers as
the individual’s habitus or student and family context (layer 1); school and community context
(layer 2); the higher education context (layer 3); and the broader social, economic, and policy
context (layer 4).
Koricich et al. (2018) reflected that the “cumulative influence [that] each layer has upon the lower-order layers. The structure of the model recognizes that social, economic, and policy factors can influence the choice decision indirectly through the higher education, school, community, and individual contexts” (p. 288). Higher educational attainment, when coupled with resource availability and increased access to advanced coursework and learning opportunities, can serve as means to combat the level of poverty that is known to traditionally plague rural communities. The Promise Neighborhood Initiative offered a “structural view of poverty” and how educational attainment can work to provide opportunity structures as opposed to individual gains because giving back to the community (holistic development and improvement initiatives) is of great importance in a rural setting.

Perna and Finney (2014) affirmed that until the existing gaps in educational attainment address race and ethnicity, family income, educational barriers, limited resources, etc., the
United States would continue to fail in achieving global competitiveness in a knowledge and skill-based society. Higher education serves as the “engine of opportunity” and represents the possibility and pursuit of what happens next and validates the need for a working conversation that accentuates the clear and substantial benefits associated with the advancement of educational attainment. The social demand to make the benefits associated with educational attainment both visible and equitable engages a multitude of parties in addressing existing gaps from the “perspective of fairness” (Perna & Finney, 2014, p. 7).

The benefits related to obtaining an advanced degree must extend beyond the earning of higher wages to appeal to the underserved; nevertheless, while improving their financial wellbeing, must also include a host of both marketable (becoming employable, earning paid time-off, employer-provided retirement, health insurance, et al.) and non-market subsidies (improved health, opportunity for life-long learning, better working conditions, et al.) for the college graduate (Perna & Finney, 2014). Perna and Finney (2014) called for an educational convergence of individual (private) and public (societal) benefits with the private self. To create a working dialogue aimed at producing a pathway through education to combat poverty and other societal imperfections must engage a clear-cut plan including who should attend college, how to navigate the process, and lastly, how society benefits from acquiring college graduates (Perna & Finney, 2014). The GI Bill and the Higher Education Act of 1965 served as a mode to combat inequality while improving college access, funding, and expanding the opportunity of the college experience to “groups who had been previously excluded” (Perna & Finney, 2014, p. 11).

Federal education policies and key stakeholders must fashion an applicable response in raising higher education attainment rates and addressing gaps in college access and choice. Perna and Finney (2014) examined the need for intentional focus on research and student aid because
“[f]ederal investment in research enhances the nation’s production of basic and applied research and improves the ability of public and private universities to compete in research and development” (p. 13). The responsibility of states for improving educational attainment commenced with initiatives such as the Morrill Land Grant Acts, the Leveraging Educational Assistance Partnership (LEAP) Program, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Perna & Finney, 2014). Many of these initiatives worked well in providing resources and programs to K-12 education; however, finding the right combination of efforts deemed itself to be a little more challenging in higher education (fiscal constraints). Regulating a consistent flow of resources and state funding would serve as a plague on the educational pipeline during a heightened trend of state disinvestment.

Understanding the relationship between public policy and performance in higher education is based on the responsiveness of states to the growing demands of the learning community, government policies related to higher education systems, financing of higher education initiatives, student development and transition into higher education, accountability, et al. (Perna & Finney, 2014). Perna and Finney (2014) expressed that “[p]ublic policy can correct for past inefficient or ineffective state policy decisions… and can shift higher education systems along a continuum from institutional aspirations toward public purposes” (p. 28). States can respond to educational attainment needs with a purposeful intent designed to answer the individualized needs of the learning community in which they represent.

Perna and Finney (2014) concluded that human capital theory (Becker, 1962; Rosen, 1976) served as the strongest predictor for the investment associated with the educational skills and training required to promote the acquisition of knowledge and the establishment of talent. Educational attainment serves as a direct link to the personalized skills and talents that yields an
elevation in an individual’s productivity. Higher education serves as a long-term investment with benefits that provide opportunities to include higher earnings, more fulfilling work environments, better health, longer life, more informed purchases, and lower probabilities of unemployment, while the short-term consumption benefits include enjoyment of the learning experience, involvement in extracurricular activities, participation in social and cultural events, and enhancement in social status (p. 33).

Educational attainment in higher education functioning in part with public policy as a productive partnership serves as both a beneficial and vital approach to address and equalize societal inconsistencies in a system created by demographic, economic, historical, and political machines (Perna & Finney, 2014).

**Summary**

College readiness requires a blend of functional and navigational skills, a process of socialization and academic preparation, that others take for granted (Elkins, 2014; Kyburg et al., 2007; Jaegar et al., 2015; St. John et al., 2018). Kyburg et al. (2007) indicated that although theories abound regarding success of underserved student populations align with the demands of set curricula within the AP and IB classroom, a gap in literature continues to exist.

Patrick et al. (2020) examined the national inequities in advanced coursework for Black and Latino students, the issues that drive decisions (gauge persistence in higher education), and what leaders can do to implement programs on a larger spectrum at a state impact level. Patrick et al. explained that in order for state leaders to make a larger impact through the implementation of advanced coursework, they must set clear, measurable goals for advancing access (state and district progress goals), use data to effectively identify barriers that prevent students from
underserved populations from enrolling in advanced courses, invest dollars to expand advanced coursework opportunities, expand eligibility and increase access for Black and Latino students, and provide sufficient support for students to prepare for the challenges of advanced coursework and how to successfully complete the program. Many schools do not offer advanced coursework; therefore, many students are “missing” from the statistics that represent underserved populations (lack of individualized classifications) (Patrick et al.; 2020).

Students from underserved populations, when granted the opportunity to participate in advanced coursework (AP), show growth across several states (Patrick et al., 2020). Systemic barriers that limit accessibility for underserved students must be addressed to improve persistence measures in higher education. In the study, the primary barriers that plague underserved populations were resource inequities, educator bias, assessment and grading bias, lack of access to diverse educators, inequitable access to quality early childhood opportunities, and a lack of communication with families regarding advanced educational opportunities. Patrick et al. (2020) concluded that disparities are inevitable, but states will make broader strides in reducing the access and persistence gap for students from underserved populations by maintaining focus on setting attainable goals with intermediate targets (consistency in monitoring progress), “highly visible communications regarding the plans to meet advanced coursework goals, collecting and publishing disaggregated data annually, using quantitative and qualitative data to determine if there are barriers to fair representation, and providing additional funds and resources to districts or schools that primarily serve at-risk students” (p. 20). The study concluded with the need to provide highly qualified educators to serve students in a variety of schools (virtual access) to increase teacher efficacy, address class size limitations, and improve course quality, and expand opportunities for advanced coursework.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The classroom represents an opportunity to teach critical life skills of success to all students. Through the implementation of integrated curriculum and the sustainability of providing an increase in retention and access, a great emphasis rests on providing all students with the necessary tools to thrive and not just the students who are easier to educate (Ruben & Hagood, 2018).

Greenthal (2019) declared that first generation and at-risk students face five main challenges that range from a lack of knowledge regarding the college experience, dealing with the guilt sentiment intermingled with loneliness and homesickness for those that they had to leave, financial struggles that require an increased need to maintain a hefty work schedules to survive, limited support from home to aid in keeping the student on track and focused on their personal mission, and an overall struggle to connect to the campus (imposter syndrome that includes sentiments of not belonging). Ardoin and Martinez (2019) found that social class shapes individual perceptions of the institutions that students “pursue, choose, and then permeates the classrooms, laboratories, residence halls, dining facilities, student centers, student organizations, faculty and administrative offices fundraising efforts, and alumni associations on campus” (p.22). College and university administrators and educators must adequately respond to the diverse array of needs of the student from the moment that they arrive on campus until they cross the stage at graduation and enter the workforce as alumnus.

Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) described the decision associated with college choice as a three-stage process that consists of stages, factors, and outcomes. The process of college choice develops through a sequence of predispositions (established in middle school to early high
school, grades 7-9) blended with the search for and accumulation of college information (high school, grades 10-12) which inevitably yields in the student’s choice in institution of higher education (at the application and the final pressing of the submit button). The “three stages interact with one another, each affecting the others in subtle and complex ways [but] parental encouragement, a pivotal force in the emergence of occupational and educational aspirations” (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, p.5) is the supporting factor that has the largest impact on the college choice for the individual student. For students to be well-versed in the skills required to make holistic college decisions, the conversation must start early, and, in many instances, this critical conversation is not taking place. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) identified that socioeconomic standing seems to have an impact on students, but not as much as parental influence, which was still a prevalent driving force in college choice. Distance learning is a platform that will utilize each stage of this process.

When examining the effects of a student’s rurality (receiving an education in a rural setting and the environmental challenges that are involved) and socioeconomic status on college access and choice (Koricich et al., 2018). The educational experience that a student receives can differ greatly due to the resources and program initiatives that were readily available to assist in the learning process. Educational attainment, in a rural setting, comes with its own distinct set of challenges and on many occasions, does not rate very high. Postsecondary educational attainment falls to the instant gratification of the workforce due to the sense of financial urgency that the opportunity fulfills. Disadvantaged populations do not easily compare because each area can represent its own diverse culture, needs, and special challenges that require a tailored response.
When addressing diverse cultures, such as rural communities, a pre-packaged educational plan simply will not do. Postsecondary access challenges exist in rural populations due to a lack of resources and in many instances, rural can swiftly manifest and exacerbate the effects of poverty. Koricich et al. (2018) affirmed that “the term ‘rural,’ these communities and their residents often experience greater levels of poverty than urban areas, and such gaps are only likely to increase as rural communities become more racially diverse” (p. 283). Educational attainment in rural communities is critical because this yields the social outcomes and opportunities connected with “employment, income, and civic participation” (Koricich et al., 2018, p. 284).

Students who experience education in a rural setting benefit from the realization of the opportunities that postsecondary education represents, but they must be willing to leave their community. Educational attainment can progress despite the limitations that poverty creates for rural students. Programs that provide opportunity structures as opposed to individual gains will support holistic development and improvement initiatives while advancing the greater good of postsecondary education in rural communities.

**Research Design**

The methodological approach that I chose to guide my research project is an interpretive phenomenological study. A phenomenological study research design allows me the opportunity to tell the stories of the teachers and share their individual experiences associated with combating rural disparities and addressing the various challenges of preparing college-ready students within the rural classroom while providing a college-focused learning experience (advanced coursework, integrated curriculum, etc.) that I interview within the real-life context of the classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The utilization of phenomenological study
allows me to remain noteworthy of the thematic and interpretive nature of the qualitative study (Hennik et al., 2011). Phenomenological study describes the “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Phenomenological research design will also allow me the flexibility to interplay the emergence of common phenomenon within the context of the case during the data collection and analysis phases. Creswell and Poth (2018) identified that the basic purpose of phenomenology is to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 75).

The implementation of the phenomenological study is most appropriate and effective platform for studying the research problem when the inquirer has a clearly identifiable case with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the case within a variety of settings (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). There is great worth in exploring the narrative experience of the rural educators who strive to teach and produce college-ready students amid a learning environment that encounters so many distinctive challenges. Their stories and the impact that increased access to advanced coursework will have on the learners and educators is valuable to providing the necessary resources to succeed in the future especially the opportunity for significant impact on educational policy.

An interpretive phenomenological study focuses on providing an exploration of a phenomenon and its description in context (lived experiences and significant statements), such as investigating ruralness in the high school classroom and the impacts of poverty on the emerging college student regarding college readiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) summarized that the need for phenomenological exploration revolves around the investigation of
the “lived experiences of individuals and how they have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other people” (p. 76).

The phenomenological study, while maintaining focus on specific issues, will remain true to interpretive tradition in qualitative research by featuring purposeful sampling, direct interpretation, and coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The experiences will contain situational relationships within the case and will consider the nature as they emerge within the specific learning environment (site). The phenomenological researcher “brackets himself or herself out of the study by discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon” (p. 77). This process of bracketing allows the researcher to remain close to the phenomenon, reflective in the participants’ experiences of reducing the phenomenon, and engaged in the interview while not influenced by past knowledge. Creswell and Poth (2018) delineated that the environment under investigation must be conducive to the qualitative case study by matching the research problem with the approach, the intent with the proper sampling, conducting extensive sampling, draw upon multiple sources, develop themes from the data collected, and report the interpreted findings using case assertions. The product for a phenomenological study resolves with a “descriptive passage that discusses the essence of the experience for individuals incorporating ‘what’ they have experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77).

Phenomenology consists of two approaches: hermeneutical and transcendental (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hermeneutical phenomenology describes research as positioning lived experience (phenomenology) while implementing the interpretation of the text of life (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1990). The Hermeneutic Cycle in phenomenological research employs the exchange of words and process of interpretation between the interview subject and the interviewer (Spickard, 2017). The process of conducting a phenomenological study consists of
six steps that include the stating the research question, applying a logical research structure, type of data (language used in research questions to provide connectivity with participants), data collection method (in-depth interview), data collection site (target population), and the data analysis method (interview questions that probe for deep investigative quality in framing the phenomenon) (Spickard, 2017). Phenomenological interviews provide data does not provide professional opinions or attitudes nor does it provide expert knowledge; nevertheless, it does provide the researcher with the necessary insight to report on individuals’ experiences as they emerge. He also noted that phenomenological interviews capture the subjective experiences of others (lived experiences) by separating those thoughts (bracketing) from the typical thoughts of others (significant statements and experience as it presents itself to consciousness).

Researchers refer to phenomenon as the “abiding concern” (van Manen, 1990, p. 31) while loosely coupling the process of phenomenological study into a sequence of research activities that begin with determining the proper fit between the research problem and the phenomenological approach (it is important for the researcher to understand the overall experiences to develop a deeper understanding about features of the phenomenon and future impacts. While identifying essential themes (commonalities) and reflecting on the nature of the lived experience, researchers describe the phenomenon through the participant lens to construct understanding.

Phenomenological study requires researchers to “distinguish and specify the broad philosophical assumptions” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79) associated with the lived experience (phenomenology). Collecting data includes conducting in-dept interviews with participants who have experienced the phenomenon. Interviews must consist of a variety of open-ended interviews questions that employ a combination of phenomenon-based to common experience-
related interactions that will lead to a textual and structural description of the impact of the phenomenon and provide insight and understanding to the participant experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The next step consists of generating themes associated with the phenomenon from the interpretive analysis of the interviews through the identification of significant statements called horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher will then develop “clusters of meaning from the significant statements into themes” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79).

Once the clusters of meaning, the research process will transition to creating the essence of the phenomenon and its impact on the participants and even on the research setting. The final stage of the phenomenological study consists of presenting the understanding of the essence of the experience where the presence a phenomenon from the words and experiences of participants (van Manen, 2014).

**Research Setting**

The state of Louisiana consists of 64 parishes, a public school system that includes 70 school districts, 426 public high schools, 49,708 full-time public teachers, and a student population of 569,682 (P-12 enrolled in public school system; 37,891 represent graduating seniors and 41,445 juniors) (Louisiana Believes, 2020). By interviewing educators from a variety of geographic regions (approximately 8) within the state, the rural public schools located throughout Louisiana in those areas, availability of AP English educators within those rural high schools, and the accessibility of AP advanced coursework offerings are present.

The National Center Education Statistics (NCES) defines rural as areas, designated by the Census Bureau, that do not lie inside an urbanized area or urban cluster and consist of less than 2,500 residents (nces.ed.gov). The NCES classifies rural territories into three subsets: fringe (less than 5 miles from urbanized areas), distant (more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles
from an urbanized area), and remote (over 25 more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster) (nces.ed.gov).

For the 2019-2020 school year, data showed that 199 public schools provided at least one AP course to a total enrollment of 21,522 students (possible COVID-related impact) when compared to the 25,295 students from 207 public schools in 2019 (College Board, 2020). In 2020, 32,607 AP exams were scored (some students took more than one exam) compared to 37,544 exams in 2019 in Louisiana public schools (College Board, 2020).

The state of Louisiana notes that there are “no formal requirements or mandatory professional development for teachers of AP courses, with the exception of teachers of AP Seminar and AP Research, who must complete a summer workshop and online training” (Louisiana Believes, 2020, p. 1). Professional development for AP teachers is “strongly recommended in their subject area before teaching the AP course for the first time, and periodically thereafter” (Louisiana Believes, 2020 p. 1). In the AP Toolkit for Educators, it is noted that the AP Program “does not supply syllabi for AP courses. College Board supplies a detailed set of expectations that includes what content a college-level course in that subject should incorporate. AP teachers design their own syllabi with these standards in mind” (Louisiana Believes, 2020, p. 1). The course earns AP-notoriety when the syllabi earn approval through the course audit process (Louisiana Believes, 2020). In Louisiana, since 2010, an average of 33% of seniors have enrolled in one or more AP courses (College Board, 2020). The next question to quickly emerge in relation to the number of students completing the course in comparison to those who earn the 3+ rating required to earn the college course credit and how it parallels with the socioeconomic status of the student.
Sample Selection

Participants

My research study will examine the experiences of Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition teachers within rural Louisiana classrooms and the study will consist of approximately 10 partially structured interviews. The participants in my qualitative study will consist of rural AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition teachers and their experiences in preparing rural students for the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition course and exam, challenges with distance learning and the rural public classroom, and the impact that it has on preparing students for postsecondary learning success and providing college readiness. Participants will represent the rural school settings and the AP learning and pedagogical experiences of educators provided throughout the state of Louisiana.

Selection Criteria

The selection criteria that I would use would be first to identify AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition teachers who are active participants in several Louisiana-based rural schools according to the definition provided by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2014) and who are currently engaged in the AP program.

The state of Louisiana consists of 70 public school districts and my study will focus on presenting the program impact perceptions of AP by interviewing teachers from a cross-section of the geographical regions to characterize a wholesome and representative rural sample. Participants will be on a voluntary basis.
Snowball recruitment or chain sampling is a “method of recruitment particularly suitable for identifying study participants with very specific characteristics, rare experiences or ‘hidden’ population groups” (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 100). Educators will also be contacted through the utilization of social media platforms/chat rooms (Facebook) where AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition teachers gather. I will post an initial interest thread to initiate communication and will also rely on the snowball effect to pool additional participants. The chatroom includes teachers from across the United States but includes several educators from Louisiana. I will email teachers who volunteer to introduce myself and to introduce the scope of the study and ask for their participation in the interview to construct my representative sample.

For additional participants, I will contact the regional representatives from each area (from a list provided through the Louisiana Department of Education) via phone and email. I will directly email teachers first to introduce myself, to introduce the scope of the study, and ask for their participation in the interview as I construct my representative sample.

In this study, I am asking for input from an extremely unique group, so the number of potential participants will therefore increase with each new person due to connectivity and similarity in social networks (Hennink et al., 2011). Interviews will take place via Zoom to remain in compliance with COVID-19 restrictions and to reduce contact and potential exposure. Interviews will be video recorded via Zoom for accuracy and audio transcription purposes via Otter and will take place outside of normal school hours (Summer).

**Study Limitations**

My study will represent a small assemblage of participants but characterize a growing concern as education transitions into the digital future and the effective response to the college-ready needs of the emerging rural student. My positionality is based upon growing up in a rural...
community that provided me with a safe environment to learn and prepare for the world that would be waiting for me; however, it did not preemptively provide me with the resources and access to advanced coursework (academic preparation) that could have made that transition more proficient.

Phenomenological research supports a close relationship between the participants and the researcher within the research setting (Spickard, 2017). It is within the authentic research setting that critical themes develop, and the phenomenon materializes. The researcher must be able to understand the participants and their experience to pull applicable themes and provide connectivity to the phenomenon. As a student in an extremely small rural school in Louisiana, I did not have access to one AP course to further prepare me for college. As a rural educator of more than 21 years, the margins of limitation regarding the rural classroom still look oddly familiar today. The rural classroom, often plagued by the outcomes of low socioeconomic standing (effects of poverty), does not grant the same access to educational opportunities that yield college readiness (Ayers, 2011; Burney & Beilke, 2008; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Koricich et al., 2018).

Data Collection

The primary instrument that I will use will be conducting semi-structured interviews that engage the participant to discuss their interaction and positionality with AP English Composition coursework, distance learning in the rural classroom, and the impact on college readiness and academic preparedness. Smith et al. (2009) described qualitative interviews as the opportunity to have an intentional interaction that the researcher can guide according to each research question. I will then transcribe the interviews and assess the components of the transcripts to identify similarities within the document (producing codes).
Interviews are only as productive as the questions posed and the information that unfolds and acts to inform others with a directed intention to educate in the process (Alase, 2017; DeLyser et al., 2010; Hennick et al., 2011). The necessity to establish a positive rapport with participants as the critical component to conducting a “conversation with a purpose” (Hennick et al., 2011, p. 109). The in-depth interview digs deep into the concept and avoids the simplistic scratching of the surface (yes/no questions). The quality of the questions asked during the interview strengthen the purpose, expectations, and achievable outcomes of the conversation.

Hennink et al. (2011) defined the in-depth interview as the means to conduct a personal probe where the interviewee shares their story in an environment that is representative of a trusting relationship and conversational exchange. Engaged participants want to tell their story and the overarching goal of the interviewer is to get them talking (DeLyser et al., 2010). By asking questions in an empathetic manner, participants are more likely to share their story which yields a much more effective interview process (Hennink, 2011).

Hennink et al. (2011) reviewed the need for an established and comprehensive interview guide prior to the start of the conversation. By utilizing a semi-structured interview platform, the questions present assists with the focus and flow of the overall intention of the conversation; however, the conversation maintains focus and naturally progresses as themes emerge. Hennink et al. (2011) devised that the questions included in an interview guide should serve as a means of refocus; nevertheless, the ethnographic cycle initiates an exploratory inquiry. An intentional interview consists of a purposeful plan that comprises an introduction, opening questions, key questions (central part of the interview; the essentials), and the closing questions further clarify any concepts while bringing the interview to an end (Hennink et al., 2011).
Flick (2014) expressed the need for the method to meet the process in means of conducting a successful interview driven by the intentions of responding to a research question(s). By choosing the correct type of interview, the interviewer creates the scope and frames the research question(s) as the primary target. The scope granted to the interviewee gives rise to the presentation of their views that either support or contrast the intent of the framework (Flick, 2014). Flick (2014) discussed that the purposeful intent of an interview when combined with the commitment of the interviewer will yield the most productive conversation aimed at generating a meaningful interaction ready for interpretation.

Flick (2014) discussed the requisite for choosing the right type of interview and its need to match its intended outcome. Conducting successful interviews requires the active response of an engaged interviewer that is ready to respond to a range of “stage directions” (Flick, 2014, p. 210). I plan to use open-ended interview questions that will initiate conversation and openness while constructing the “whole picture” effect of distance learning in the rural classroom. Interviews range in intention and purpose from the responsive (reactive), focused, semi-standardized and problem-centered, ethnographic, to the extremely direct approach for the expert and elite to the online approach.

Flick (2014) discussed the essential need for the interviewer to choose the correct interview platform prior to creating the interview guide. Interviews should never have a one-size-fits-all approach and each participant must be both respected and esteemed in their individual story and the experience that they must impart (DeLyser et al., 2010). Flick (2014) stated that by addressing the “pitfalls” of interviewing, a focused and maintains an expressive conversational tone. Flick (2014) directs that the interview form must match its intended outcome as much as the interviewees’ need to mingle with “as much scope as possible to reveal their views” (p. 238).
The interview will be most productive if the interviewer creates an environment that promotes healthy conversation and one where the interviewee feels both safe and respected.

DeLyser et al. (2010) noted that the true value and success that resides in an interview begins with the critical steps that the interviewer takes to establish the process and provide opportunities to the interviewee to share their lived experience. The concept of recording life history interviews resonates with a practicality of preparing the moment (the interview) for what it could reveal and giving rise for the connections that it could unearth (DeLyser et al., 2010). DeLyser et al. (2010) affirmed the need to establish and maintain both confidentiality, copyright, and a high level of ethical confidence when reporting the personal history of a participant. Interpretation now requires the clear practice of “[m]aking sense of the data [which] usually involves a process of coding, designed to make the analysis systematic and to prevent researchers from jumping to premature conclusions” (p. 189). Coding requires the researcher to engage in the process of creating a sense of connectivity between the participant, the data, the interpretation, and the outcome.

**Researcher Positionality**

Maintaining objectivity as a researcher is a critical component to balance. Negotiating the concept of “self” as the personal self and the political self requires the ability to interchange and participate in various roles. Phenomenological researchers must view themselves as participants acting within the reflective process (bracketing) and not as outsiders looking in and they must also have a degree of understanding to the phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). DeLyser et al. (2010) discussed the struggle associated with “the balance [of] self and other in publications, represent contentious findings, and manage loyalties” (p. 14). How
the researcher views themselves as engaging with others, as others, and sometimes against others is an integral component in maintaining the component of reliability in the reflection process.

I have been an educator in a rural classroom for the past 22 years, I am most interested in increasing accessibility to advanced educational initiatives (educational policy implications) and in studying the impact of the current AP English Composition coursework since it emerges as one of the core standards used to gauge college readiness (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Greenthal, 2009; Natow, 2015; St. John et al., 2018; Wakelyn, 2009). I am not a certified AP teacher, but I am intrigued by the possibilities and opportunities that the AP program has to offer for the rural learner and the opportunity that the program represents in advancing college readiness. There is a grave and noted gap in research that establishes the progressive focus on rural communities and the increased accessibility to advanced coursework and its direct impact on improving college readiness. Rural educators often teach multiple subjects due to smaller faculty size, limited course availability, teacher certifications (often educators are teaching outside of their subject area and many are not highly qualified in the field in which they are teaching), and strained resources within the classroom.

Productive struggle is an acceptable and expected part of learning and can be quite meaningful in itself; however, students can easily also become lost in translation on a college campus when not properly prepared academically and/or socially. The opportunity to expand advanced coursework initiatives to rural students is positively achievable on a much larger scale than is currently in motion. Rural educators can offer valuable insight to reducing the divide that exists between the rural classroom and the college campus. Distance learning can work in the rural classroom, but it will need to be purposeful by design (resources, proper funding (policy
implication), advanced educational initiatives, etc.) to be influential for the emerging college student.

**Human Participants Ethical Precaution**

In qualitative research, ethical issues are more pronounced as research often focuses on sensitive topics, requires a close and prolonged contact with participants, and the subjectivity and positionality fulfill critical roles (Hennink et al., 2011). During this study, I adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Louisiana State University. I informed participants about his/her right to refuse to take part in the study without coercion and upon approval, provided necessary consent forms to those choosing to advance in the interview process. Participants are assured anonymity, confidentiality, and are insured that their personal responses would remain secure (data management and archiving). Ensuring the ethical use of data and the process of analysis and interpretation develops from accurate reporting of both the positive and negative aspects while maintaining cultural sensitivity.

Choosing to conduct interviews included in this study via Zoom provided the safeguards necessary to reduce direct contact and to reduce the possibility of COVID-19 transmission and reduce all possibility of harm for participants.

**Data Analysis**

Education is a machine comprising many moving parts and the interviews conducted would tell a tale of the phenomenon components (or lack of) that would create the pliable foundation for student transition (successful acclimation) on the college campus. I will utilize Moustakas (1994) advanced series of phenomenological analysis method to explore and reflect upon the interviews as I examine the transcripts for significant statements and emerging themes. Alase (2017) encourages that the researcher “bracket” themselves during this process and
separate from the “lived experiences” of the research participants (p. 16). Creswell (2013) instructed that the researcher group significant statements by theme or connectivity into larger units called “meaning units” to discuss the impact of the phenomenon without interjecting personal relation to the lived experience (p. 193). The significant statements (including verbatim examples) and identifiable themes will construct the composite description of the phenomenon and discuss how society can address the textural components (Alase, 2017).

The use of the interpretative phenomenological study design would characterize the various themes and views of the rural AP teachers that emerge during the interviews in correlation with the supports that the 1) federal and state curriculum standards mandate and 2) how parish and school-based instruction/programs are employed to prepare emerging college students (provided resources and opportunities) for the next chapter of learning. The embedded themes and significant statements will represent the degree of college-readiness mindset and the measure of effectiveness would be based on how each individual approach is applicable and maintain the degree of consistency. By comparing similarities in themes that surfaced throughout the progression of the interviews, commonalities revolving around distance learning, post high school transitional training, and college readiness.

DeLyser (2018) deemed the landscape used to frame research is one of the most important concepts involved in the process of analyzing a culture or understanding a series of events as a means of grappling to locate patterns or explanations. Landscape is “what we see as an object of perception” (DeLyser, 2018, p. 226) intended to create insight and increase perceptiveness. Landscape interpretation effectively utilizes historical insight from the “outside looking in” and the value by stepping back to analyze and gain understanding from the big picture verses focusing on a miniscule aspect (DeLyser, 2018).
Hennick et al. (2011) avowed that the observation is a “research method that enables researchers to systematically observe and record people’s behavior, actions, and interactions” (p. 170). There is great value in watching and analyzing both the actions and the reactions of people. The method also allows researchers to “obtain a detailed description of social settings or events in order to situate people’s behavior within their own socio-cultural context” (Hennick, 2011, p. 170). Hennick et al. (2011) classified observation as part of the interpretive paradigm and is most beneficial within the ethnographic lens application to gain an in-depth impression of the social setting that frames the community.

Hennick et al. (2011) expressed that observational-based exploration requires that the researcher understand and engage in the process of knowing when to conduct an observation, what steps are most effective, acknowledging what to observe (actions and interactions, body language, place, or social setting), and choosing the type of observation (participant, non-participant, observation with visual aids, walk through spaces). The process in preparing for the observation is significant in reflecting on positionality, selecting a place (most conducive to yield the most accurate response possible), improving access, appearance, and providing a “pre-test” (Hennick et al., 2011, p. 193) to test your ability to document the moment while being in the moment. Creating field notes and analyzing materials (coding) with a high level of reliability, while acknowledging both the strengths and limitations of that moment (and of the researcher), presents the most effective environment in which to obtain a true interpretation that extends beyond talk (Hennick et al., 2011).

**Credibility and Dependability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established that trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability as criteria for qualitative research. Credibility refers to the
truth of the data or the participant views and the clear interpretation and factual representation of them provided by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cope, 2014). Flick (2014) outlined five strategies for increasing credibility in qualitative research:

1) activities that implement a “prolonged engagement” and “persistent observation;”
2) implementation of a “peer debriefing” that included regular meetings to reduce blind spots for the researcher and to discuss working hypothesis;
3) conduct in depth analysis of any negative implications that may surface during the exploration;
4) establish the appropriateness of the terms of reference used in the reporting phase; and
5) “‘member checks’ in the sense of communication validation of data and interpretations with members of the fields under study” (p. 488).

Charmaz (2006) considered that for credibility to exist, a balance must be both established and maintained by criteria standards within the qualitative process. In providing quality in qualitative research, the credible researcher preserves familiarity within the setting and the group being studied by providing sufficient evidence to respond to claims while educating the reader, conserves originality within their voice while remaining socially and theoretically grounded, asserts resonance in categories and themes extracted from the qualitative data, and provides an overall usefulness in the analysis of interpretations while advancing a plausible and real-world application of the research findings (Charmaz, 2006; Flick, 2014).

Cope (2014) describes dependability as the ability to manage patterned consistency of the data over similar conditions and the ability to replicate similar findings. Dependability in research also occurs when researchers concur with other authors in the field throughout the various intersections within the research process. Research is considered dependable when the
researcher’s process, descriptions, and findings could be reasonably replicated with similar participants in similar conditions (Cope, 2014). Research dependability is verified through a process of auditing designed to closely resemble the “procedure of audits in the domain of financing” (Flick, 2014, p. 488). The process of establishing and maintaining procedural dependability rests upon the collection and recording of raw data, consistent process involved in data reduction, reconstruction of data and results of syntheses (themes, relationships, categories, findings, etc.), process of evaluating field notes and the expectations of participants, and the development of various instruments used within the study (Flick, 2014)
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to qualitatively examine the implementation and effectiveness of college readiness and transitional training delivered through Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework, the perceived barriers associated with enhancing college readiness and access in the rural community, the effectiveness of supports employed to encourage college access (resources), choice (preparation), and the enrollment in Advanced Placement coursework in the rural Louisiana public high school setting. The central research questions gauge teacher perceptions regarding Advanced Placement (existing program and pedagogy) and the effectiveness of college readiness techniques employed to provide students with adequate academic preparation for college in the future.

The research questions also focus on supports provided while examining current curricula and available resources employed within the students’ social-cultural context. The research questions and interview protocol reflect the theoretical framework of the study, and it models the concept as working from the inside and moving outward and identified the four layers as the individual’s habitus or student and family context (layer 1); school and community context (layer 2); the higher education context (layer 3); and the broader social, economic, and policy context (layer 4) (Perna & Jones, 2013):

1. What is the rural educator’s perception of the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework regarding program effectiveness in providing equitable access and college readiness in the rural public classroom (Louisiana) and to promote success in post-secondary education?
2. What supports (provisions and resources) are employed within the social-cultural context to encourage college readiness (access, academic preparation, and enrollment success) for rural students in Louisiana through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework?

3. What is the relationship between existing barriers and the rural educator’s ability to provide enhanced college readiness through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition courses?

To answer the three central research questions of this study, I gathered data through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 10 rural educators in Louisiana public schools, representing a teacher pool with classroom experience ranging from 6 to 33 years, who taught or have taught Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition or Pre-AP coursework. I invited teachers to participate in this qualitative study to share their lived experiences surrounding the process of preparing rural students for the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition course and exam, challenges with distance learning and the rural public classroom, and the impact that the access to AP coursework has on preparing students for postsecondary learning success and providing college readiness.

During the interviews, participants characterized the rural, public school setting in Louisiana and the access to AP college-structured learning opportunities afforded by College Board in conjunction with their lived experiences in the classroom. I transcribed the interviews and coded the transcripts to develop concepts and ideas incased within the personalized and lived experience of the educators. I organized the embedded structures associated with the lived experiences within the phenomenon (perceptions, supports, and relationships) and grouped them by theme.
Participant Profiles

Participants represented rural educators who were currently teaching or who had taught Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition in public Louisiana high schools throughout the state. This study embodies the rural teaching and lived experiences of 10 educators who volunteered to participate and identify the dominant themes that emerged from the interviews. I compiled a demographic profile for each participant to establish the breadth of the study. The representative sample included educators with 6 years of teaching experience to veteran educators with 33 years of classroom experience and represent a cluster of AP teaching experience that ranged from 3 years to 20 years. The study participants included 9 White females and 1 White male. Louisiana Believes (2019) reported that 73% of Louisiana public school classrooms are staffed by White educators. The participants are certified educators in the state of Louisiana and are currently certified through College Board to teach Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition.

The participants represent rural schools that are located across the state of Louisiana from rural fringe (an area that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster), rural distant (an area that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area), and rural remote (an area existing more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster). The participants currently teach in rural Louisiana school located in parishes that report socio-economic statuses (SES) that range from 65-93% (the percentage of students enrolled in the school that receive free or reduced lunch in response to living at or below the rate of poverty). I did not include the individual school SES to preserve the participant’s anonymity. I
assigned pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of each participant and to allow for an interview experience where the educators could speak freely.

Table 8. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Participant</th>
<th>Years of Classroom Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Participant Diversity Demographic</th>
<th>Rural Classification: Fringe Distant Remote</th>
<th>Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition; Pre-AP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Ardoin</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White Female</td>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>AP Language [16 years]; AP Literature [16 years]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Boudreaux</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>White Female</td>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>AP Literature [6 years]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Cooper</td>
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<td>White Female</td>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>AP Literature [5 years]; AP Language [3 years]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Davidson</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>Remote</td>
<td>AP Language [8 years]; Pre-AP/English I</td>
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<td>Mrs. Fordam</td>
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<td>White Female</td>
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<td>Mrs. Kern</td>
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<td>White Female</td>
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Mrs. Ardoin

Mrs. Ardoin is a veteran teacher who has been teaching in the Louisiana rural public high school classroom for the past 20 years. Since 2014, she has taught AP Literature and Language and Composition. Mrs. Ardoin’s teaching career has always included “very small rural schools” where she has focused much of her energy in preparing and advancing the academically gifted
students. She currently teaches at a distant rural school in Louisiana. When Mrs. Ardoin found herself grappling to understand the process behind the AP exam by searching for an explanation of why her students were struggling and the ways to further advance her students’ writing skills specifically, she became involved with AP on a professional level as an exam grader. She decided to become a grader to see what she was missing and where she could grow as an educator to better serve her students because they did not have a pre-AP experience. Mrs. Ardoin “wanted them to have everything that met their gifted needs as well as the AP rigor and all the beauty that comes with it.”

Mrs. Boudreaux

Mrs. Boudreaux has been an English teacher for 16 years and has been an AP English Literature and Composition teacher for the past 6 years. She currently teaches at a rural fringe school. Mrs. Boudreaux particularly revels in the sense of freedom that AP offers to her and to her teaching style to address the individual needs of the students on her campus. She stated that she believes that the AP experience simply “makes students better by exposure” because of the opportunities and rigorous learning that takes place in her classroom that is “not scripted to a test.” The AP opportunity is open to any student on the campus who has a strong work ethic and is looking to for a challenge. She says that the key to engagement in her AP English Literature and Composition class is reading a variety of high interest pieces that initiate big conversations and motivate the students to commit to the advanced coursework.

Ms. Cooper

Ms. Cooper has been teaching in Louisiana for the past six years where she has taught AP Literature for five years and AP Language for the past three years. When Ms. Cooper had the unique experience of doing her student teaching in a remote rural AP English Literature
classroom and noted that “AP Lang is the most important class that students can take in high school because of the exposure to big thinking that it offers.” After spending one year in the private sector, she returned to the remote rural high school campus where she could continue to serve the community and promote students by “challenging their intellect by provide a college-designed instructional influence for [her] students…that is not just for the elite.” Ms. Cooper accepted the AP Literature position at her school the week prior to the start of her second year of teaching, so that did not leave much time to receive a more proper training such as the opportunity to attend an APSI-Advanced Placement Summer Institute. For the past five years, Ms. Cooper has taught in a rural remote school in Louisiana, and she also became a qualified AP exam grader.

Mrs. Davidson

Mrs. Davidson has been teaching in the rural remote Louisiana high school setting for 16 years and she has been an AP Language and Composition teacher for 8 years. During her teaching experience, she has had the opportunity to teach “every level of English” including Pre-AP. Serving in numerous roles throughout her parish, Mrs. Davidson identified the critical need for vertical alignment in curriculum and the need for an early intervention initiative that would introduce Pre-AP in 8th grade and the need to increase access to minority students. She noted that the AP English Language and Composition “increases the access to sophisticated thoughts and questions by incorporating sensitivity while empowering students to engage” and best equips students to “face the advanced academic conversation that they will encounter in college.” Mrs. Davidson also expressed the importance of combining the focused learning that takes place in the AP classroom setting with preparing students with the skills necessary to excel on the ACT (dual purpose and combined resources).
**Mrs. Fordam**

Mrs. Fordam has been an educator for the past 15 years and has just completed her 6th year as an AP English Language and Composition instructor in a fringe rural Louisiana high school. She has taught a variety of grades from 8th grade to 12th grade and traditionally teaches at least three preps (different subjects) in a school year/semester. “Purpose over passing” is important to Mrs. Fordam, who believes in placing value in the learning and the critical skills (providing effective communication in both the spoken and the written word) that are developed rather than focusing primarily on the exam score at the conclusion of the course. The overall purpose of the AP English Language course is structured upon creating a well-rounded learner who “leaves the class with the ability to think more critically, write effectively, and be more eager to participate in academic discussions.”

**Mrs. Granier**

“I did not know how to be a good teacher until AP.” Mrs. Granier has been an educator in a rural remote Louisiana high school for the past 12 years, where she has offered a variety of advanced courses ranging from Pre-AP (9th and 10th grade) to AP Language and Composition. She identified the overarching goal of the AP program to be improving the campus culture through providing experiences to the rural student that expands those essential skills needed to succeed in a college class. Mrs. Granier indicated that “through the vertical alignment of critical skills, a platform of inquiry-based learning develops reasoning, promotes the drawing of conclusions, and stimulates effective communication skills specifically in difficult discussions.” Advanced learning is about teaching students how to “take a stand, establish an argument, and provide adequate evidence to make an informed decision which inevitably leads to educated conclusions.”
Mrs. Guitreau

Mrs. Guitreau has 18 years of experience in the Louisiana distant rural classroom where she has offered various English classes from Career and Technical Writing, Honors English to AP English Language and Composition. She has served in a multitude of roles on her campus, including TAP Mentor and Master Teacher. Mrs. Guitreau noted that the rural community “maintains a respect for education and appreciates the opportunity that advanced learning provides...learning that is rooted in the real world.” Completing her 6th year as an AP educator, Mrs. Guitreau stated that Advanced Placement English Language and Composition coursework presents rural students with an introduction to societal issues, exposure to conflicting perspectives, and instills a sense of tolerance through the exploration of multi-cultural works embedded in the curriculum. The AP classroom serves as a “window to promote open-mindedness and also constructs an outlet to reduce societal and/or personal prejudice and bias.” On average, over half of the students who take the AP English Language and Composition course obtain the score of 3 or higher on the exam. Mrs. Guitreau stresses that the overarching goals designed to promote college-ready critical thinkers who are “open to the world” include providing increased exposure to complex literature (with higher Lexile levels) and strengthening a student’s ability to communicate effectively.

Mrs. Hebert

Mrs. Hebert is a veteran educator with 33 years of experience in the fringe rural high school setting in Louisiana. She has taught AP English Literature and/or Language and Composition for the past 16 years, and 6 of those years were in a school where students did not have the opportunity to take the AP Exam. According to Mrs. Hebert, the productive AP classroom bolsters the “perfect relationship between highly motivated learners with an
atmosphere of respect, inquiry and energy.” The AP classroom “fosters an environment of advanced learning through the implementation of rigorous expectations and collaboration in daily assignments while strengthening communication skills (including both the spoken and written word).” Advanced Placement coursework develops students who “grow in response to the challenge and supports a strong personal work ethic” that they can then apply across academic disciplines.

Mr. Jacob

Mr. Jacob is a veteran educator who has 20 years of experience in the distant rural Louisiana high school setting and has provided a variety of advanced courses ranging from Pre-AP (9th and 10th grade) to AP English Language and Literature courses (11th and 12th) to Honors English. Mr. Jacob noted that Advanced Placement coursework helped to “promote the sense of community within the classroom and strengthens the relationship of family” that exists in the rural classroom. He welcomed the freedom in curriculum that AP had to offer and noted that there is not much room or value in the concept of scripted learning. In Mr. Jacob’s classroom, the instruction and discussions were often student-led and advanced literature address difficult themes that can unearth “big wounds” that require an established dynamic of respect and maturity.

Mr. Jacob enjoyed being able to serve in the role of the classroom facilitator who could then focus on addressing the individual needs of the students. There has been a shift in his school in placing a greater emphasis on the CLEP (easier to obtain a higher score which has a stronger influence of the school performance score) than promoting Advanced Placement because the scores were not as profitable, but the skills are highly favorable. Mr. Jacob noted that students received a much higher skill base that included a more thorough understanding of critical
thinking, reading, discussion, and writing skills through AP. The AP program has since been dissolved at Mr. Jacob’s school.

**Mrs. Kern**

Mrs. Kern is a veteran educator with 20 years of experience that includes providing advanced learning opportunities that range from Pre-AP in 9th grade to providing 12th graders with college-ready skills to transition to a college English class discussion. The AP English classroom provides a “more professional vibe…a mood” promotes a strong work ethic through the blended exposure of rigor, accountability, and expectations with intentional and rigorous learning through complex texts. College bound students are uniquely motivated and understand the need to be educated because at Mrs. Kern’s rural remote school, it is “cool to be smart.” The classroom atmosphere must be both engaging and challenging while promoting an intentional learning community that promotes community and implements diversity. Educators closely monitor the individualized academic progress of each student that begins with the Summer AP Assignment (baseline writing/research project) and is continues throughout the year through a series of written and verbal assessments. Individual learner conferences (with both parents and students) encourage a spirit of engagement within the learning community. Mrs. Kern views the AP opportunity as a “new way to teach…a way to push any student who wants more to succeed.”

**Findings**

The participants in this interpretive phenomenological study are currently teaching or have taught Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition or Pre-AP in the rural Louisiana public high school classroom. The findings include the lived experiences of each of the participants as they strive to advance academically prepared students in the rural community who are ready to face the rigors of college. The educators represent a
combined total of 174 years of teaching experience taught at schools located across the state of Louisiana that varied in locale from fringe (less than 5 miles), distant (more than 5 miles and less than 25 miles) and remote rural (more than 25 miles) areas from an urban center. I conducted the interviews in June and July 2021, via Zoom to eliminate the need for extensive travel for participants and to adhere to COVID health-related restrictions and maintain safety protocols. Scheduling interviews during the summer allowed for educators to reflect on the past lived experiences without the added everyday pressures of the school year and provided a more flexible schedule in which the interactions could take place.

Once the interviews concluded, I analyzed the transcripts and four dominant codes emerged in the participant responses. The phenomenological structure (perceptions, supports, and relationships) are the roots of the research questions of the study and serves as the primary tool to organize the data according to the individual themes that emerged:

1. What is the rural educator’s perception of the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework regarding program effectiveness in providing equitable access and college readiness in the rural public classroom (Louisiana) and to promote success in post-secondary education?

2. What supports (provisions and resources) are employed within the social-cultural context to encourage college readiness (access, academic preparation, and enrollment success) for rural students in Louisiana through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework?

3. What is the relationship between existing barriers and the rural educator’s ability to provide enhanced college readiness through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition courses?
The primary themes that emerged during the interviews regarding participant perceptions, supports, and relationships associated with the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework in providing equitable access and college readiness in the rural public classroom (Louisiana) identified the essential components provided through the current AP program that actively promotes success in preparing for the transition to post-secondary education. The lived experiences of the educators (interview participants) and their perception, supports, and relationships established in the current implementation of the AP English program in the rural public high school revealed four fundamental themes:

1. Creating the Academic Mindset
2. Course Accessibility
3. Academic Preparation and Addressing the Rural Learning Divide
4. Teacher Efficacy and Autonomy

**Theme 1: Creating the Academic Mindset**

The educators’ perceptions between Advanced Placement coursework and its ability to providing college readiness for the rural student was extremely powerful despite the obstacles that educators and students would often have to overcome on the rural Louisiana public high school campus. The first theme that surfaced early in each of the interviews was the ability to formulate the academic mindset of the rural student through the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition program and the early integration of the Pre-AP in the schools where the program was available.

The academic mindset emerges from the ability to provide opportunities that yield forward analytical thinking and challenge learners to rummage for answers. Of the rural educators interviewed in the study, nine of the participants described AP is just “good teaching,”
and expressed that the coursework provides students with the necessary platform for rhetorical and analytical thinking within the first minutes of their interview. The AP classroom builds a community of learners that both teaches and conditions the rural student to participate in an academic environment.

Rigor and Relevance

The classroom environment and experience differ for those students who choose to participate in the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework. The rigor of the coursework and the relevance of the skills reinforcement improve the overall learning opportunity for the college-bound rural student.

Mrs. Ardoin started out as a teacher of academically gifted rural students and she wanted them to have everything that they would need to meet their gifted needs as well as the AP rigor and all the beauty that comes with the process.” From the start of her AP teaching experience, Mrs. Ardoin has had many students, even the ones that do not earn the qualifying score on the exam, come back to her, and say that they were just better because of the AP experience:

‘My English class at college is so easy because you showed us how to tackle these texts in a way that my classmates cannot. They did not take AP and so they do not know how to tackle this college-level reading the way that I can’ and that is not just at local small universities. I have had students from two prestigious universities that have contacted me and said, ‘I can’t believe something that we talked about at our little, small school in our AP English class just came up in my college class and I knew it.’ So, for me, when it comes to college readiness, AP is the way to go.

Mrs. Boudreaux has personally experienced the growth that students can make and believes in the possibility associated with the AP curriculum and the potential to provide advanced learning and college readiness while strengthening of the rural learning experience for:

Even students who do not pass the exam, or who struggle throughout the course are just better for having been exposed to the literature to the challenges. They are better for it because those are the ones that grow the most. They may not pass the exam, but it is
very rare that I get a student who will score a 1. College Board says that a score of 2 indicates college ready. The way that I look at it, if I can get a student who came to me very unprepared in the beginning to scoring a 2 on the exam, then I consider that to be a win for me. It is not all about the score, it is about growing the student.

Ms. Cooper quickly identified course rigor to be the ultimate method designed to advance learners and prepare them for college-structured coursework. The participants echoed Ms. Cooper’s professional opinion in that the rigor of an AP course is the:

Big component, the kind of expectations that go into an AP course are preparatory for what students are going to be expected to do in a college setting. I also think, particularly with AP Language when it comes to the content, those students are taught crucial skills necessary for framing an argument. Students gain the ability to effectively synthesize information, the ability to take a position and argue for themselves.

The participants related with Ms. Cooper’s description of the AP process as one that “teaches students to be able to work with texts, whether it be AP Language or AP Literature, their ability to talk about literature without just reciting what the literature said or paraphrasing it but being able to analyze it (rigor) and take a position on it (relevance).” She noted that this is what college professors are looking for and the AP skills that provide students with the ability to think and read analytically, will benefit the students the most in their college English classes. Mr. Jacob and Mrs. Kern specifically noted this skill set as the knowledge that will make the most impact in any course that the students take in college. Ms. Cooper identified that high school students tend to “lack this ability to think deep and especially those who do not participate in AP programs.”

Mrs. Fordam discussed the significance of relevance and providing the opportunity for the rural student to form relationships with the materials that they analyze. Engagement is a critical component within the AP process and educators must first help rural students to invest in
the concept of advanced coursework before the first piece is examined. She stated that to provide a linkage between the student and the literature, you must:

Connect the work that they do to the higher paying job that they will get that will directly enhance their life. Many of my students know struggle and they know that they want better—you must make it relevant. Simply saying that ‘you just need to do this’ is not going to be enough. People love stories and they enhance our lives, we love telling stories, watching stories, and it is my job to help them connect to reading stories. The stories that I work into my AP Lang class are central to human life and are designed to help them examine their own life more closely—with hopes to enhance the story of their own life.

The participants discussed the value associated with the AP Classroom and the use of common planning time to ensure skills alignment and the most effective use of resources. Although many of the AP educators included in this study do not have a direct PLC (professional learning community), they each find themselves reaching out to collaborate with other AP English teachers throughout their districts, in neighboring districts, or even making virtual connection with teachers in other states. In each of the interviews, the AP educator discussed that to be effective, they must entertain an academic mindset to effectively engage, instruct, and grow successful AP students.

Mrs. Granier explained how College Board has structured the “AP experience” upon the idea that the teacher eventually serves as a mere facilitator with the goal of relinquishing control and the learning focus more on student-led instruction. Instead of being a primary participant in the conversation, the teacher guides the conversation by “tiny prompts from the back row.” Constant and specific feedback provides the learner with the opportunity to guide their own learning by model.
Mrs. Hebert characterized that students were “just better” in for the mere exposure to the progressive academic setting of an AP course or in the Saturday clinics required through the NMSI (National Math and Science Initiative) grant. She described the interactions:

As students huddled in small groups from a variety of other schools and you could just hear them talk about things and ponder ideas. My students would look somewhat eased when it was a topic that they knew or understood; however, the table could quickly turn leaving them uneasy and quiet when they were not as well-versed in the topic of discussion—but they were better because of the exposure, the collaboration, and for the opportunity to discuss and to participate in an academic conversation.

The participants revealed that the AP English Language and the Literature and Composition courses are equitable in the rural classroom because the curriculum is rigorous in providing the skills necessary to succeed in any college class. The teachers each imparted also that the work is relevant, and the students can make the necessary educational and social connection through the heightened expectations. Mrs. Ardoin expressed that it is “critical for rural students to connect to their work, they must believe in it to see its worth. They are not just going to do it because they are instructed to, they must know and see how the work is making them a more socially conscious learner. The work must matter because they know that college is relevant.”

**Constructing Academic Confidence and Self-esteem Within Rural Learners**

Participants noted how the AP English curriculum transformed the rural classroom while addressing academic skills and needs of the individual students. Instead of generic learning, the students were engaged on a level that constructed a sense of academic confidence and fashioned a self-esteem that would benefit the rural learner far beyond the high school course. Mrs. Granier characterized this “enhanced sense of confidence and stronger sense of self as being some of the
most valuable tools that the rural student would carry over to the college English course or class that they may face on the college campus.”

Several of the participants in the study discussed the constructive use of student-propelled Socratic Seminars in place of teacher-led discussions which challenged the students to think both critically and independently. The AP English curriculum was designed to educate students in how to support their own conclusions and assertions while providing evidence based on their interpretations. The participants identified how the AP English Literature course instructs the learner to view the piece of literature as an open-ended question and instructs the student to look for connections while demonstrating how to remain open-minded to alternative opinions.

The educators overall agreed that the academic confidence of the rural student can only be reinforced once the student can overcome the initial barrier of understanding the advanced expectations. In many instances, the students have been “quickly steered through the materials” to, as Mrs. Davidson stated, “cover more ground in a shorter amount of time because it is on the test.” Each of the participants revealed the additional confidence-driven barrier associated with completing the independent reading that is required of the student at home. Like a college-course expectation, the students are held accountable for reading before class in preparation for the anticipated classwork (which often does not include class time to complete primary reading).

Mrs. Hebert described her AP Literature class and incorporating those kids that are “highly motivated and they are interested in my subject, like I am. We immediately share a common ground which is our love for literature. I can give them the tools that they need to be successful in AP Lit and in preparing for college and support is primarily what they need.” Mrs. Hebert described the AP Literature class as the
Perfect teaching situation. AP Lit offers more rigor, at a faster pace. I think that it is still a bit handicapped within the high school setting because I cannot have them read at the exact pace that they will experience in college, but we do more much quicker that the average academic English classes.

**Encouragement and the Village**

Mrs. Ardoin noted that the major concern for the rural student, as far as academics, is that they are primarily concerned about being able to do the work once they get to college. She detailed with a crackling voice:

My students are legitimately worried that college is going to be so hard and that they are not smart enough—which breaks my heart because they are doing the same level work as students in other states across the nation are doing. It is about reassurance and they need it, they require it. My job includes building their confidence by showing them that they can do the work by providing them with the AP Language and Literature experience.

Encouragement is a significant component in growing the rural, college-bound learner in an AP classroom. One of the major fears that Mrs. Ardoin identified is that her students feel that they are “not going to be smart enough” to do the college work. She said that she must reassure them that AP coursework is the essential tool that they have prepare themselves because it is the connection that they have to a “college-like class.” The students are committed to being better, but they feel limited because they are coming from a small school in a small town.

Mrs. Boudreaux is determined with AP Literature that if she teaches her students to “be better readers and writers, the test will take of itself and those are skills necessary for life in general. So, I feel like with AP, I am actually teaching and preparing students to be better people—the way that it should be.” Ms. Cooper stated that AP coursework “is not just for the elite, it’s about challenging intellect” in those students who do not identify themselves are college-minded:
I know this sounds funny, but in smaller rural areas, there is this idea that while the schools are really good, many of our students do not go to college. So, it is almost fighting this mentality of “Well, I don't have to take this class you know, I'm doing this because I'm the brightest and the best at the school,” but it is not about just being the brightest and the best, it is about creating the work ethic, advancing the learner. It is about establishing that balance between all students as well.

The participants mirrored many of Ms. Cooper’s opinion in that often in rural schools, students are consequentially streamlined and those who are gifted and talented continue into those honors and AP courses. She specifically noted the students that she has had who are on the vo-tech pathway, who were in her AP classes, they did not need the credit, but they were choosing to do the work. “They are doing more work than you know some of my gifted and talented kids. so, it is also about establishing the idea that it is not just a class for the elite. Anybody can take the AP courses, regardless of your ACT score--it is about building necessary skills. So, I think that is kind of a challenge in terms of stereotypes, in terms of mentality.”

Mrs. Fordam identified the AP coursework as being relevant for the emerging rural college student because it:

Challenges them in an environment that provides support while they take risks, and the high school campus is a great platform for this. Students often come back and tell me that my class was more difficult than their college English class—and they ended up doing very well. They may not have passed the AP exam, but that is not really the point. It is about preparing a more confident learner. The college credit is always a welcomed incentive, but the skills acquired throughout the AP experience will have a direct influence on their future interactions in life.

Mrs. Hebert stated that treating the students as if they are in college requires them to rise to the level of accountability, acclimate to the more strenuous workload, and meet the college-level expectations while in the security of the high school classroom.
Mrs. Ardoin stated that a large part of establishing a student’s academic independence is aiding that student in associating value with what they are doing. She commented on the need to create and support an academic independence because:

There are times when teaching in the South, athletics often do come first. With that focus, there are often times when a kid has to choose between the rigor of the AP class, working, and being on the football team. There is simply just not enough time to read the assignments because they are going to have to choose the job and then they are going to want to choose the football. It is about establishing a value of education; it is about priorities.

The participants perceived that family views weigh heavily here and establishing meaning with the student’s support system is critical. Mrs. Ardoin remarked how school administration weighs equally because the “priority of sports can often interfere with the academic mindset of the school.” The participants honored and credited extracurricular activities with the ability to grow the students socially, however, they equally noted the significance of educating children and how that should always be the primary intention.

Mrs. Kern echoed many of the participants when she expressed how AP suffers in this capacity, when compared to the time management required to prepare for the course versus an extracurricular activity, because of the amount of preparation and reading that a student must complete outside of the classroom daily. The participants agreed that when students face the choice between academics (advanced coursework) and extracurriculars, academics do not always win. Mrs. Boudreaux mentioned how the home expectations of the rural student does vary greatly, because in some instances, the student is not often choosing a sport, but they become the caretaker of younger siblings or often work and serve as a financial contributor in the household.
Mrs. Boudreaux believes that it is critical that students gain a sense of academic independence during their high school experience that provides them with the tools that support them as they:

Learn to think for themselves. I run my class very much like a bridge between high school and college because that is exactly what it is. I have tried to make it a bridge between what they are used to doing and what they are about to experience in college. I also try to make them more self-sufficient…the consequences are their own, they are not mine [academic responsibility].

Ms. Cooper identified AP English Language course as a class that is fundamentally one of the “most important classes that a student can take when they are in high school because it teaches them in a manner that they will experience in college.” Advanced Placement English Language is “essentially the beginning English 101 college course, and the course also teaches them to be a more competent writer for any other subject.”

Mrs. Davidson discussed the use of the summer assignment to help create the transition in the AP mindset for incoming students. To create a mindset of excellence, the students first had to feel equipped. The summer assignment allowed the AP educators to work closely with the students in creating a strong sense of preparedness and success. The summer assignment also made room for those students to come to a self-realization that they could succeed through a series of workshops hosted throughout the summer.

Mrs. Davidson characterized the value of early intervention and the need to implement the AP-aligned learning platform as early as sixth grade through a Pre-AP curriculum. The summer assignment that her district would host had very specific expectations and a strict deadline that was non-negotiable. The students read a book supplied with federal funds and they attended workshops throughout the summer to guide learning.
Mrs. Fordam avowed that the academic mindset and the transferrable skills that work to create an academic independence is applicable to career areas and helps the learner to understand what would be expected in a college-level course and in a professional capacity. She said that the “skills essential to AP Lang, specifically, go everywhere—they follow you no matter what and it makes you a more proficient communicator.”

Mrs. Granier loved the way that AP allowed her students to get involved because of the big push towards student-centered learning and the students were challenged to guide themselves and their classmates. Before long, Mrs. Granier noticed that “her students were going on those deeper levels on their own and I was doing as a teacher was providing the tools and the framework to help them get there.”

Mrs. Guitreau discussed the rigor that the AP coursework and the ability to introduce rural students to a college-structured course while they are still within the comforts of their school and community. In the 10 interviews conducted, the teachers identified the rural student’s drive to learn and how they have a fundamental respect for education. Mrs. Guitreau expressed that the students that she has taught “often lack the skills and experience to see past the barriers, but they know that it is something that they need to do. They acknowledge that education is a way out, a possibility, but they are afraid.”

Mrs. Hebert described the excitement of sitting in front of a group of AP kids as being “full of inquiry and how amazing it is to watch them grow as they learn and question.” In fact, 8 of the rural AP educators expressed that the atmosphere in the AP classroom was unique because the students were overall highly motivated and eager because they can see the opportunities and possibilities ahead of them. Three of the participants specifically mentioned the high level of accountability that exists immediately in their AP course. Mrs. Hebert said that there is “an
instant respect in the room, a give and take. I have more of a personal relationship with them because know that they are there to work.”

**Modeling Socialization and Communication**

Mrs. Ardoin and Mrs. Hebert both used the analogy that compared the socialization and communication mindset of rural students as one that transitions from being a big fish in a small pond where they feel comfortable and confident to facing the big river where they are unsure and without boundary:

I find that most of my kids come back and talk about how easy their English classes are but that they fret about the fact that they will not know anyone at college. They are accustomed to walking into school and having that immediate sense of belonging because they have been in class with this specific set of kids for their whole lives. My students talk about not knowing anyone at college and how they just ‘drive there, take classes, and leave’ and that ends up being their big issue. I find that my rural students crave connectivity.

Mrs. Hebert commented that once the rural college student gets to college there is a stress and a fear when:

The pressure is on and now they find themselves surrounded in a place where everybody has got to be smart, everyone is going to be motivated, and they are going to have to adjust how they see themselves, because right now, they really think, ‘Hey, I am on top of the world.’ What is most exciting is getting to be part of constructing the confidence and that solidifies that what we do matters. We must prepare them with a confidence here that will set them up for success there.

Each of the participants perceived the need for the strong academic confidence, that Mrs. Ardoin and Mrs. Hebert both referenced, as the primary component in a critical skill set needed to face the challenges of college-level coursework. Mrs. Hebert expressed that “once that sense of confidence is set in motion, the student’s view of a challenge also changes. They will no longer view the challenge with fear, but with an appreciation for what they can learn and how they are going to be better.”
Ms. Cooper noted that AP Language course is a strong component to providing socialization and communication skills to the rural learner:

AP Language is the most important course that I think students can take as a high schooler, I think it is that fundamental, not only mindset, but the skills that are taught in that class are so fundamental in terms of advancing a college students preparation for their introductory courses when they get to college. As far as AP Literature, I have got to think of AP Literature as the icing on the cake to your high school experience. So, I think of it as, okay, you have gotten through the basics, but if you want to put yourself one step above. You are going to take AP Literature, because it is teaching you how to write in a way that not every other student will enter college. So, I would say it is kind of that bridge, but like I said, it is the icing on the cake.

Of the participants interviewed, each teacher would mention the significance of the AP Language course and its ability to provide college-minded and purposeful learning. Ms. Cooper and Mrs. Hebert expressed the importance of the AP Literature to further prepare those students wanting to major in the humanities. Ms. Cooper stated that “AP Lang is about being able to communicate with people, but I think AP Lit it is a big communication course as well. It teaches us how to speak to each other.” The participants mirrored Ms. Cooper’s vision of AP Language and its “vital focus on communication and AP Literature takes you in a completely different direction where you break down those challenging texts—these are all necessary skills that prepare rural students for college and give them access to an opportunity that they would not have had otherwise.”

Mrs. Davidson indicated that for students to feel more independent, they must be “provided with the opportunity to grow and I believe that AP is the perfect platform for rural students—all students to experience that sense of college before they leave the comforts of the high school campus.” The AP experience develops students because “it just gives them access to sophisticated talk modes, teaches them how to think, how to question and to not just accept
something at face value. I think that it empowers them by helping to make them feel more equipped to face academic conversation.”

Mrs. Fordam discussed the need to establish communication skills and to develop the rural student’s ability to confidently participate in an academic conversation. The design of an AP English Language course seminar course and the educator serves merely as the facilitator. The students take control and guide their learning early in the course:

Being more aware of everyone else’s story as well and cultivate an awareness that there is often more below the surface helps to reinforce the concept of communication and provide connectivity within their daily lives. We learn to read below the surface and the words on the page often guide our deeper analysis—those skills help to develop community and support a more profound sense of understanding. Stories offer a lens for students to wear while they investigate people who are different than they are, and all students will benefit from gaining this life skill.

**Engagement and Work Ethic**

Ms. Cooper stated that AP Language coursework requires the student to “step out of the robotic” and to engage as an active participant in the process of inquiry-based analysis and being confident enough to challenge a traditional response:

Here is your question and here is where we want to end up, but the true growth takes place when they are formulating their own thoughts and providing evidence to support their opinions. Now, this is something that they will struggle with especially and it seems very rotary. It is as if they have trained to answer the certain questions from their books in a specific way. Stepping away from that model is challenging for them and AP requires them to stretch.

Mrs. Fordam teaches on a campus that encompasses a “very, very empathetic athletic community” and often compares the learning that takes place in her AP Language course to how teammates rally on the football or baseball field when the team is behind. She described the connection between her students go to a sporting event:
You are going with the intention to connect with other student athletes and join in the excitement of the student section, so I use that analogy to describe my AP Lang classroom as the weight room in which we prepare for the big game. My students already know how to read and write. And so, we are just here working out and doing those reps, those squats for your brain—all with the goal of building a confidence that my students can read and write whatever they want, regardless of the context. It is ultimately about confidence while growing and strengthening those essential college-ready skills.

Mrs. Granier identified that AP Lang was the “one curriculum that I taught that truly prepared the kids for all aspects of life.” She noted that the AP Language curriculum standards instruct both students and educators to be better at what they do by strengthening effective communication skills. The AP curriculum lends itself to:

Challenging the learner to think through an argument whether it be verbal or written and being able to effectively provide evidence to support your stance and it allows the educator to participate as the guide. Effective communication skills will make them better adults, and then they will be able to contribute as better citizens.

Mrs. Guitreau stated that a critical engagement with the materials takes place when students can identify and actively address bias with writing. The AP Language class prepares learners to realize when someone is trying to persuade them to think a certain way. Students are taught to look at various modes of media and not only distinguish bias and opinion within academic writing, but also understand their own. She remarked that AP Lang is:

Amazing levels of thinking, critical thinking, rhetorical analysis—but by the end of the class, you want them to identify the needs of their audience, be able to persuade someone through the use of logic and credibility, evoke certain emotions and achieve an intended response within their audience.

Mrs. Hebert discussed that her students come in ready to work and she particularly enjoys seeing their level of engagement rise as they accomplish their goals. She identified that “AP students primarily have a fairly focused work ethic that is intentional because they know that this class is something that can prepare them for college. They are driven and they want to do well.”

Several of the participants mentioned that it is essential to increase student engagement at the
start of the class, the students must acknowledge where they are currently and set realistic goals of where they can be by the end of the course.

The AP educators each discussed the importance of assessing student models as a tool to increase student engagement. Mrs. Ardoin and Mrs. Hebert noted specifically noted that sharing examples of high-quality work to guide them in both structure and style because it is important to reassure them that they can write an advanced academic composition. The participants, in 8 of the interviews, avidly discussed the rural student’s feeble writing skills due to limited exposure of literature with an appropriate Lexile level that is on grade level and that surfaced as a one of the primary educational barriers that inhibits college-level, sophisticated engagement in the rural classroom.

Participants identified that the reinforcement of clear and concise writing skills and strengthening of critical thinking skills will guide the student in becoming a better communicator, which will influence the rest of their lives. In many situations, the AP educators remarked that a great deal of scaffolding and collaboration was required to structure the work ethic of the rural AP student. Mrs. Hebert said that “before you can grow them, you have to take the time out to reassure them that they have to crawl before they can walk. My kids want to do well, and they are committed, as am I.”

The participants identified that meaningful engagement is established in the AP English classroom by providing the learner with feedback assessed through daily work. The daily assignments often provide connection between course themes which reinforce essential verbal/communicative skills. Most of the participants did mention the increase amount of grading that is associated with teaching an AP course; however, the grading provides continuous communication between the teacher and the students.
The participants identified a variety of lesson manipulatives strengthen the needed skills and to provide advanced communication such as AP-released practice exams, FRQs (free response questions) graded with the AP rubric, multiple choice questions where students provide both the answer and justification, etc. Preparing the student with the necessary critical thinking skills and with the ability to read analytically will encourage the student to fashion a sense of confidence to perform amongst their colleagues.

**Diverse Perspectives**

Mrs. Guitreau commented how that the AP curriculum and expectations are so rooted in the real world. The participants said that often in a rural community, the students are not exposed to much in terms of societal issues. Mrs. Guitreau described her rural school and the community that surrounds it represents its own “little bubble.” This little bubble would be referred to by 8 of the 10 teachers that were included in the study. Some would discuss the bubble as providing safety and protection to the rural learners; however, they would all discuss the limitations that the bubble mentality would also provide. Limited exposure would also limit the views and experiences of students; whereas AP offers them the opportunity to discover and explore diverse perspectives and cultures.

Mrs. Ardoin expressed that the AP curriculum offers a unique opportunity to introduce rural learners to receive valuable exposure to a variety of literature:

Written by people from all walks of life and includes cultural things that we, as educators, want to show our students. Introducing them to the world of literature and diversity helps them to see themselves, but also helps them to see that there is something outside of their little town and that there is this whole big world. Now, it is not always easy because with a small town comes big limits to what topics are acceptable. I collaborate with AP teachers from all over the United States and I must be mindful of the books that I choose because I am working under somewhat of a limit, but I do what I can.
Mrs. Fordam confirmed the shift in course expectations and learning objectives by College Board from the:

Traditional literary canons to the implementation of more diverse literary pieces. There is great value in studying all cultures; however, I feel that it is instrumental to begin with pieces that my rural students can make a direct connection with—that begin with those authors and/or characters who come from backgrounds like my students. This connectivity helps to create a bond—a sense of community within the AP classroom. Diversity will be instrumental in implementing various cultures as the class progresses.

Mrs. Granier remarked that the AP program offers great value in providing social skills to the emerging college student because once you get a collegiate level:

It is a melting pot where everyone is coming in from different areas and them you are making this new little nucleus of students and I feel like everybody is going to have a different perspective based on their background and their individual experience. There is great vision gained in experiencing that growth of having to think for themselves through their interpretations and how that has taught them how to be open and how to communicate their thoughts, but still be open to what other people have to say and maybe even be open to someone else’s views.

The participants described the rural AP classroom, even though it focused on big world ideas, it still resembled a rather closed audience. It was in the Saturday NMSI workshop-setting that many of the educators would observe their students interacting with peers that were outside of their school circle in an academic capacity that was both relevant and rooted in the real world. They described the peer-based experience as the moment where their students would practice agreeing and disagreeing with someone that they were not as comfortable with as they were in the regular classroom setting. Mrs. Hebert stated that rural students often go to school with a “very small faction of classmates, they share in each other’s backstory and they fuss because they are almost like brothers and sisters. This experience required interaction that was unscripted and raw.”
Building a Community of Support

Mrs. Boudreaux said that there is a great need to build a community amongst the AP educators, learners, and their family support group; furthermore, parents need to know more about the program other than the notion that it is a “hard class which can get you college credit.” Prior to COVID-19, her school counselors and the faculty of AP educators hosted informational nights to introduced academic incentive programs and initiatives that would benefit the students and provide them with college-geared learning opportunities. She felt that these nights were helpful because incoming freshmen and their parents can see all the things that her school had to offer. Parents could ask questions about AP programs and see how AP coursework could help their student. The concept of the learning community (between the AP educators and the college-bound learners) became inclusive of the parent support group during these in-person meetings.

Each of the AP educators that participated in the study indicated that more is needed to reinforce a stronger working relationship between the rural student, their parent support group, and the AP opportunity. The primary concern that exists between the rural AP classroom and the parent support group at home is that the parents do not have a strong grasp of the potential benefits and gains associated with the AP coursework.

Ms. Cooper perceived that more must be done to tighten the connection to better benefit the rural learner. She mentioned that this process may require:

College Board sending out AP representatives, like colleges do to educate and recruit, at an informational parent night. An AP representative coming and talking to the parents and telling them what to expect of the course, telling them who else their child is compared to when it comes to their work and their essays, and how it will advance their writing and analytical skills.

Several of the participants echoed the need for a stronger relationship between College Board, the learner, and their family support. They need to know what to expect and understand
the benefits of being in an AP program and how it can prepare them for college. Ms. Cooper recommended “a community outreach, if not in person could at least be done digitally through a welcome video, Q&A session—a kind of connection, because I do not see a whole lot of outreach right now. Our students are often overlooked and quickly find themselves unprepared and overwhelmed.”

Mrs. Davidson spoke of the AP relationship that must represent the link between the educator, the student, and the parent support as being critical to providing the necessary encouragement for rural students to succeed in college-preparatory learning. This relationship is necessary for the learner to succeed in advanced coursework because:

I do not think that a lot of parents really understand what AP really is and they focus on more that their student signing up for Mrs. Davidson’s class where they do all the ACT prep and college stuff. Involving and educating parents to the core values of how AP can benefit their student is an area that requires attention—it is definitely a weakness for us. We need to focus on strengthening the relationship between our AP classrooms and the rural family.

Mrs. Granier rated the engagement of student and their family support to be critical components in the success of the AP learner because often in the rural community, not everyone goes to college, not everyone has a strong educational background, so often we are dealing with gaps in learning, in vocabulary and in effective communication. She identified that as an engaged AP educator, “we must help to build confidence when the learner is experiencing the shock and awe of reading eight novels in a year instead of the occasional one. The students grapple with adjusting to the rigorous course load, the higher expectations, time management, and how to use their personal experiences to help strengthen their comprehension.” The participants concurred by saying that the students and the parent support must both see the value in what they are choosing to do and honor the potential for academic growth for the AP program to be effective.
Mrs. Kern observed that in many cases, the parent may not be aware, because maybe we have not published enough information or hosted enough meetings. She stated that she believes that it is “equally as critical that the parent realize the program’s potential for educating their child and preparing them for college as it is for the student.” The participants reaffirmed Mrs. Kern’s call to “include the parents in AP decisions and provide adequate information regarding the program expectations and level of student accountability to reduce the woes later on.”

Mrs. Guitreau linked College Board’s primary focus on the use of nonfiction literature in AP Language to strengthening the student’s ability to connect with and participate as an active member of society. Students evaluate a variety of memoirs, speeches, news portals, etc., which provide them with the vast experience and investigative skills designed to make them a more enlightened learner. A strong presence of AP classes on a campus provides a strong sense of school culture which is extremely beneficial in an environment that must address and overcome a multitude of learning barriers. The participants described AP coursework as a window to open mindedness that provides an outlet for student reflection where they can decrease prejudice and bias while they learn about their own preconceptions. This character growth benefits the learner greatly when they emerge onto the college campus where there a so many different types of people.

The participants equally noted the essential need for their learners to differentiate between a test score and growing them as an actively engaged, college-thinking, analytical learner. Mrs. Hebert said that it was:

A discussion that just had to take place in the semester. It is most important to tell them before they get their first essay back that this is not a reflection of you—it is a grade on an essay. I did not grade you because they take it personally, and in many instances, they are quite distraught. I must remind them that if their essay was not good, it does not mean that I do not think that they are not a high-achieving student and capable. For many of my
students, this is the first time that they have received a true rubric-based critique. The first time for them to look at certain topics or address certain areas of thought. They consider themselves advanced and they are just ‘supposed to know the answer’ and then, they find themselves with a sense of struggle. This is the true beginning of the journey where they will begin exploring the process associated with critical reading, analytical thinking, and the application of sophisticated rhetorical devices.

The participants described the AP English classroom as the perfect environment for this degree of sophisticated interpretation of rigorous literature and concepts. Providing a community of support affords a safe place for them to take risks or, as Mrs. Hebert described it, “their essays will always be vanilla. It will never stand out among the whole stack of essays that they [AP] grader is going to be reading.”

**Theme 2: Course Accessibility**

Course accessibility and having the necessary resources and supports to provide the full AP experience to the rural, college-bound student comes with many obstacles. Those obstacles pose a multitude of challenges for the school administration, the AP educator, and rural student. When asked how AP English Language and/or Literature coursework has impacted the learning environment in their schools, the participants identified that often, there was a lack of support for the program because it did not have the score-based results that would yield higher school performance score results. The AP educators reiterated that the coursework was grounded in constructing a more competent and progressive learner that would be prepared to venture onto the college campus and succeed.

**District and Administrative Support**

The study participants maintained that a consistency in the focus of student growth and college readiness must often compete with the programs that provide the easiest points to advance the SPS (school performance score) over the programs that truly prepare and challenge
the college-bound learner. College Board’s Advanced Placement Program is a nationally and globally recognized program that is designed to provide the most college-like experience to high school students; however, as Mrs. Davidson said, “Many just do not understand the true educational value of the program and how it fundamentally prepares college-minded students, sadly, even school leadership. It is not about the score on the exam, it is about the kids. It is about advancing analytical thinkers. The scores are linked to funding.”

The participants agreed that the focus on Advanced Placement is an effective fundamental learning component and how the curriculum instrument is often left to the discretion of the school districts and quickly become a funding matter. They also noted that it is imperative that administration understand the essential purpose and objectives of AP learning and how it can benefit the rural learner.

Mrs. Ardoin discussed the importance of having district and administrative support in all aspects of providing the AP experience to rural students.

I do not feel that my administration completely understands the opportunity that providing AP coursework does for our students. Their primary concern revolves around the SPS (school performance score) and what programs earn the most points towards the school score.

Mrs. Hebert exposed that in a school environment focused solely on the strategy of increasing the SPS, there is a great push for students to take the CLEP exam (College-Level Examination Program) and AP:

I would like to say that it was for the development of the student, but the SPS always weighs in as a major contributing factor. Our school receives points if students just attempt the AP exam and of course, more points if they pass. We get points if they pass the CLEP, which is traditionally an easier exam and students migrate to what gets them the easier college credit. The skills that are structured and reinforced through the AP coursework need to remain at the forefront of deciding what is best for our students.
Mr. Jacob is a 20-year veteran in the classroom and a committed believer to the AP core values and the opportunity that the program offers to his rural students. He revealed the true benefits and growth that he experienced during the years that he taught Pre-AP and AP Literature because he was able to witness the transitional development of his students by being an involved member of the vertical professional learning community that exists at his school. The increased vertical alignment:

Enabled us to monitor the students and know exactly where to pick up. There is no loss of subject matter and it helps to address gaps in learning. No matter what level of AP you are teaching, kids are growing. Unfortunately, our district moved away from it. Our district moved away from AP in favor for an honors curriculum and CLEP testing. We have an extremely limited number of AP English classes left in our district and that is because the teacher must fight to keep it each year.

Mr. Jacob passionately stated that, “You have to have an administration that understands the program and buys in at that level… they have to be willing to back you up, because the program is worth it. They must see that students are growing and not focus solely on the exam score to claim a win or a loss.” He also noted that the AP English exam is “one of the more difficult exams that AP offers and not all of the 4s and 5s mean the same.” Mr. Jacob also noted that:

The concerns that I have now is not receiving support by the district, because they chose to move away from this proven program without fully vetting its replacement. In many instances, and in my district, the people who made this strategic moves are not even in those positions anymore. They move on after they have made major structural changes and often at the cost of our students. I do not want to say that it destroyed what we are doing, because we are still doing amazing things, but it severely hurt what we were able to achieve.

**Program Longevity and Funding**

The participants each noted that there never seems to be enough money; however, each teacher spoke passionately about the National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI) grant and how
that initiative made a direct impact on their individual classrooms and the AP learning experience. They each noted that the NMSI was one measure that created monumental change in the rural classroom in advancing AP learning opportunities. The grant, during its 3-year average span, NMSI would provide extensive financial support, trainings, professional development opportunities, lesson manipulatives, student materials, increased access to technology, etc. Each of the educators would discuss the obstacles associated with maintaining the programs (longevity) that the rural school would experience once the grant ended. At the end of the grant, the limit of consumable materials would again become a barrier due to lack of funding to replenish the materials and Internet limitations on the rural school campus and in the rural student’s home would resurface.

Many of the participants teach at schools where more than 60% of the student body receives free or reduced lunch and are currently living below the rate of poverty. Mrs. Ardoin stated that for the AP program to thrive, it is “critical to have buy-in by all engaged stakeholders—district, administration, educators, students, and their parental support system. Without the unified partnership, the AP program will not survive and will limit the opportunity for advanced learning in the rural classroom.” A large percentage of the students at rural schools rely heavily on fee waivers to subsidize the expense of taking an AP course.

The participants also noted that the NMSI grant also promoted the increased participation and access of AP coursework to underserved populations. During the interview process, seven of the teachers mentioned the school-wide fundraisers that they did to offset the expense of the AP exam once the NMSI grant period ended. During this time, the participants spoke of how the NMSI grant funded educational manipulatives; conversely, many of the materials would require long-term financial maintenance. The participants reflected upon the paper books purchased with
the NMSI grant and how they books would benefit students for several years, but also how
capped funding would limit the ability to incorporate new and more diverse literature.

Mrs. Ardoin identified the alternative sources that she would institute to provide
educational materials and access to the full AP experience once the NMSI grant ended. Mrs.
Ardoin wrote grants through DonorsChoose (a website where teachers can request necessary
funding to support classroom projects), she would frequent the Goodwill store in her town to
gain new reading materials to supplement the AP curriculum, and when needed, she would
“come out of pocket to make sure that [her] kids would have what they needed to succeed. Many
of my students have struggles that I cannot comprehend, and the ability to do their schoolwork
should not be one of them.”

Ms. Cooper, who teaches in a well-funded school district, still has the need for a course
textbook. Rural students have limited to no access to the Internet once they leave school which
creates a barrier for completing at-home reading assignments that are not on paper. The
participants discussed the effects of COVID on their rural campuses, and Ms. Cooper said:

Last year, because of the pandemic, we experienced our first year of having a one-to-one
ratio for technology, meaning that each student was assigned their own laptop for the
school year and it traveled back and forth to class with them. The lack of technology also
leads to a limited knowledge of technology, so that is one thing that we must constantly
address.

The participants each mentioned facing the technology barrier, which was a major hurdle
to address during the pandemic. The barrier included getting Wi-Fi hotspots set up within the
parish and then getting the system kinks worked out almost overnight. Once the students had
access to the Internet, the students faced a grave lack of knowledge when navigating the AP
Classroom and College Board websites. Ms. Cooper and Mrs. Fordam discussed the need for an
AP Classroom boot camp-styled intervention where the students were taught to work the AP
website. It was the only thing that was going to benefit them and allow us to move forward. Sometimes basic student skills require learning to navigate the system and ours included simple things like working Microsoft Word and taking quick notes before working on the larger things like AP Classroom and writing.

Mrs. Granier reveled in the success of her AP classes, before her classes were phased out by the district, because her students had surpassed the national average for passing the AP Lang Exam. She reflected that was very sad to see the end of the program, because:

We had the students who had scored the 4 and 5 and I was blown away by that. I was so proud of them. But for me, it was about seeing the challenge and how the students accepted the challenge, applied themselves, and saw the value in knowing that, whether they pass that test or not, they would pass any college English class because they had been thoroughly prepared. AP takes the cake in providing a college-structured learning curriculum and provides all students regardless of their location or situation with the chance to experience college. There was a great shift in education towards standardized tests and what offers the best financial incentives for the school and AP remained focused on the student. We just did not have the funding or the support to keep the program thriving any longer.

Limited Faculty

The participants acknowledged that one of the overarching barriers that smaller rural schools face is providing diverse coursework while working within the constraints of a limited faculty. In many instances, educators are taxed with teaching a variety of classes and often classes fall outside of their areas of certification.

Mrs. Davidson said that her school does not have the staff to provide teachers who only provide AP courses. In most cases, one teacher may “teach a single section of AP in conjunction with several other courses and AP is not going to take priority. It is not going to be their specialty area; whereas, you know when you have a placement in a bigger school, one teacher may be responsible for teaching four sections and that is their thing, and they get really good at their...
thing.” Often, in smaller schools, it poses more of a burden and the teacher spends more time scrambling around than being able to provide instruction. Staffing for AP courses is often an issue which can also deter student interest due to limited seating.

Mrs. Kern identified that a strong vertical team is significant to aid in the success of the AP course. “There is strength in being able to collaborate and isolation is a terrible feeling for any teacher at any junction in their career. You should not be burdened with facing the exhausting barriers that teaching in a rural school brings.” She referred to her AP co-teachers, who were not even located at her school, as “family… we face the challenges together, but there are just not enough of us to serve kids.”

**Academic Gain for School**

Ms. Cooper said that she believes the process of advancing growth within the rural school and with the AP program begins with building a community where the guidance counselors are involved in the AP process because they are responsible for doing the scheduling. The participants identified that the guidance counselors on the campus serve as a direct link between the student and the AP experience. They noted that it is critical that the counselors buy-in as engaged stakeholder and fully understand how AP can benefit the rural student. Ms. Cooper identified:

The value of hosting informational sessions and offer an introduction and an exposure so that the community can understand what AP the program is about and how the program can best benefit their student. I will say also, a lot of our upperclassmen so a lot of our seniors, they have the option of taking Dual Enrollment, and parents are drawn much more to DE [dual enrollment] because it sounds so much better because you are getting that GPA boost. Then they learn about what can happen if you do not do well in the Dual Enrollment class, and then there is a push for AP, so I think we need to have more of a positive connection link between the student and the benefits of AP.
Mrs. Davidson referenced that the students on her campus, like so many other rural campuses, represent diverse backgrounds and reiterated how vital it is that they [the rural family] understand the value of education that their student is receiving and the saving of potential tuition dollars in the future. She mentioned that there is an:

Ongoing battle between AP and Dual Enrollment because both the students and their parents can make a mental connection with the physical university and they can visualize the campus—they are familiar with the concept of the college and feel more comfortable in making that choice; nevertheless, AP better prepares the college-bound learner by establishing stronger analytical and critical reading skills that provide the student with skills that are applicable in their other classes.

The participants discussed the ongoing battle on the rural campus and the decision comes down to what positively effects the school performance score more. The teachers believe that the magnitude of their efforts, as educators, should be propelled by what best equips their students with the proper tools to make their next big step. Mrs. Davidson proudly noted that in the past 4-5 years, the demographic on her campus has transitioned from “just getting by” to an institution that focuses on providing our learners with opportunities geared towards college preparedness.

“We still have growing to do, but with the vital support of our administration, we are getting there, and our students and teachers are better because of that support.”

Mrs. Granier avowed that the biggest goal was to try to change the culture of our school. We really wanted to show kids that they “could produce and achieve at a higher level, and whether or not they pass the test—just the knowledge and information and the experience they gain from just taking the courses is what is truly indispensable.”

*Academic Counseling and Gatekeeping*

Mrs. Ardoin addressed gatekeeping and how College Board offers the advanced learning opportunity to all students who are willing. The positive thing about the AP program is that it
does not have a baseline ACT score requirement; however, a true assessment of the student and their individual work ethic does require close monitoring to ensure their best chance at success in the course. The honors kids are usually the ones who naturally gravitate towards the more challenging AP courses. The administration and counselors do a good job at my school of monitoring the students, their performance in past courses, and that helps to maintain the course efficacy.

Mrs. Boudreaux discussed introduction underserved students to the AP pipeline and college-styled learning:

Caused a surge in class sizes; however, the direct intention of the NMSI grant was to lessen the existing gap in access to advanced coursework. The grant, designed to give underserved students open access to advanced learning opportunities, AP classes exploded in size and yet we still had to address the same rural barriers. Students who were not necessarily on the college track were able to experience what it would be like to exist in a true college-preparatory environment, but that growth did not come without its own degree of struggle. I truly believe that the students, regardless of what they make on the AP exam, is just fundamentally better because of having been in the class. They are better because of the struggle.

Ms. Cooper stated that course recruiting “is one of her favorite topics.” She said that are still great strides to be made to advance the AP opportunity to students in Louisiana in general and not just in the rural classroom. The participants reflected upon Ms. Cooper’s comment:

So, as far as recruiting, we do not really have much in place. Students and their support need more information regarding the value of the AP experience and how it can serve students. What happens is that student do to schedule in the spring of the year and the guidance counselors guide them where they think that they would best fit, which is obviously problematic.

One of the primary goals of NMSI was to focus recruitment of lower socio-economic students and to reinforce diversity in AP programs. Ms. Cooper did mention the substantial growth in course enrollment during that time; however, she did equally fear that the numbers would eventually begin to decline once the grant ended. She found herself asking, “What can be
done? Recruitment and education. I have a friend that goes into classes and markets her AP class herself. As an English department, we are in the building stage of a recruitment program designed to stir potential interest in students who would not have signed up for an AP course otherwise.” As AP educators, the goal must be to reduce the stigma or the cloud around AP that the advanced learning program is only for certain types of people or those from certain socioeconomic groups.

Mrs. Davidson noted that if they can handle AP, they will seamlessly step into college. In terms of reading challenging texts, creating complex acts of writing, and discussing these concepts in general. The rural student requires support regarding the adjustment to expectations that fall outside of the assignment—such as managing workload, taking initiative, and just overall a more highly rigorous work expectancy.

Mrs. Fordam has always been “personally encouraged by College Board’s response to the concept of gatekeeping and the organization’s motive to provide students with an open access to the advanced coursework regardless of their means or even basic provisions to take the ACT to qualify for the course. She said that the AP program is:

Completely voluntary and furthermore encouraging to the underserved population because it does not penalize those who are overcoming barriers that are often out of their control. Dual Enrollment courses often require a baseline ACT score which can limit the rural student’s access to the experience. Even if the student does not pass the AP exam, the college-bound experience that they receive is so advantageous to their intellectual growth, their college readiness, and overall academic preparation.

Mrs. Fordam also adamantly noted that she is “very vocal about her school not getting rid of the AP option for their students because will further disenfranchise the rural demographic.” Referencing a school in her district, that represented a much higher economic demographic, who opted to suspend the AP program, left their junior and senior-level students with only the choices
of academic English or Dual Enrollment. Basically, the only choice that students have, who do not have the baseline ACT score required to qualify for DE, is to take a regular academic English class. Students who “already face educational hurdles (transportation, financial, etc.) do not need to face additional obstacles when an advanced, college-ready learning option is available.”

For AP coursework to be productive in terms of providing college readiness on the rural campus, the decision to take the courses must ultimately reside with the student. Mrs. Guitreau adamantly stated that “it must really be the student’s choice,” but the students are always encouraged, and the parents are supportive when their teacher recommends them to take the class. She remarked that one thing that is unique to teaching in a rural school is that:

sometimes it just takes a bit of reassurance for the student to accept that they are capable and challenge themselves, but it boils down to work ethic and will. I can teach them the rest of what they need to know. The counselors are our go-between. They are the direct connection that helps us to fill our rosters.

Mrs. Hebert identified College Board’s position on maintaining an open enrollment as a fundamental tool designed to reduce the learning divide that exists in the rural high school and provides the most influential avenue to providing college-ready learning. She also said that the core idea of AP is that the program should be accessible to anyone who is interested in the advanced learning and no student should be hindered based on environmental, educational, or financial barriers. These barriers, however, do not go away and College Board readily assumes that the students who elect to take the advanced course are ready to do college-level work and in many instances, students do not know the challenge that awaits.

Mr. Jacob expressed that more effective was to address college-level work and potential gaps in learning was with scaffolding that was purposefully designed to benefit the individual learner and their specific needs. The most significant concept revolved around College Board’s
commitment to maintain an open enrollment policy for students wanted to experience AP coursework. College Board does not restrict access to students based on GPA (grade point average) or ACT score. Mr. Jacob and Ms. Cooper both spoke of having students, who were not considered traditional honors kids, show interest in taking their AP courses, and they had great success. Both teachers said that those students both went on to take the next level of AP English course.

The AP English course is not the traditional English class that revolves around vocabulary and reading questions, it pushes the boundaries to condition thinkers and debaters. Mrs. Davidson mentioned that the powerful thing about the rural students that she has prepared through the AP program at her school is that “if you set the bar high, they will reach…you just have to keep moving the bar and they will continue to rise.”

**Theme 3: Academic Preparation**

In the interviews, the participants discussed their experience and views of the relationship and the linkages between AP Language and Literature and Composition coursework in addressing the rural learning divide and providing college readiness skills for the underserved population. Their responses were both powerful and impactful as they identified the woes and successes of the current program. They addressed the need for consistency in providing academic support and preparation in the rural classroom. The conversations were comprised of identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the current AP English Language and/or Literature classrooms, as well as, addressing the unique barriers that exist in the rural classroom.

**Reducing the Rural Learning Divide**

The relationship between academically preparing the rural learner and providing the critical skills needed to succeed on the college campus must include working diligently to reduce
the rural learning divide. This relationship requires a commitment of educators and engaged stakeholders to maintain an advanced level of academic preparation and to the continued development of the analytical thinking skills as early as possible. In the interviews, the teachers were asked about their experiences as AP educators in the rural classroom (working with both the emerging rural college student and their home support group) and what they would consider to be major concerns as students entered the college campus. They were asked about the gains that they had experienced in their classrooms and well as the continued challenges.

Of the 10 teachers interviewed in this study, each categorized the need for an educator’s fundamental grasp of the rural culture to furnish the appropriate class climate designed to truly serve the rural college-bound student and their family support. Mrs. Kern said that “you first have to serve the student before you can advance them as a learner. Accept that they are coming to you with gaps and you will have time to address those needs individually. You must first earn the respect of the student.”

The participants mentioned the need to provide the essential basics (personal, health, etc.) for their students before you can begin to teach them. They noted that in many instances, those basics often had nothing to go with English, but included providing food or necessary clothes. Mr. Jacob responded that “You cannot teach them until you have their full attention and if their attention is somewhere else, then no one is going to be productive. They are young people who are often dealing with big adult problems.” The teachers unanimously agreed that there is a strong and positive relationship between the rural, college-bound student and the AP experience; however, they also agreed that there is just not enough time to address the academic gaps if the stylized learning begins in their junior year.
Access to Pre-AP

During all 10 of the interviews conducted with rural AP educators during this study, there was positive mention of the strong connection between College Board’s Springboard curriculum and the Advanced Placement standards and expectations for coursework. The Springboard curriculum, created by College Board, provided the fundamental skills necessary to promote a healthy foundation and alignment for the future construction of AP learning. Some districts have recently made the transition to Guidebooks which were equally noted, by many of the educators, to be “highly engaging.” Mrs. Fordam described the anchor texts as works designed to quickly hook the reader, but she found herself questioning the rigor of the works included in the curriculum.

Mrs. Ardoin stated that during her training to become an exam grader for College Board, she quickly noticed that the lack of access to Pre-AP curriculum was going to inhibit her students and their ability to succeed. She equally perceived that:

Many of the educators in my roundtable sessions were working with students who had been engaged in a Pre-AP curriculum as early as sixth grade. That makes a huge difference because AP requires a different way of teaching, a different way of thinking. These students had such an early introduction and had been conditioned and that is so powerful. I knew that my course design would have to make up for those missed opportunities and everything would have to count. For me personally, the fact that we do not have a Pre-AP program in place at our school or even in our district is problematic in conditioning the rural college-ready learner. At our school, I get them barely crawling at the beginning of their junior year and I must have them ready to run a marathon in May. Do not get me wrong, we have some very strong English teachers in my department; however, their focus is not on AP and providing those applicable skills.

The participants spoke of each school year as having its own degrees of challenge (academic or environmental); however, each responded with how they must remain focused and just keep moving. Mrs. Davidson identified that in her rural classroom, there is a very wide
economic disparity that assimilates the extremely poor students along with the more affluent students:

The underserved students that come from the more economically disadvantaged feeder schools do not have the Pre-AP background because it just was not a realistic part of the real world due to limited faculty certification pool or the need to focus on the SPS (school performance score) or on the individual evaluations linked to their SLT (student learning target). In many circumstances, teachers were responsible for teaching several courses and advanced college-readiness skills did not rate high on the list. The students with a limited Pre-AP approach will spend the beginning of the semester combatting feelings of intimidation when paralleled with the more affluent learners.

Scaffolding the AP curriculum will work to meet the needs of all learners, but the AP educator must remain committed to providing consistency when implementing the AP fundamental skills. Mrs. Davidson stated that establishing the “fundamentals of AP work expectations, the essential skills, must be instituted at a much earlier junction or grade. Educators can reinforce these critical skills through the implementation of more diverse texts to model deeper analytical thinking.”

Mrs. Fordam concentrated on the use of AP Lang specifically to provide an avenue designed to fundamentally prepare learners for college-styled learning:

A lot of students do not pass the exam, but that is not necessarily something that I am super concerned with, I mean, we just do not do well traditionally because we are addressing a multitude of cultural issues that are not going to be easily or quickly resolved. We are a work in progress and I honestly think that it is not that my students cannot pass it, it is just that there is so little time to truly prep for the exam once you address the other hurdles that exist. My students know what is at stake and they want the credit, they want to save the tuition money because they understand finances—poverty and money are big issues in a rural community. They just simply run out of time if the learning curve must take place primarily during their junior and/or their senior year. English is the foundation of learning and it boils down to simply not having enough time with them—I wish that we could start the process earlier [Pre-AP].

The participants adamantly agreed that an early introduction to Pre-AP course work is the critical component to obtaining a more proficient and highly skilled college-equipped student.
Mr. Jacob taught Pre-AP for 5 years and said, “I really wish that we still had Pre-AP because we would have gone as far as some places around the country, where they started AP skills as early as sixth grade.”

**Vertical Alignment of Curriculum and Monitored Progression of Skills**

Mrs. Ardoin discussed the need for vertical alignment of curriculum because teachers must place their primary focus on preparing their students for the end of course exam because their SLT (student learning target) are based on that data. “I get it—their annual evaluation is based on those scores and preparing students for the EOC (end of course exam) requires a totally different set of skills as compared for what they need for AP and then ultimately college.” Mrs. Ardoin also noted that skills focus, and curriculum alignment was often interrupted by the teacher’s need to:

Focus on meeting their individual SLT (student learning target) which helps them to earn the rating of a highly effective educator. If students could have access to a Pre-AP program in an earlier grade, I think it would be highly beneficial so that when they get to their junior year in AP Lang that they are not totally overwhelmed. I also know that dual enrollment is a big obstacle to overcome for AP teachers because it is easier for students to earn the credit without the extra work.

Ms. Cooper revealed that the true learning gaps that existed emerged during the pandemic and the need for some sense of alignment between the freshman-level courses to the senior-level courses because the expectations are not consistent. She stated that it was important to note that in AP writing:

I am not asking for a cookie-cutter formulaic style of writing, but I think that we need to look at samples of the writing as teachers together by grade level and devise a degree of parallelism, some expectation of consistency, that best benefits the learner.

Collaboration, consistency, and connectivity is key to providing productive growth and college readiness in the AP classroom. The participants identified that the early implementation
of Pre-AP and the initial skill base established for preparing students for AP Language are also the tools necessary to guide educators when assessing and addressing those gaps in learning before students get to their junior and senior level coursework. The collaboration must start before that point, there is simply just not enough time to do it then.

Mrs. Granier recognized that her department really paid close attention to creating a vertical alignment with the middle school teachers in her district to address the learning divide:

We really looked at what our goals where for our students, and kind of created the pipeline by figuring out what skills they absolutely needed to know before they got to our AP classes. We made sure that those skills were embedded into those Pre-AP courses so that they were able to handle what we were doing when the time came.

Mrs. Davidson noted that the summer AP assignment in connection with the NMSI grant created a “promptness in the rural community” where she teaches to combat the lack of minority representation that often exists in the AP classrooms today. As a result, skill deficiencies had to be the primary focus as well as offering the advanced learning opportunity to all students in the underserved rural population. The underserved often face skill deficiencies and financial barriers associated with advanced AP learning. This summer program was free and granted all students access while it focused on implementing a vertically aligned AP curriculum and worked to further minimize the learning gap in the rural classroom. Mrs. Kern affirmed the need to focus recruitment of more minority students on her campus and that the stigma of “who is AP material” must be addressed. She also recognized that the minority students on her campus:

Are truly underserved and these kids are awesome… they are really great, and they represent a lopsided demographic that deserves immediate attention. In most instances, the lack of representation equates to a lack of information. We have got to work on getting a large minority interest if we are going to serve the demographic. They just do not know what AP entails or because maybe in the past, they unintentionally were not included in the course rally, so they just do not know.
Mrs. Fordam recognized that rural students enter the AP classroom often with a “lower-level, very rudimentary understanding of English” and they must rise to grade level before they can excel. Mrs. Fordam added:

The mere challenge of facing advanced coursework can be intimidating, but our rural students are willing. Let them! Reduce the obstacles that we can control and the address those limitations that limit rural access. Those restraints that reinforced when requiring a baseline ACT that only accentuates the learning divide, broadening the gap on campuses that avidly promote Dual Enrollment over AP. We have many EL students (English-language learners) and the learning gap is further amplified when you must address the ACT and a language barrier.

The participants recognized that in many rural households, the student often faces financial barriers where they work and may even operate as a financial provider in their home. Students may not be able to afford to take the ACT, or even have transportation to the test if they qualify for an exam voucher and this creates an obstacle that often cannot be overpowered.

The participants discussed the importance of choosing the specific pieces of literature that fit their culture and could benefit the emerging AP students by reinforcing an armory of literary materials to build upon. The rural students just did not have an assemblage of literature to tap into when it came to writing in a timed environment because they had such limited exposure up to that moment. It called for a vertical team effort where we could ensure that the skills were being taught.

The participants discussed the essential need to instill an academic interdependence in their rural college-bound students and to reinforce the positive association of academic feedback. Mrs. Hebert identified that to provide sufficient and monitored support of skill progression and to appropriately address the individual academic deficiencies in the rural AP classroom, she hosts weekly writing conferences with their students. She said that merely “writing all over their essays is not productive because they immediately feel defeated. It is our ultimate job to give
meaningful feedback that will build that relationship that encircles encouragement and provides academic support.”

Mr. Jacob, when asked how AP assists in providing critical college-forward skills, referred to a conversation that he had recently had with a coworker where they discussed:

How the program equips students with the skills necessary to apply deep analytical thinking that rises above reading a passage and answering a set of recall-level questions. Students are challenged to question the process, and these are skills that will benefit them as productive members of society for the rest of their lives. Students who have experienced AP English will succeed no what university they go to because they have an understanding of evaluating the source and questioning the foundation.

**Reading Comprehension and Access to Rigorous Literature**

Mrs. Boudreaux noted that the level of difficulty and Lexile level that the students will encounter on the exam is often beyond their ability. The participants echoed Mrs. Boudreaux’s conclusion that:

The students up to this point have received short and sweet little snips of literature and nothing in its entirety. For some of the prose that they will see, it will be so difficult for them, that they simply give up. Several will shut down. They do not have the skill base to conquer the material or the confidence to overcome the feeling of helplessness. So that is something that I had to learn how to teach them without over teaching or guiding them too much, I teach them through exposure. Free Response Question (FRQ) are challenging for my students and the more that they can do, the better off they will become at constructing the responses in the short time frame that they are given.

Ms. Cooper observed that the rural students in her class had experienced such a limited introduction to rigorous literature, but she combat that obstacle by offering larger chunks of literature rated at higher Lexile levels. Mrs. Kern would identify this issue to be one of the major academic struggles that she would need to address in her classes as well. Ms. Cooper stated that:

A big part of AP is exposure to different types of texts. It is moving beyond the basic fiction and working with those nonfiction pieces is where students truly begin to struggle. The ability to read complex texts is critical to the AP experience and a lot of our students are not at the reading comprehension level required to be successful in AP coursework.
Comprehension is an essential building block to be able to thrive in the course, so working in texts that are at a higher Lexile level from the beginning is crucial. They will struggle and you must be willing to accept that and be prepared to help them work through the resistance that will follow.

Mrs. Fordam remarked that on her rural campus, the curriculum decisions regarding her AP Lang classroom and driven:

In terms of what I choose to teach, it is based on the availability of what literature that I have access to, and I do not have much for short stories and poems. Everything is digital, copies are rationed, and our technology access is equally as limited. I teach the novels that are here in my cabinet, because I do not want to make students purchase books. The teacher that had this class before would choose new novels every year and some were costly because they were more modern. Those books were sometimes really expensive for the rural student and can create quite a burden on—a paperback that cost as much as $20. I choose to go with books that I have so no student has to go a purchase a book.

Nearly all the participants in the study noted the rural students’ concern with having the ability to perform and write at the level of sophistication that AP Language coursework commands. Mrs. Guitreau recognized that one of the greatest struggles that the rural AP educator faces is “creating a confident learner by providing the supports necessary to prepare the learners to confront complicated and multi-dimensional texts, many times before they feel that they are ready.” She also identified that the writing component of the AP Language Exam is the main reasons that the students in her rural school do not have a very high passing rate.

The participants in the study identified an additional area that their rural students struggle is in response to the lack of access to rigorous literature, and traditionally, they traditionally not as well read. Mrs. Hebert stated:

That what her students had read in their prior English classes and by the time that they reach AP, what they have read was usually below grade level, and they just have not read many quality novels if any at all. That is a huge amount of ground to cover. Excerpts are not going to cut it when you need to rely on those quality pieces for supporting evidence to strengthen the foundation of your argument.”
The participants discussed the need to introduce their students to a library of meaningful pieces of literature that they could then use for reference in their writing. Mrs. Boudreaux echoed Mrs. Hebert’s conclusion in that students will continue to struggle when they are given the universal theme if they do not have much in their personal library that they have read, they do not have that much to choose from, “so we have to fill them with as much material for thought as possible and it must be applicable to their lives to help them on the exam. It is important for them to connect with the material on a personal level for them to be able to apply the life lesson or concept.”

**Cultural Resistance**

The participants described the AP Language course to the needed life skills required to be a well-rounded and effective communicator. This communication is strongly indicative of their reading comprehension and inevitably their competency. Mrs. Fordam identified that the AP Language course gives students “all the skills that they need… the ability to read it, write it, discuss it, and defend it. If they struggle when reading it, the learner cannot proceed.” The learner’s ability to effectively communicate will have a direct influence on their choices beyond graduation. AP Lang just helps students become better at either dissecting the written or communicated word that takes place around them every day.

Mrs. Boudreaux when asked about the challenge of educating rural college-bound students, she responded with the lack of reading. She concluded that:

I do not know if has anything to do with it being rural or generational, but students just do not read. What the students do read has to be forced upon them in a school setting. Students have become savvy with figuring out how to get around reading and it shows in their comprehension. My students come to me with a great comprehension deficit that spans from the skill in general to the types of literature that they have had exposure to in past their English classes.
Ms. Cooper discussed the need to teach productive struggle in the AP course because that is not something that rural students are accustomed to and they will want to pull back, primarily because they accustomed to reading much traditionally shorter pieces.

The key to overcoming this obstacle was giving constant and focus feedback. It took large amounts of prep work on my part and individual time with each student, but it worked. For feedback to be purposeful and in time, class sizes had to somewhat regulated because you want to offer grading and daily feedback for AP content that is individualized, directed, and effective. In a class of 25-30 students, time with each student is limited and you find yourself spread super thin.

Mrs. Davidson affirmed that, in many instances, the rural classroom represents a variety of cultures and levels of learning. She stated that on a campus:

With students coming from a limited number of feeder schools, the learning can be somewhat constant; however, in a rural community, you could have learners coming in from all different places—as many as 10 feeder schools which can yield a mixed bag [various levels of learners] where early student assessment and intervention is key. The summer assignment provides students the opportunity to experience the AP learning continuum on a much smaller scale with guided support and it also furnishes the AP educator with needed data, skill analysis, and insight to the learner.

Mrs. Fordam referred to the use of after-school tutoring to address academic gaps in the underserved community and for students who are not on grade level. The program showed great potential and received positive interest; conversely, the additional issue of having a ride home in the afternoon would quickly become one of the largest obstacles. The students who would benefit from the afternoon tutoring sessions were often dependent upon the school bus for transportation home at the end of the school day.

Mrs. Granier described the cultural resistance to be the mere result of a lack of experience and exposure. The literature that the students are experiencing, many for the first time, is “so rich and seems so advanced in some cases that our students feel overwhelmed at the start.” Each of the 10 educators commented how this AP learning experience looked different when students
who have had a background in Pre-AP-styled learning viewed the challenging work. The comfort and confidence level were very different, and the students were no longer bound by the culture or by a particular barrier. The participants discussed the need for scaffolding as a response to combat cultural resistance, support students in addressing the more challenging AP framework and standards, and to help the students reach their learning goals while developing their confidence towards college-level work.

**Limited Access to Technology**

Each of the participants referenced some degree of struggle associated with the rural student’s access to technology both on the school campus and at home. Of the 10 AP educators interviewed, 8 of the rural teachers stated that their school did not have a 1:1 technology ratio before COVID in which restrictions required the students to have access to a laptop and Internet outside of the classroom. Access to technology and consistent WIFI served as a substantial barrier as much on the campus, as it did off. Participants mentioned that in many instances, prior to COVID, they would have to schedule the library or the computer lab to ensure access to assignment or web-based AP resources.

Many of the rural educators referred to the limited access to the Internet once their students left school. Mrs. Guitreau noted that:

> Even the most robust technology plans cannot compensate for the lack of Internet once the student tries to access the assignments at home. I still often make paper copies because handing them a computer does not fix the real-life responsibilities that they face once they leave class.

The participants discussed that overall, the rural students and their willingness to work after school is also not as customary. In many of the interviews, the participants noted the emphasis associated with responding to family responsibilities and supports provided by the rural
student and how are often quite different and include expectations that collide within the rural
culture. These expectations are frequently mixed with the strain of poverty, focus, and an overall
immaturity regarding a sophistication to technology.

Mrs. Boudreaux and Mrs. Guitreau both acknowledged that some of their students were
still so new to the computer-based world but remained persistent that the reading must occur
prior to the start of class. Students must come in prepared to discuss, if the seminar-styled
learning will be the primary objective during class. In each of the interviews, the participants
recognized the need for grade-level (at least) and independent reading as critical components to
the success of AP English coursework. As a rural educator, the overarching goal is to create a
balance between the rural student’s workload and their home existence without having them lose
their identify within the class.

The lack of technology and how the struggle hindered the overall course efficacy
surfaced in each of the interviews. In many of the classrooms, the teachers spoke of having to
share computer labs and face limited resources that kept them from using their time wisely. In
many instances, the teachers faced the need to choose alternative books because they did not
have enough copies for the students and had to often resort to paper copies because they did not
have the money to purchase the materials.

Technology is a wonderful resource when everyone has access to a computer; however,
the participants in this study represented many districts throughout the state of Louisiana who
had not obtained a technology ratio of one device per student. Many of the participants spoke of
the federal grants that their school districts had received and how they hoped that the money
would help their districts and schools move in more of a technology-savvy direction moving
forward. The next issue that would arise is the access to Internet in the classroom and the spotty to non-existent access that students faced once they left the high school campus.

Mr. Jacob referred to his rural classroom as the “great technology overload” that took place this year:

It was the technological aspects because up until this past year, we did everything on paper or when the students did work electronically, it was often done on their phones and that was definitely a big downfall. Technology was a huge point of contention with parents, and understandably so, but we were doing the best that we could and trying to make things work. Students and their parents, on many occasions, had to come to the school parking lot to use the WIFI or they would go to a neighbor’s house or even the local library to complete their assignments.

The participants discussed the use of COVID funding as a positive means to purchase much-needed computers that would improve the technology ratio at many their schools by providing each of their students with a laptop. Students were able to rent hotspots if they did not have Internet service at home. Mr. Jacob predicted that his school would probably end up with a class set of 30 computers per room over the initial projected ratio of providing 1 device per student. When asked if the school districts would be able to fund the continued technological advancement of providing a device per student once COVID funding subsided, the participants discussed the hopes that they would at least be able to keep a classroom set of computers but that they were not sure if that would be feasible.

**Theme 4: Educator’s Autonomy and Program Efficacy**

One of the fundamental strengths that surfaced during the interviews was College Board’s ability to provide alignment for educators both nationally and globally through the implementation of forums, checkpoints, and connectivity. The College Board website progress checks provide an opportunity for educators and students to adhere to a both a national and global level of accountability.
Mrs. Ardoin stated that the training that we receive to become an AP certified educator has “just made me a better teacher and the AP framework has taught me how to show students the process of true analytical thinking. I am truly a better teacher because of AP.”

Mrs. Granier said that AP has strengthened her skillset as an educator, and she could “say this time and time again, I didn’t know how to be a teacher until I was trained in AP. It really impressed me just the way you learn how to build your own curriculum that I believe in and understand. I just think AP makes better teachers and better students.”

**Professional Development and Engagement**

Of the rural educators interviewed, four participants had completed the training and were qualified to score the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition Exam. They each stated that making the choice to become an AP educator and participate in the capacity of an official exam grader has made them a more highly effective educator and a more engaged AP investigator.

Mrs. Ardoin made the decision early in her career as an AP educator to become a reader, meaning that she would become an official grader of the AP English Literature and Composition exam for College Board. She noted that the primary reason that she chose to become a grader was because “my AP scores overall were not the greatest and I wanted to understand why, so I decided to join in the process to see what was missing and how it could be better for my kids. Seeing the process from the inside has made me a better teacher—it is just good teaching and being able to collaborate with teachers across the United States literally set me of fire.”

Ms. Cooper did not get to attend her training in person but became an AP grader virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions and still maintains that the training that she received was some of the “most positive and most productive professional development” that she had ever
experienced. She continued by saying that the opportunity to collaborate with AP educators and to see the process from the inside made her a stronger teacher and provided her with the necessary tools to better prepare her students and to support them during the AP experience. Ms. Cooper also said that she will attend an in-person training whenever she has the opportunity.

**Course Design and Development**

During the interviews, the participants were asked how the curriculum and lessons differed for those students who participated in AP English Language and Literature courses versus those who made the decision to take a more traditional route in academic English classes. The AP educators reaffirmed how the course design and curriculum development in the AP classroom resides with the AP educator and declared how this shift in focus was positively perceived as one of the fundamental strengths of the program in the advanced rural classroom. The educators noted the ability to choose impactful pieces of literature that their students could personally connect to and choose manipulatives that would best serve their students while addressing the potential learning divide.

A portion of the interview included examining how the rural teachers modified or adapted the AP Language and/or Literature and Composition curriculum to address the potential learning deficits or the overall educational inequities of an underserved population. The participants spoke of the need to serve their students by setting high expectations to combat the learning inequities. Mrs. Kern characterized AP Language as “providing the most appropriate platform to service the rural student that would benefit them directly in the class and in the future. That class is about preparing for life—it is about the struggles and the wins.” Mrs. Granier stated that “working with rural students is a great challenge at times, but with it, comes great rewards.”
Teacher Autonomy

The participants celebrated the freedom to design their AP courses to respond directly to the needs of their students as one of the appealing factors of the AP curriculum. They each referenced the AP course descriptions as being a guide to the skill expectations for the courses, but teachers could then scaffold the learning and design individualized pacing structures that would most benefit the students in their classrooms. The Springboard textbook, designed by College Board, offers a series of excerpts that blend to reinforce a common theme. The AP course expectations rely heavily on creating engaged learners who are equipped with a diverse literary base and the skills to read and respond analytically utilizing advanced rhetorical devices.

Mrs. Boudreaux regarded the freedom that AP offers in course design and development as having such a positive relationship within her rural classroom:

It is real teaching. I feel like that is what teaching should really be, because I am more of a facilitator instead of following a script or having to teach certain things in a certain way that is designed to pass a specific test. AP is about teaching the whole student to be a better student.

Mrs. Boudreaux identified that one of the major curricular strengths in AP Literature exists in the freedom provided in the course description (standards and expectations). The description consists of an “inclusive list of literature where I can choose what pieces will most benefit my students, the materials that will best reach my students, and also which literary pieces and materials that I have access to in my school.” The participants noted that the course description serves as more of a guide that grants freedom to both the teacher and the student and allows the teacher to design, develop, and implement the curriculum structure is, as Mrs. Kern agreed, “what teaching should be.” In many academic courses now, teachers are heavily scripted
based on the needs of the state standardized tests and teachers find themselves left with very little choice as an educator.

Ms. Cooper’s teaching experience has always revolved around the AP English classroom. She was gifted with the unique opportunity to complete her year of student teaching in AP English Literature and Composition. As a student, Ms. Cooper had taken AP Literature, but had no experience with AP Language. She noted that learning first-hand was powerful because she was able to use her personal experiences from AP Literature to propel her lessons while learning about the concepts associated with AP Language. She also identified how different the two worlds were and each framework required its own contextual skills set of both the educator and the learner.

Ms. Cooper received the call to teach both AP Literature and AP Language the week before school started and she felt that she was not adequately prepared. She reiterated that AP Language, though she noted that she did not have enough training going into the experience, is the “most important class that a student can take when they are in high school because it really teaches them to face the scale of coursework that they will meet in college. I particularly appreciate the autonomy that AP extends to its educators in allowing us to design a course that best meets the individual needs of our students.”

Mrs. Davidson described the English I and II teachers in her rural school as being “some of the strongest teachers to implement the Pre-AP experience into their daily lessons” and they choose to do it because they believe in the process and they know that it works. She identified that:

Once the students get to their junior and senior English classes, they are prepared to tackle AP Language and Literature. It is essential for the consistency of a close alignment to exist within the AP and academic English Department because you would just know
where to pick up. The learning would always be perpetual. A course does not have to carry the ‘Pre-AP title’ to prepare students to think and to respond analytically; however, you do have to have educator buy-in, and we are fortunate enough to have teachers who are on board.

The participants identified that the strongest department will best benefit students if educators incorporate collaboration, connectivity, and promote a vertically aligned skill set with the support of the administration. Teachers must provide consistent and collective skill set and the AP curriculum fosters the necessary platform of autonomy. Most of the educators during their interview, such as Mrs. Granier, suggested that they “sneak AP skills into the current curriculum whenever possible. because it is just good instruction.”

Mrs. Fordam reveled in one of the overall appeals to educators and the implementation of AP as being its ability to offer the freedom of creativity within your lessons. She stated that:

In a world of scripted and heavily mandated curriculums, AP offers choice. AP represents an outlet for to still be able to have control over my own lesson plans and over my design. My lessons are a direct reflection of my creation packed with my creativity and I find myself more engaged in the lessons, because I believe in them.

The participants AP gives you literally a set of standards and you develop your lessons in response to addressing those targets. Mrs. Ardoin described the scope of the courses as being comprehensive and remarked how the standards break down a necessary central knowledge that is full of smaller skills that lead into big primary ideas. Mrs. Granier appreciates the autonomy that the AP curriculum offers to the educator and the ability to design a curriculum that directly responds to the needs of each specific group of students and how AP does not utilize a one-size approach and it offers such a variety of strategies that can apply to so many different kids and their different learning styles. She recognized:

The main thing that I liked about the AP course itself was that even though there are parameters that College Board does set, you know that they do want you to have certain types of literature and certain types of materials; however, they do not take away your
autonomy. You can still really mold the curriculum to fit your students’ needs and still give them the skills that they need to be effective in college and beyond. Most importantly, the curriculum is not scripted, and it is so much more effective because it allows you to take students where you feel that they need to go.

Mr. Jacob compared the freedom of autonomy that College Board provides its teachers in AP Literature to the prescribed daily lessons in the current curriculum that they are required to use now. He said that the freedom that College Board “granted to us more options regarding the design of our courses and discussion boards as long as you created a course syllabus and implemented the skills and genres of literature that AP requested in the course description.” The participants reiterated that AP would allow them to use a variety of different strategies in a manner that best fit their kids as well as coach them in the various ways to write. Mr. Jacob said that “with College Board and with the freedom to design our course, we were not so pigeonholed as we have become.”

Mrs. Kern made a bold statement, “You have to be willing to grow as an educator and be willing to evolve.” She acknowledged what works for one AP Language or Literature section, may not work for another and you must adapt accordingly. “Many times, the students who enter our classrooms in August represent a ‘mixed bag of tricks’ because they are funneling in from a variety of feeder schools and have a blended background regarding their fundamental skills.” The participants echoed that as efficacious educators, they must be willing to address the now without losing sight of the end goal. Most referring to the backwards-by-design vision (start with the goal and work backwards to confirm the steps to achieve it), AP allows them with the prospect of seeing where they need to go and planning out the activities that will help them get there. Mrs. Kern said:

Of course, at times, I will get discouraged—well, frustrated, but the great thing is knowing that all the primary skills that AP encourages is going to come back around. The
students will see the foundational skills, those essential big-ticket items, again. It is not a one-time thing. I like having the freedom to gauge student struggles and readdress the things that added attention because my students’ needs vary and so should my teaching style.

**Program Efficacy and Professional Connectivity**

The program efficacy and professional collaboration offered through the AP and the Advanced Placement Summer Institute (APSI) was progressively recognized in each of the 10 interviews conducted. The study participants, representing both the novice and experienced educator, referred to the professional development and instruction that they received at the APSI as “just good teaching” and said that they really “learned to teach” during that summer experience, whether virtual or in-person.

Mr. Jacob noted the professional connectivity that AP provides through its trainings and resources as the principal strength for teachers. He also identified that:

The program’s scope and benefits came from the fact that you must go through the intensive AP training where you are put in the mindset of the students. We went through a crash course in applying ourselves from the perspective of the students in which we were aiming to serve. It was at that moment that we switched from thinking like teachers addressing materials to understanding how to be most effective for our students. I left that training a better teacher.

The participants described the professional collaboration that AP advocates as a program that provides teacher with skills linked to advancing teacher efficacy and supplies professional connectivity. Mrs. Kern “You no longer feel like you are alone on an island anymore—you can see the curriculum design, both horizontally and vertically. There is always someone to reach out too and to collaborate with regarding the content.”

**Advanced Placement Summer Institute (APSI)**

Mrs. Ardoin said that her experience with each one of the several large-scale institutes that she remembered walking away from that training and thinking:
Wow! I wish someone could have shown me this when I was in college. I wish a teacher would have done for me what I am fixing to do for these kids. From the start, I loved it [training] and I felt empowered. I just took the rigor and the analytical thought processes and stayed excited about being able to give that to my students.

Mrs. Boudreaux was granted the opportunity to attend a local APSI and said that she became “a sponge in that workshop… I craved the information that they were willing to give me because I just knew that it was good stuff. I knew that it would help my kids. I did not want to miss a thing. I was like, teach me, tell me what I need to know.” Ms. Cooper attended a local APSI and did not feel that she received all that she could have to most benefit her students. She said that the training felt like a band-aid meant to cover the situation instead of implementing a platform of learning designed to enlighten her rural classroom and positively influence her teaching. The positive influences in her AP classroom would culminate from the connections that she made via social media (Facebook) and within her district.

Mrs. Fordam praised the connectivity that the APSI offered to her personally and how the materials and lesson concepts shared within that training:

Set the stage for a deep reflection into my teaching practices. I became a real teacher at that training. I am part of several professional AP groups that share a Google Drive that is full of materials that are ready to be rolled out any day into the AP Lang classroom. I have used many of the lessons as starters that I then can tweak to fit the needs of my students. It is important to remember that not all students look or learn alike, and they definitely do not have the same needs.

The AP educators identified the Google Drive as being a great place that was full of lesson starters, but the APSI helped to clarify their understanding of the AP Standards and allowed them with the opportunity to create a strong connectivity with the other AP educators in the room. Mrs. Fordam and Mrs. Boudreaux both noted that there is great power in numbers and that they stay in close contact with the other educators from their groups because they do not have other AP Language teachers at their school.
Mrs. Granier was just a second-year teacher when she began the quest of AP learning and she immediately found herself on a road trip headed to an APSI Training and she regarded the training as “probably the best professional development that I had ever had in my whole life.” It was not long after that she would find herself part of the AP classroom to experience the skills hands-on and completely grasp the value of AP learning. Mrs. Granier described herself as a brand new teacher when her department decided to visit a sister school in Texas that had implemented AP for years. She expressed that the school “had a good Pre-AP program in the middle schools, so it was a good school to go look at to get an idea of what was going on earlier in the learning process.” She additionally noted that “one of the teachers had taught with the teachers there, so there a was strong working relationship there with them already and that made it easier for them to get their foot in the door.” Mrs. Granier identified that the most helpful resource was that:

We were able to observe them teaching in their classes and I learned so much. It empowered us and offered us the reassurance that we could do this and that we could bring this powerful program to our students. We started by pulling AP schools who had syllabi posted online and we collaborated with many of those schools to build one that would work for us. Our Texas friends have shared such many materials with us which has helped us to build a quality AP program that directly benefits our students.

Mrs. Granier also noted that there was not money to pay for her team to attend the APSI in advance, so many of them “maxed out their credit cards to go with the hopes of being reimbursed upon their return. There was little incentive to attend an APSI in my district, but the benefits are huge—especially for our students who already face so much.”

Mr. Jacob spoke favorably of the APSI that he attended as “a week-long intensive focus on how to put the course together, because we actually had choices.” It was the first time in his
career that he was able to see and participate in the “entire scope and design of a curriculum.”

The training concentrated on:

What teachers should be looking for, how we should be grading using the AP rubric, and what the end game was… preparing our students for work that took place in class, the assessment, and how to ultimately prepare our students for what happens next, beyond my class. I felt empowered just by having a seat at the table. I was surrounded by amazing teachers who knew how to grow college-minded learners and all I wanted to do was take it all in.

Mrs. Kern acclaimed how her school succeeds in blending students from a “melting pot” of feeder schools into the AP course track, but she identified that there is a substantial underserved population on her school’s campus and that they “have not done a great job of reaching minority students.” She said that she used the chance to experience and collaborate with other AP educators to see how their schools work to strengthen the area and increase student representation. We work with those college preparatory students and identify the minority groups that could benefit from the AP English experience and the ability to provide college readiness.

Mrs. Kern discussed how underserved populations deserve more of a voice and how her school vowed want to provide them with the same information and opportunity to advanced coursework as their classmates. The participants noted that inclusion, with the intent to lessen the equity gap for the underserved population, must be more than just identifying those who are capable; likewise, they must receive the encouragement necessary to register for the AP coursework, and it must challenge them academically. Mrs. Kern remarked that the “relationship between the underserved learner and the AP curriculum will strengthen the connection between their academic growth during their high school experience and their future potentials on the college campus.”
AP Classroom... Online Portal to Discovery

The increased connectivity through access to online materials and a thriving collaboration with other AP educators emerged in nine of the 10 interviews because the teachers had a place to go for literature and supplemental aids. Four of the teachers did state that the AP Classroom (online portal) was “not user friendly.” A primary issue posed for those students who had limited access to the Internet because once they left school, they had no access to the reading materials. To overcome this obstacle, many of the teachers would make paper copies for those students so that they would be able to stay current with their assignments. AP Classroom in the rural school was more effectively utilized as a support-driven, informational portal that could be accessed on campus.

Mrs. Ardoin said that she felt that there were “more materials available to AP teachers online. College Board has provided the process checks on the College Board website for teachers to utilize to make sure that we are on the right track.” This website offers course descriptions and suggestions for teachers to use when they are designing their individual courses:

The nice thing about AP is that nobody is going to come in and make sure you are doing what you say that you are doing. You submit a syllabus to College Board and then they let you teach. There is a binder with the course descriptions, and I have a mixture of following that, but I also have the ability and autonomy to add in a variety of text, a blend of prose and poetry, that I know are going to be well received in the rural community in which I teach. I mean in some places they can teach some controversial text maybe in a big city, but in a Bible-belt area, you are limited. College Board gives me the freedom to choose the materials that best fit my students and it also must include materials that I have access to on my campus.

Mrs. Boudreaux was not as intrigued with the AP Classroom strongly noting that it was “the worst website that I have ever seen in my life. It is awful, just awful. It is extremely difficult to navigate, it is extremely difficult for students and teachers to use. I have tried to use it several times this year and gave up. I ended up remaking much of the materials into Google Docs, post
them in Google Classroom, and printing the materials, that way the kids can still have the exposure to those style of questions.” She also stated that AP English Literature exam had recently undergone a transition in the format of multiple-choice questions. The only place that students can gain access to this new style of questioning is through the AP Classroom and her students just needed better access to this information. She had set a professional goal to continue to work with the materials to better meet the needs of her students while addressing the new AP multiple choice question format.

The primary complaints that Mrs. Boudreaux had regarding AP Classroom is that the website was not user friendly, it was not compatible to the laptops on campus (students had to download additional programs to gain access were often restricted by the district), and ultimately, students would not have access to the materials once they left the campus (limited to no internet access). A positive feature of the AP Classroom was that you could assign practice tests for the students. This access granted students with “the opportunity to take retired exams in real time; however, they were not graded by official graders from College Board, so the students did not get the chance to see a possible score. Classroom teachers still graded the FRQs (free response question) and were expected to the give the appropriate feedback.”

Mrs. Davidson remarked that the guidelines and supports that College Board posted for the 2019-20 school year:

In sharing the new course descriptions, expectations and exam requirements was nothing short of amazing. It was absolutely the most transparent that College Board had ever been in terms of skills and in what they expected students to know than in the past years. I felt more confident about what they were looking for from us instead of the ambiguous approach from before. Students knew where to go, and I knew how to guide them with a more precision. AP Classroom was such a strong support component for both me and my students and it was evident in our exam passing rate.
Mrs. Fordam specifically noted the availability of the progress checks in AP Classroom as a powerful connection between the classroom and the exam. This new and welcomed transparency:

Creates the mode of stylized test practice that will directly aid the students in scoring higher on the AP Exam. I do not believe that the AP experience is merely about passing the exam, it is about the exposure; however, I want my students to also have access to prepare with the tools available to run the race strong. You do not wait until the week before to train for a marathon, you train by running each week by running a little longer and maybe a little faster until to gain both distance and stamina.

Mrs. Granier reiterated that when she began the AP journey, being somewhat fresh out of college and new to the classroom, she still did not have a good grasp on how to be a good teacher. She said that prior to AP, she struggled with how to present materials, choose the most effective types of strategies out there, and implement the best-fit scenarios for certain topics that would positively impact her students. The introduction to the College Board’s AP Classroom at her APSI session:

Gave me the insider’s edge to seeing the whole picture. It was the first time that I really could comprehend a curriculum in its entirety. When I got home from APSI, I spread all my materials out on the floor, and I could see it—I could see the amazing connections. And so, it really taught me how to go through a planning process as a teacher with an end goal in mind, like the backwards by design concept that tell you about but never really get to truly plan in some cases. The AP Classroom guides my teaching and sets the stage for my students and their learning.

**Social Media and Professional Association**

The participants perceived the AP Literature group on Facebook as being one of the links that provides a very strong connection for professional collaboration. Mrs. Hebert said that it is one of her favorite places to peruse for lesson starters and it is also a great place to post questions and share teaching ideas. Many of the APSI trainers belong to this group and will participate in many of the posts where teachers are discussing concepts, prompts, etc.
Mrs. Ardoin and Mrs. Boudreaux both noted the positive relationship between their classroom and the Facebook group of nationwide AP English Literature educators as being a place to talk to other teachers from other states about all things AP. The participants described the resource as empowering because for many of the rural AP teachers, they are the only AP English teacher at their school. The online resource provides a mode of connectivity to combat the feeling of being alone when there is no one to collaborate with when it comes to the AP requirements, expectations, and daily assignments. The ability to talk to other teachers across other states is amazing because we get to share ideas, materials, and lessons.

The teachers noted that although they cannot use everything posted on the Facebook site, the lessons are often a great place to start. Mrs. Boudreaux expressed that belonging to the AP Lit Facebook group also gained her you access to the shared Google Drive that is packed with wonderful resources, lesson starters, etc. The participants compared the Facebook group to a fantastic toolbox when it comes to providing a highly personalized encouragement and a concentrated professional support system.

Mrs. Davidson credited that the “new and improved super transparency” that College Board unveiled through AP Classroom and the valuable professional development opportunities presented via YouTube is what helped her students to attain such a high exam passing rate on the AP Language and Composition Exam even amid battling obstacles associated with virtual learning and COVID-19:

I did all the PDs [professional developments] that College Board offered on YouTube—I watched every single session, and each were powerful and full of information that I directly applied to my classroom. With College Board’s focus on making the materials readily accessible on YouTube, I feel like that is the leveled playing field that rural teachers need, they no longer must ask for $800 to travel to Fort Worth to go to an institute. They can just access the training from their computer.
Of the participants interviewed, five mentioned the direct and positive impact that having a direct method of communication with many of the AP trainers, that actively engaged in the AP Facebook group, had on their classrooms. They identified that the resource provided them with the portal to pose questions and have people, who are on the test committee or have been in the past, weigh in with quality information was resource so important to teach the course. The participants appreciated that the web access was very helpful and free which was equally as important; furthermore, Mrs. Davidson noted that the resource, aside from being affordable, had to be worth her time.

Mrs. Fordam celebrated College Board’s AP Daily Videos as a highly beneficial professional development tool:

That consisted of a diverse group of educators (representing the many demographics that the AP programs serve) and a multitude of AP trainers that were charged with making instructional videos for student and teacher use. They are amazing! I watch them all the time and use the materials in my classroom often. There is literally a video for every skill!

Mrs. Granier regarded the online AP trainings and resources to be “invaluable… that is where I really learned how to be a teacher.” She said that the “most empowering moment came from sitting around a table, beside people who are the best at what they do, and they are sharing their materials and wisdom with me.” College Board has recently revamped their materials, and everything is online. She also noted that the online platform represented a huge resource and such a strong avenue of connectivity and alignment for AP educators regardless of their years of experience with the program. One of the largest realizations that took place was when they had access to the materials, but their kids were not ready academically to accept the challenge. Mrs. Granier, as many of the participants mentioned, had to adapt:
I think the biggest thing was putting the training websites on YouTube and Facebook, created by the trainers to work for us, and many of them post a lot of their materials that are ready for you to use. You can pull and take things that would fit what you are doing and make it your own, but we quickly realized that our kids were not quite there yet, and the materials were going to need to a little tweak to work.

Mr. Jacob discussed the excitement that he experiences with “scouring the Internet, nearly daily to see that is going on in AP English classes across the country, especially from the Texas schools that we know are doing the programs right and are getting the results that we are aiming to get.” He unanimously identified the need to scaffold learning and spoke of the AP vision as being able to present his students with a rich learning experience. No expectations, just strong teaching, and good learning. Mrs. Granier discussed how her “no-expectation passing rate” would quickly transition to the successful passing rate that they have today. Mr. Jacob stated that “even if they did not achieve the college credit at the conclusion of the course, they definitely were a more open-minded and receptive learner because of the experience.” The participants echoed that the AP English Language and Literature classes teach the critical life skills that lead to effective communication through analytical thinking, rhetorical writing and speaking.

Mrs. Kern distinguished that for her, the excitement of online collaboration with AP teachers across the country allows her the opportunity to see what other visionaries are doing in their classrooms and to see what will fulfill the needs of her kids. “I think also that is kind of just seeing the success that students have that really pushes me to stay interested in seeing how I can further challenge my students. I really like what I teach, and I love sharing my passion with other AP educators.”
Summary

The findings of this interpretive phenomenological study provided insight by sharing the lived experiences of Advanced Placement English educators as they prepare rural, college-bound students for the transition to the college campus. Four themes emerged from the 10 qualitative interviews that were conducted. Each theme identified the positive influence and motivation that AP Literature and/or Language and Composition and Pre-AP has provided to the rural Louisiana high school classroom and well as address the challenges that also surfaced. Implementing advanced coursework in an environment that riddled with a collection of distinct barriers requires educators who are engaged in their intent and purposeful in their approach to advance their rural college-bound learners.

Overall, the participants confirmed a positive relationship between the AP Language and/or Literature and Composition and Pre-AP courses that benefitted the rural learners because the program aimed to create an academic mindset within the student. This mindset would be the result of constructing a partnership between the learner and the curriculum that is both rigorous and relevant. The participants identified that this partnership would support an academic confidence and self-esteem within the rural student by providing them with the tools and with the experience to contribute productively on the college campus.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to examine the implementation and effectiveness of college readiness and transitional training delivered through Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework, the perceived barriers associated with enhancing college readiness and access in the rural community, and the effectiveness of supports employed to encourage college access (resources), choice (preparation), and enrollment in rural Louisiana public high schools.

The research questions were designed to gauge teacher perceptions, in a series of semi-structured interviews regarding Advanced Placement (existing program and pedagogy) and the effectiveness of college readiness techniques employed to provide students with adequate academic preparation for college in the future, evaluate the supports provided while examining current curricula and available resources employed within the students’ social-cultural context, and assess the relationship between existing barriers and the rural educator’s ability to provide enhanced college readiness skills to the rural college-bound student.

This chapter addresses the primary topics of discussion that surfaced during the progression of the study, provides response to the research questions, and presents future areas for research expansion:

1. What is the rural educator’s perception of the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework regarding program effectiveness in providing equitable access and college readiness in the rural public classroom (Louisiana) and to promote success in post-secondary education?
2. What supports (provisions and resources) are employed within the social-cultural context to encourage college readiness (access, academic preparation, and enrollment success) for rural students in Louisiana through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework?

3. What is the relationship between existing barriers and the rural educator’s ability to provide enhanced college readiness through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition courses?

This interpretive phenomenological study provided insight by sharing the lived experiences of Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition and Pre-AP educators as they prepare rural, college-bound learners with the academic skills and experiences to successfully transition to the college campus. This study revealed four primary themes regarding the perceptions, supports, and relationships between Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition and the rural educator’s ability to provide college-level access learning: (a) creation and development of an academic mindset in the rural, college-bound student, (b) maintaining AP course accessibility that provides beneficial and consistent learning opportunities to the rural learner, (c) inducts academic preparation that is equitable while actively addresses the rural learning divide, and (d) initiates a lesson platform that is autonomous for the AP educator and grants the educator with the ability to design an efficacious program that responds to the individual learning needs of the college-bound, rural student within the educational environment.
Discussion

The rural road to college can prove to be a bumpy ride without the equitable access to educational initiatives and involved educators who assist in conditioning the student with advanced college-styled learning opportunities along the way. Daun-Barnett et al. (2014) affirmed that the road to college would involve the implementation of educational initiatives designed to increase academic rigor while regulating the minimum curricular standards and requirements intended to bring all learning environments to the same starting point (baseline).

Creating the Academic Mindset

The results of this interpretive phenomenological study indicates that the employment of College Board’s Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition and early access to Pre-AP learning is exceedingly beneficial for the college-facing learner. The advanced learning initiative is a critical tool in forging the academic mindset of the learner that will promote growth not only for the student but create a climate of innovation and inquiry on the rural campus. Creating a culture of excellence where students are not defined by the barriers that they face but by the possibility and opportunity that they represent. Advanced Placement forces students to think both critically and analytically and challenges them to engage with academic work at a level that they would not normally encounter in an average academic English classroom. The advanced coursework fashions a skill base within the learner that is more about the execution than it is about the story.

According to Irvin et al. (2009), success in advanced coursework and persistency in college readiness emerges from the overlapping of four holistic domains: cognitive and metacognitive factors, motivational and affective factors, developmental and social factors, and individual-differences factors. Irvin et al. (2009) identified the first domain, which refers to
thought processes (cognitive factors), involving a variety of learning strategies used to reflect on the information obtained during a learning experience (metacognitive factors). The second domain addresses “students’ efforts (motivational factors) and emotional states, beliefs, and interests (affective factors) influence learning” (p. 32). The third domain refers to the “previous experiences and learning (developmental factors) and interpersonal relations between students and teachers or facilitators (social factors) that affect current learning” (p. 32). The final domain refers to the “differences between and within students (individual-differences) that influence learning” (p. 32).

The academic mindset of a learner is one where the student is both challenged to gain confidence and to experience self and robustness in character while functioning with a network of their peers (many times, this is a first experience). The AP English courses provide heightened academic expectations and accountability for the learner through coursework that is both rigorous and relevant. Advanced Placement is notorious for its rigorous course load provides opportunity to construct an academic confidence while enhancing the self-esteem of the learner through productive struggle and wins within the sanctuary of the high school classroom.

Advanced Placement learning opportunities provide open doors for underserved students who are often discounted; however, rural students represent a growing number of students who venturing onto the college campus each year. All learning opportunities are not equal, nor is the environment (resources and supports) in which they exist. The rural classroom, the dedicated educators, the learners, and their family supports often face unique barriers that range from lack of resources that are a result of poverty to increased levels of state-mandated accountabilities; furthermore, the implementation of advanced learning through AP provides students the opportunity to develop a sense of determination and a college-persistent mindset amid adversity.
Students from underserved populations require more attention; however, they tend to receive a lesser concentration at this critical junction due to reduced staff and the driving influences of career and college counselors involved in the college access process.

Creating the academic mindset means constructing a working relationship of encouragement within the village. That sense of partnership and community between the rural classroom and the family. Perna and Jones (2013) model “identifies four nested contextual layers that influence students’ college enrollment and choice” (p. 12). Perna and Jones (2013) described the model concept as working from the inside and moving outward and identified the four layers as the individual’s habitus or student and family context (layer 1); school and community context (layer 2); the higher education context (layer 3); and the broader social, economic, and policy context (layer 4). The partnership is critical to assisting in educating not only the college-bound rural student, but in enlightening the family support that help to guide the student in their educational endeavors. In establishing a sense of village aimed at providing encouragement for the learner to task risks, AP educators condition the learner by building an academic independence and a sense of confidence where learners are reassured that they are capable. Creating a classroom and school climate of prominence begins with fashioning a belief system that encourages students can do this level of advanced work.

Working with peers and learning to communicate is one of the fundamental core values of the AP English Language and Literature standards. Students are encouraged think analytically and to provide evidence to support their conclusions. They are also taught how to productively disagree in this academic setting. Modeling socialization and communication skills are vital to the welfare of the AP classroom and to their future college and life-level interactions because of the exposure to various views and the respect that is gained in acknowledging someone that may
have a different perspective. In the study, the participants echoed how students in the AP English courses learn to become part of the global community… something larger than themselves. Mrs. Boudreaux said it best when she noted that, “It is in that setting that they often come to the realization that there is something bigger out there.” The AP educators noted that rural students have often lived a sheltered existence, but they are not immune to tragedy or the effects of real life at a young age.

Designing the academic mindset of an engaged learner is taking those tragic and unstable moments and using them to benefit the learner and broaden their views rather than restrict them. Conley (2013) identified the four keys to college and career readiness as being able to 1) think (cognitive strategies); 2) know (accumulation of “foundational” content knowledge); 3) act (skills associated with student “ownership” of learning and fundamental techniques); and 4) go (transitional knowledge and skills that must exist “beyond high school”). A fluid relationship must exist between the federal, state, and local (high school) governance to focus on learning initiatives that concentrate on creating systems alignment (emphasis on college readiness and success in college) at all policy levels. Providing a sense of engagement within the works that they are analyzing and supporting the ability for the rural learner to connect with the work that they are doing is critical to stakeholder buy-in. The rural students must believe in what they are doing and understand the impact that the advanced learning and instruction can have on their future.

Creating the academic mindset and a resilience of self and work ethic in an underserved population is, as Mrs. Hebert noted, “not about the story, it is about the execution. It is the way that the story is created and grafted into capturing the interests of the students, setting that bar
high and encouraging them to reach and grow. It is also about being there to help them up when they fall.”

The academic mindset is reinforced in an environment that promotes inquiry and encourages risks, but it also is a platform for students to experience diverse perspectives where they engage as members of a global community of support. Building a community of support on the rural campus grants students with the opportunity to grow and develop their academic mindset from the discussions that take place within the classroom community and from having their voices heard and valued while learning to be attentive to the words of their classmates. This awareness of communication instructs students in how to engage in an academic setting where they learn to question and not take things for face value. Advanced Placement English coursework provides the platform for student inquiry and opportunity that stimulates and encourages a more engaged learner. Embedding the academic mindset provides students with the prospect of transitioning to a responsible learner that is accountable for their own learning is what will yield a more engaged stakeholder on the college campus and the barriers that once impacted their learning now motivates them to strive for better and progressively makes them stronger.

Course Accessibility

The benefits of implementing Advanced Placement English coursework in the rural classroom as a means of providing college-ready learning in this study has proven to have a very strong association. The teachers perceived the relationship between what the course offered to their both their students and how the program advanced their rural classrooms. Of the teachers interviewed, 4 of them noted that their districts had or were in the process of moving away from providing AP coursework and they added their discontent with the decisions to terminate the AP
programs at their schools. Of the educators interviewed, not one of them had a negative outlook associated with the program and the influence potential that it can have on the rural learner; however, they noted that they often did not feel that the program received the adequate support from the district and administrative levels that the AP program geared in preparing college-minded learners should.

Some of the teachers discussed paying for the APSI trainings and materials themselves because they believed in the program and the potential for opportunity and for the impact that it could have on their rural students, classrooms, and how the instruction and professional development could impact their overall teaching efficacy. Hendrix and Degner (2016) examined the call for necessary training and guidance support as a response to the teacher scarcity (highly qualified) that exists currently in rural schools. Rural schools often struggle to hire qualified teachers with training in specialized AP content areas (Cross & Burney, 2005; Hendrix & Degner, 2016; Irvin et al., 2009). Rural schools often face a limited faculty which also limits their scope of expertise (academic opportunity and supports).

Klopfenstein (2003) revealed how often in at-risk learning environments, AP teachers are placed out-of-field without adequate support for professional development, applying narrow enrollment criteria for students entering the program, using AP exam scores for program assessment, and communication failures between teachers, parents, and administrators about the unique demands of AP can diminish the effectiveness of a school’s AP program and the impact that it can have on the underserved learner. Providing teachers with the opportunity to engage in professional development that will have a direct impact on the rural campus and on the college-bound students, but the program’s success is often gauged by the AP test scores and not the development of the student and the expansion of their college-leveled skill base.
Perna and Jones (2013) proposed the need for continued growth in the domain of higher education to further “expand the nation’s economy, meet workforce needs, improve the financial and social mobility of individual families, reduce discrimination and inequality, and develop a better-educated citizenry” (p.1). Program longevity and the necessary funding will exist if there is an encouraged appreciation for what the program can add to the rural classroom and the underserved population and the impact on the impending workforce.

Advanced Placement coursework revels in providing a learner with the analytical skills to read a complex text, but they must first know of the program and of its potential. Klopfenstein (2003) disputed that if AP is going to serve as a national standard used to affirm academic excellence and gauge college readiness, then there must be little tolerance for educational inequities to subsist in the classroom. Academic counseling is a critical component to engaging the learner and their family support in the decision to have their student attempt the advanced coursework. College Board disputes the policy of gatekeeping and notes that all students should have access to the advanced coursework if they are so intrigued. This policy is what sets AP aside from other advanced learning initiatives such as Dual Enrollment, etc. College Board does not require a specific ACT score to qualify for the course. The participants did equally note that it is important to have a courageous conversation with the student and their parent support about the expectations of the course and its rigor; however, students should not be deterred from signing up for the course. There is great opportunity for academic gain within the underserved population regarding the implementation of AP courses, but the focus must remain employed in the academic growth and skill set of the student over the coveted SPS (school performance score).
Academic Preparation

The rural learning divide will begin to experience a lessening when an essential realignment takes place, and the emphasis is placed back on the learner over the school performance score. Louisiana Believes (2019) reported that “historically disadvantaged students are attaining college and career credentials at a lower rate than their peers” (louisianabelieves.com). Daun-Barnett et al. (2014) identified that the best practices for improving academic preparation were to implement a variety of advanced initiatives (Advanced Placement, AVID College Readiness, College Summit, International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, and Dual Enrollment) that ranged from focusing on the students while some resolved to reform the learning environment provided in the school. The issue of limited resources surfaces again because rural schools often face limited access to advanced coursework.

Accountability is important and the participants noted the need for assessment and responsibility; nevertheless, the need for early intervention programs to impact the learners and prepare them for advancement must be held to as equitable of a standard. The participants spoke of a shift in their schools, as Mrs. Davidson called it, “a battle on her campus,” away from AP because the test scores at the end of the year were not as favorable as the results of Dual Enrollment and CLEP. The expectations and standards are very different between these programs and each of the participants identified that AP was the only program that they felt prepared students with skills that would be applicable throughout their college experience and continue to benefit them into the working community.

Reading comprehension and the lack of access to rigorous literature does pose to be quite a substantial barrier in the rural classroom. Students struggle because in many instances, there has been a lack of access to the more challenging literature (advanced Lexile levels) or they have
just been given very small snips of the much larger piece of literature. The participants noted that in many cases, it is not that the teachers do not want to cover the materials, the case is often that they are held to strict expectations that revolve around the state testing and reaching their personal SLTs (student learning targets) that they set at the beginning of the school year. They are often pushed to cover many pieces of literature in a short amount of time and the more advanced pieces that will take longer to teach are put to the side. As a result, students reach their junior and senior year of English classes and they struggle with comprehension and rhetorical devices because they are not accustomed to the complexity of the texts.

Cultural resistance that is associated with committing to the advanced coursework is often a result of not understanding the possibility and opportunity that the AP English courses represent. The resistance must be combatted by noting that according to each of the study’s participants, the students traditionally become better students for taking the AP course. The participants who had opted to become official exam graders for College Board said that their writing exam scores would exponentially increase because they were able to the see the process and expectations from the inside.

The SpringBoard curriculum, created by College Board, fashions a collaborative sense of vertical alignment amongst classrooms with criterion-based expectations, but some school districts have transitioned to other curriculums and texts making the alignment a little more challenging. The participants identified the positive community that develops within the curriculum and the classroom when the district is committed to ensuring a sense of vertical alignment. In the study, the teachers spoke of the need and will to fight to keep their AP classes on their campuses because they believed in what the courses did for their students and as Mr. Jacob said, “prepared them for not just college, but life.”
The realm of technology can represent the best and worst of the educational world, especially when the rural component is added. In a perfect world, every student has their own device with an unlimited access to the Internet where they can have access to discover the world; however, that is often not the case for the underserved population that faces barriers that are often a result of poverty. Hendrix and Degner (2016) conferred that for AP and advanced coursework to support online learning for rural students and to a higher rate of persistency, students and educators require consistent and intentional support (resources and curricula). Of the participants interviewed in the study, 7 of them discussed the overall lack of technology on their campuses prior to COVID. Some discussed extremely limited access where they needed to share computer labs once or twice a week; whereas others, discussed the lack of or spotty access to the Internet on their campuses and their student’s lack of access to Internet once they left the campus. The participants discussed the need to, as Mr. Jacob said, “Go old school at times… print out what we can and scaffold where we need to.”

**Teacher Autonomy and Program Efficacy**

The professional development and engagement that College Board provides to AP educators is considered one of the major strengths of the program. Mrs. Kern discussed how College Board has become “more transparent in the program’s expectations in the past two years and everything is offered online.” The participants stated that educators have so many outlets to interact professionally with other AP instructors and College Board AP program trainers across the nation with a quick email. AP Central website consists of a dashboard full of opportunities for the AP educator that is full of instructional videos, progress checks, etc. that prepare students for the computer-styled, video-based learning that they will encounter in college. The AP
Checkpoints offer practice exams so that the students can experience the format of the test that they will see at the end of the course (AP exams are administered in May).

Teacher autonomy and course design was a popular topic in the interviews conducted during this study. Each of the 10 teachers interviewed noted their contentment with College Board’s approach of leaving the course design to the teachers. The participants discussed the important of being able to address the individual learning needs of their students without the scripted approach that has become the tradition in the classroom curriculum of today.

On the rural campus, the AP educators included in this study spoke of the need to prepare their students for the ACT as well. The ability to read critically, apply annotation strategies and employ the appropriate rhetorical devices would benefit them on the ACT, but the format of the exam is quite different and they noted that it was important to prepare their students for success in that realm. On the rural campus, the classroom must often employ a variety of learning tools and manipulatives to create a platform designed to advance the whole student.

The efficacy of the AP English courses provides opportunity for connectivity and collaboration which can guide a strong sense of vertical alignment amongst districts and states. The professional training initiatives that the participants discussed (APSI, AP Central/Classroom, social media outlets, etc.) positively linked them to both fellow AP educators and to APSI instructors directly. That advanced degree of professional connectivity offers interaction that inevitably works to build stronger teachers which encourage the implementation of stronger learning initiatives within the classroom and has a great impact on students. The strong social media presence had engaged AP educators to share, guide, and encourage each other as they serve their AP students.
The AP Classroom did receive some mixed reviews; however, the participants also noted that during the past two years, it has been under a great degree of revision to make it “more accessible, more highly transparent, and more responsive” for both educators and students. Mrs. Boudreaux did discuss her discord with the AP Classroom and how it could still benefit from becoming more user friendly for the students but noted how the resources do benefit the educator. She discussed the struggle to gain access to many of the pieces of literature that College Board recommends for the lessons and she noted that she spends most of her time trying to find the texts and modify the lessons for her Google Classroom because the AP Classroom is hard to navigate.

The opportunity for professional development and engagement, whether it be online or in person at an APSI, the participants noted that the trainings were “just good teaching.” The connectivity that is provided to AP educators offers the portal to engage with each other regardless of where they are located, the socioeconomic standing of their school campus or of their students, and often does not require a healthy travel budget. Constructing positive professional relationships amongst educators’ functions to create confident learners and progressive classrooms.

**Implications for Theory**

St. John et al. (2018) stated that “sociological, economic, and educational theories have been widely used for research on college enrollment and attainment in higher education… frameworks derived from these theories focus on [expanding] students’ education choices” (p. 44). In theory, educators encourage students to make their own decisions; however, under many circumstances, those decisions are often driven by current educational policy, academic pathways, and higher education services provided to the student (St. John et al., 2018). St. John
et al. (2018) utilized the Academic Pathways Theory of Change to link Pathways to College Framework to the guarantee of student aid and support costs associated with student academic preparation prior to the transition to the college campus (access to advanced coursework that promotes college readiness) and with the costs of attending college (linkage 1). St. John et al. (2018) discussed the need to align high school curriculum and graduation requirements (linkage 2) with postsecondary encouragement programs that influence academic preparation and provide additional funding (linkage 3). St. John et al. (2018) avowed that academic preparation can be directly linked through student financial aid to enrollment (linkage 4), persistence and degree attainment (linkage 5), successful college transitions (linkage 6), and the connectivity that exists between high school resources, curriculum mandates, and graduation requirements to college success (linkage 7).

Perna et al. (2008) identified four critical layers that would serve as the foundation for the Conceptual Model of Student College Enrollment with Policy Linkages. Perna et al. (2008) declared that each layer that exists in a student’s decision-making process serves as a factor that actively influences some aspect of the on-going process associated with college access and choice. Each layer mandates a certain level of personal and societal expectation and accountability while setting demands for higher education (solidifying the supply of resources, aligning, and regulating K-12 standards with college-readiness expectations, fortifying financial aid policy, and affirmative action) (Perna et al., 2008). Perna and Jones (2013) model “identifies four nested contextual layers that influence students’ college enrollment and choice” (p. 12).

Perna and Jones (2013) described the model concept as working from the inside and moving outward and identified the four layers as the individual’s habitus or student and family context (layer 1); school and community context (layer 2); the higher education context (layer 3);
and the broader social, economic, and policy context (layer 4). Each of the layers that Perna and Jones included in this model has some bearing on the rural student’s progression towards college that ranges from their home to educational policy and economics.

**Student and Family Context (Layer 1)**

Perna and Jones (2013) employed layer 1 of the Conceptual Model of Student College Enrollment with Policy Linkage as being the intimate layer that is most influential to the student because it includes the impact of family that help to form and influence personal sentiments associated with advanced learning and with higher education. This layer includes the family’s view and value of higher education and the influence that those views have on the student. It is in this layer that the student also experiences the results of their academic achievement and see the scope of their academic preparation as they transition into college. The family and its views are most impressionable to the learner and stakeholder buy-in from this layer is essential in establishing the success in academic preparation through the AP English opportunity and how it can serve the learner to be most prepared and more secure to productively contribute to college classes.

This layer is extremely important to the rural student in that a strong connection between the home and family must be directly linked to the AP classroom and how the program can serve as an educational advantage to the student. It is in this layer that the educator and academic counselors can provide critical understanding of the AP program and construct a meaningful relationship between the learning opportunity and the learner. This opportunity to succeed in progressing their skills associated with critical reading, analytical thinking and the effective implementation of rhetorical devices are all proficiencies that will assist in advancing the college-bound rural student.
Family income and financial aid play into this layer because the degree of sticker shock that is quickly associated with college must be readily addressed. It is imperative that the learner’s personal circle or family support first understand the vocabulary of college finances before they can see the true spectrum of benefits that their learner can achieve. The expected benefits include financial gain (monetary benefits) and the cultural and societal gains (non-monetary) that help to drive the student’s expectation and acceptance of the college route. Participant (stakeholder) buy-in is significant in preparing the student to advance and succeed on the college campus. Often, the rural home and community may not represent a strong assemblage of college graduates; nevertheless, the AP English teachers in this study noted that it was imperative to serve the students and to provide the education to include not just the skills necessary to prosper in college, but also those skills that include how to attend college (expected costs associated with college and foregone earnings). The financial aid policy (layer 4) would directly link to the family and student context because the importance of attending college must be visible as one that is both equitable and affordable.

**School and Community Context (Layer 2)**

The second layer of the model would include the impact of the school and community context on the learner and how curriculums and programs implemented within the high school setting would provide college-ready and minded learners upon graduation. In this study, the implementation of AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition and Pre-AP would serve as a direct link between the rural learners and the college campus. These AP learning opportunities provide experiences that would create more critical readers and more effective analytical thinkers who would be stronger communicators in their schools, classes, jobs, and in their communities.
Wakelyn (2009) sustained that Advanced Placement courses are “not just for the elite; it’s for the prepared,” (p. 1) and that preparation does not happen in a junior or senior year in high school. Academic preparation occurs as the student successfully navigates the K-12 pipeline (de la Varre et al., 2014; Finn & Scanlan, 2020; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Perna, 2006; Wakelyn, 2009). A strong vertical alignment, or pipeline, must exist between the K-12 classroom and the college campus to prepare the most academically equipped students that are confident and prepared to address the complex and rigorous standards of the college classroom. This rigor must begin at an earlier junction to prepare students in a timelier fashion; otherwise, educators find themselves struggling for the adequate time to develop students academically for the advanced expectations that the college realm will require.

Addressing the family context, school and community impact, socioeconomic status, college access and opportunity, and social capital (challenges and barriers) are equally significant; however, the primary emphasis must be improving academic preparation in the rural classroom (St. John et al., 2018). Creating the demand for higher education and providing the college-minded student with the focus of maintaining a consistency in supporting academic preparation and achievement through alignment in the K-12 pipeline is essential in strengthening the relationship between the student and family context (layer 1) and the school and community context (layer 2).

**Higher Education Context (Layer 3)**

The third layer includes the high education context, and this layer serves as a direct reflection of the opinions and views of the student, the family support system, and the impact of the school and community context. The student’s willingness to enroll in higher education will be a direct result of the engage that emerges from this layer. In this study, the participants echoed
the need to ensure the concentration in this layer because it includes the influences that help to
drive the rural student through the commitments of the AP educator, academic counselors, and
even college recruiting efforts. It is significant that the rural student and the parent support be
able to envision the value of college life, entertain the ability to see themselves there as a viable
part of the campus, and to resonate college as both an achievable and reachable goal that will
have lasting effects on their future. Forming a connection is central to molding the concept of
what could be (possibility) with what can be (reality). The school and community context (layer
2) and social, economic, and policy context (layer 4) both lend resource to creating the overall
positive views and opinions associated with participating in advanced learning opportunities and
with the impacts associated with striving in higher education.

**Social, Economic, & Policy Context (Layer 4)**

The fourth layer lends itself to money and the idea of being able not to just dream of
higher education and obtaining the campus dream and the better life but being able to afford that
dream. The price tag associated with high education and the concept of sticker shock that
immediately follows, in a community that is no stranger to struggle, can suppress any vision of
future and prosperity. Layer 4 includes the financial aid policy that will support the dream of
attending college and make it a financial reality that is obtainable. The working relationship that
exists between the social, economic, and policy context are directly linked to the supply of
resources that are provided through family income and financial aid opportunities. In a
community that is challenged by the constraints of poverty, students and their family supports
must participate as part of a network committed to providing supportive resources and financial
information that is focused on making the significant step towards college.
Each of the layers characterized in Perna and Jones’ (2013) Conceptual Model of Student College Enrollment with Policy Linkage work together to generate a high school student who is confident and ready to enroll in college upon graduation.

Perna and Finney (2014) concluded that human capital theory (Becker, 1962; Rosen, 1976), which consists of a series of inputs and outputs, served as the strongest predictor for the investment associated with the educational skills and training required to promote the acquisition of knowledge and the establishment of talent. Educational attainment serves as a direct link to the personalized skills and talents that yields an elevation in an individual’s productivity. Higher education serves as a long-term investment that begins with the decision to attend (individual input-initial investment) and leads to the outcomes of productivity, higher earnings (finances), citizenship, and social efficacy. Educational attainment in higher education functioning in part with public policy as a productive partnership serves as both a beneficial and vital approach to address and equalize societal inconsistencies in a system created by demographic, economic, historical, and political machines (Perna & Finney, 2014).

The human capital theory begins with an individual input (initial investment) in education such as an AP course. The participants in this study concluded that the outcome of participating in AP English coursework yielded students who were more academically prepared to address the rigors and expectations of college work once they reach the college campus versus those who chose to participate in academic English classes. The outcomes or benefits also served as a social investment because the students who participated in AP English coursework learned to communicate their thoughts and opinions in a manner that was respectful and one that they were able to effectively provide evidence to support their opinions. The participants discussed how their AP English courses created productive members of society because they were introduced to
a broad spectrum of advanced learning materials, manipulatives, and rhetorical devices that would support diverse perspectives. Students in AP English courses were educated in how to disagree respectfully, and these, as Mr. Jacob called them “life skills,” will prepare them for all their future college course endeavors and interactions to come. This investment in the social input of the student will lead to a more highly productive and engaged citizen. The human capital theory would resolve with two communication-based goals in mind. One of the goals would be higher earnings that is a direct result of increased productivity; additionally, the other goal would be social efficacy which is the direct outcome of serving as an engaged citizen. Perna and Finney (2014) resolved that human capital theory (Becker, 1962; Rosen, 1976) demonstrates the impact of education and the impact that it can have on a learner, a community, and a society.

Implications for Practice

Access to advanced coursework (Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, etc.) serves as an indicator of college readiness; however, a substantial gap exists in providing the college-bound programs to underserved student populations. Rural students face significant barriers that can hinder their ability to thrive on a college campus which begins with preparing for and applying to college, navigating the process of attending successfully, and completing higher education degree program (graduation). There is a great divide within the learning continuum that separates rural students, and their parent support groups from the information, strategies, and advanced coursework offerings that could assist students successfully transition onto the college campus by providing the necessary academic preparations.

The theoretical framework of this study employed an interpretive phenomenology with an emphasis on capturing the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants associated with providing Advanced Placement coursework in the rural educational setting through a
compilation of qualitative interviews with educators actively engaged in the field. The research aimed to develop analyzing the experiences of rural AP teachers and the effectiveness of the coursework within the rural community. Exploring the phenomenon through the rural educator’s perceptions of Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework, current supports (provisions and resources) that are employed within the social-cultural context to encourage college readiness (access, academic preparation, and enrollment success) for rural students, and relationship between existing barriers and the rural educator’s ability to provide enhanced skills associated with advancing college readiness.

The findings of this study add to the efficacy and scope of Advanced Placement coursework within the rural classroom by providing emphasis on expanding course access, reinforce teacher efficacy within classrooms (advanced pedagogy), and creates academic incentives that serve rural students (providing support) in preparing for the transition to postsecondary learning.

**Recommendation 1: Pre-AP Training and Early Implementation (Perception)**

The participants in this study shared many positive experiences associated with Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition but their praise of the program and the opportunities that it offered to their rural student always seemed to be followed by a “but.” In each of the 10 interviews conducted, Pre-AP was always a topic of discussion when the potential ways to improve methods regarding college readiness training was the focus. In 5 of the interviews conducted, the participants spoke of going to visit schools in neighboring states that had a high passing rate on the AP English Language and/or Literature exam. Each of the participants identified that their middle schools implemented Pre-AP curriculums starting in sixth grade and by the time that the students reached their junior year, they were conditioned to
reading more critically for information, analyzing the texts more thoroughly, and were able to read overall more difficult texts.

Three of the participants discussed their experiences at the APSI that they attended and when they heard the passing rates that the AP teachers were reporting from the year before, they were astounded. According to the participants, the teachers that they met at the APSI all had one thing in common, their students had experienced an early introduction to Pre-AP coursework and when they reached their junior and senior-level AP English courses, they were proficient readers, knowledgeable communicators, AP-skilled writers, well-practiced in rhetorical devices.

**Recommendation 2: Professional Development AP Trainings (Perception)**

Each of the participants that shared their lived experiences associated with providing AP English coursework to the rural student all mentioned one training… College Board’s Advanced Placement Summer Institute (APSI). This professional development would be what the educators would describe as the training that “taught them how to be a teacher,” “it is just good teaching,” and “there has never been another training like it,” and one teacher even maxed out her credit card so that she could attend. Mrs. Ardoin discussed the summer that she attended her APSI as being one of the most powerful moments when she realized that she was sitting at a table with some of the best teachers in the nation. Mrs. Boudreaux talked about her APSI as “wanting to write every single thing down because it was all good teaching.” Mrs. Granier recalled the days following her APSI experience as including the moment that she “could picture the whole concept of a curriculum and appreciate all of the pieces that went into making it work for students.” Mr. Jacob. Ms. Cooper, and Mrs. Davidson all noted the bold potential for professional advancement and departmental alignment if districts would have APSIs local and provide that learning opportunity for their teachers.
Recommendation 3: Consistency in Resource Funding (Support)

To provide equitable learning and opportunity that will address the rural learning divide that currently exists, it will take more than a one-time grant. The NMSI grant would represent the most progressive growth in providing advanced learning opportunities for rural college-bound students of it time; however, the educators who participated in this study feared the ability to continue or uphold the momentum started by the grant. The NMSI grant provided opportunity to students and to teachers who would not have otherwise had access to the materials and manipulatives because of lack of funding (poverty). Technology advancements in any classroom and in any district costs money but overcoming the unique obstacles that exist to an underserved population will cost additional money and the investment is long overdue.

A commitment between federal and state agencies to address the discrepancies in resource funding that exist in the school districts that traditionally serve rural students is necessary. This study evaluated the lived experiences of AP English coursework; nevertheless, when asked what they would buy with an open checkbook to improve their courses and/or classrooms, Mrs. Ardoin responded, “enough staff to teach all of the students in our school who want to take AP,” and Mrs. Boudreaux said, “all the books—I want each of my students to have their own book.”

Mrs. Granier and Mrs. Guitreau would provide test vouchers for all their students with their open checkbook, because Mrs. Guitreau said, “sometimes, coming up with half of the exam fee is still a huge issue.” Mrs. Hebert would buy more technology for her classroom, “I don’t have a whiteboard. I have just a regular laptop with PowerPoint. So that’s, that. I would also buy printed novels, and more diverse novels, so that my kids could experience more and have their own copy to bring home.” Mr. Jacob noted that he would have “everyone in a SpringBoard texts
and would provide teachers with a ticket to an APSI or have a College Board AP trainer come to each district to do professional development in-service that would make a difference.” Mr. Jacob also stated that this “type of in-service could help to vertically align Pre-AP and AP English curriculums, corroborate expectations, and to provide academic supports for English teachers and for departments regardless of their socioeconomic status.”

**Recommendation 4: Community Outreach and Advising (Relationship)**

Early exposure to campus life is the key to forging a relationship with students from underserved populations (campus visit-field trips, career fairs, welcome days, et al.). Introducing students to the college experience and granting them the opportunity to “see” themselves on the campus is essential to establishing rapport. Students from underserved populations desire connectivity and a strong campus support system can create the comradery that could lead them to the campus and through to graduation. Experiencing advanced coursework in the security of their high school classroom introduces them to their own academic potential; however, they need to see the possibility of themselves as belonging to and participating as part of the campus. There is ultimate value in not only choosing the right career path but achieving success in the right program and the right campus. The varsity-team mentality is not the only way and rarely do players go straight to the starting lineup of the varsity team. There is a structure and collection of skills that must accrue, and community college could be a valuable component to the college experience if its potential to serve as a transitional steppingstone (junior varsity training) aimed at securing the successful transfer to the 4-year university later while being more prepared. Being able to emerge as a college graduate with the tools to effectively join the workforce and provide for themselves benefits both the student and the community. High school seniors graduate today
lacking general life skills that could and greatly benefit them in procuring the successful transition onto the college campus.

The road to college can be paved with good intentions and can still be a bumpy experience even in the best of situations; nevertheless, the community college has the ability to serve the underserved student population in an effort to realign of pre-college training efforts, reallocate necessary resources, and a regain focus on creating balance regarding job-related expectations (school partnerships) that will function to create an environment bound to grow engaged and college-ready learners and even offer a map.

**Recommendation 5: Rural Students and the College Connection**

The partnership between rural students, their parent support, educators, counselors, and college recruiters are critical in creating a community that is committed to assisting the student to enroll in college. Students from underserved populations will need more attention and supports in getting them to the college campus. Means et al. (2016) declared that underserved students will often readily respond to the information that is available, and the successful partnership that exists between school and community is critical in shaping future aspirations; nevertheless, two questions realistically emerge when the discussion of college is at stake for the rural student. The first question *How much?* is the initial cost concept associated with the family’s ability to financially provide the college experience (sticker shock can be critical component here) and the second question, *Now what?* (lack of direction) rises due to a lack of preparation that would help to ease the transition.

Morton et al. (2018) proposed that access to information is the necessary tool addressing gaps in college access and choice and institutions for rural high school students and the initiatives in place must provide opportunities to *all* learners regardless of ethnicity or
socioeconomic background. Great emphasis resides with choosing the right “fit” in a college-level program which will inevitably lead to the “right” college choice (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012). “College-level programs can provide the target of high standards, but readiness comes from the mechanism through which students are supported and their efforts to teach college-level standards” (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012, p.66).

Improving the access that rural students have to Dual Enrollment and Early College coursework, Dual enrollment and the Early College High School model serves as a support system for first generation college students; whereas AP provides a version of a “national curriculum” intended to serve a student population that is not plagued by lack of resources or any degree of financial standing (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012). Advanced Placement (AP) has “influenced education policies and have led to the use of AP in schools where dual enrollment may have been a better fit for students” (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012, p. 59). AP is not readily available to all students and often requires reasonable proximity and accessibility to 2 and 4-year institutions (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012).

Advanced Placement (AP), managed by College Board, was “created to allow advanced students who had exhausted their high school’s course offerings an avenue to obtain credit while still in high school” (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012, p. 60). Dual Enrollment (DE) was created to challenge the talented, increase excitement regarding the multitude of opportunities that exist on the college campus, and to keep high-scoring students engaged while smoothing the transition between high school and postsecondary study (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012). The participants identified that based on their experience as an educator, when comparing Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement requirements, the DE course which had a required ACT score often limited
the rural students who would be eligible to take the class, whereas the AP course does not have a baseline ACT requirement (prevention of gatekeeping).

Elue and Martinez (2019) noted that “while some colleges have made concerted efforts to reduce financial barriers for their students by developing institutional scholarships, others have not” (p. 382). Financing the college experience is one of the largest barriers that underserved populations face and require vital assistance to procure funding to attend postsecondary learning. Financial aid and the use of programs designed to specifically aid underserved students and represent the fine line between success and failure. Family wage versus living wage must remain balanced and, in many instances, the student and their parent cannot see past the sticker shock of the price tag associated with attending college. The value of receiving purpose-driven guidance through this process in critical in establishing that higher education is a manageable process and that it does represent obtainable goals. While college access marketing or selling the idea of college via the Internet to all students remain highly lucrative, students and parents in underserved populations can remain lost in translation. Every parent wants their child to succeed; however, in many cases, a lack of information or an understanding of the information that is present can misguide the student at a great expense.

**Limitations**

This interpretive phenomenological study provided insight by sharing the lived experiences of Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition and Pre-AP educators as they prepare rural, college-bound learners with the academic skills and experiences to successfully transition to the college campus. As the research process progressed, the limitations that emerged were (a) lack of research that specifically focused on advanced
learning opportunities and the rural educator to inform the study, (b) the scheduling of interviews with educators during the summer, and (c) the COVID-19 pandemic.

The lack of research that specifically focused on advanced learning opportunities and the efforts of the rural educator required the boundaries and the active components of the phenomena to be expanded. The literature loosely grouped “rural students” and identified them under a general title of an “underserved population.” It was rather difficult to pull Advanced Placement data that specifically addressed the rural Louisiana public population because those numbers were included in that general “underserved population” category on the College Board’s AP website. Pulling the AP data for Louisiana was located on Louisianabelieves.com by parish and was rather uncomplicated; however, locating a rural classification that is not commonly used to identify the specific group that I was intending to study would present a challenge.

The next limitation of this study would be associated with the scheduling of participant interviews during summer. Contacting the teachers during the summer using their school email addresses posed to be quite an issue because many of them do not check their emails during the summer. Many of the teachers that participated in the study assisted in enrolling others in the study and would also help in contacting them. Messages were sent to the teacher’s school email accounts and social media was used to also establish contact with some of the participants.

Another limitation of this study was implementing a cross-sectional representation of teachers across rural Louisiana and needing to conduct interviews in a variety of locations during a COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted via Zoom to reduce the risk of transmission and to also minimize extensive travel by the participants and the researcher. The final limitation of this study, associated with rural locale, was the limited access to Internet with
some of the participants because they represent rural fringe, distant, and remote areas across Louisiana.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to provide insight by sharing the lived experiences of Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition and Pre-AP educators as they prepare rural, college-bound learners with the academic skills and experiences to successfully transition to the college campus. Research focused on analyzing the experiences of rural AP teachers and the impact of the coursework on college preparation (readiness), access, and choice within the rural community. In this study, I interviewed educators who provide low-income, rural students with Advanced Placement coursework opportunities and explored how the state of Louisiana addresses program implementation and efficacy in rural communities.

This study revealed four primary themes regarding the perceptions, supports, and relationships between Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition and the rural educator’s ability to provide college-level access learning: (a) creation and development of an academic mindset in the rural, college-bound student, (b) maintaining AP course accessibility that provides beneficial and consistent learning opportunities to the rural learner, (c) inducts academic preparation that is equitable while actively addresses the rural learning divide, and (d) initiates a lesson platform that is autonomous for the AP educator and grants the educator with the ability to design an efficacious program that responds to the individual learning needs of the college-bound, rural student within the educational environment.

Future research could compare the efforts employed in providing AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework in rural communities across rural United States.
The study would potentially need to engage a survey and a more systematic approach in obtaining qualitative interview participants. The study would also benefit from implementing a quantitative element that would distinguish the rural classification and characterize the successes and areas of further growth that still exist in educating the rural, AP college-bound student. A potential area of research expansion could also be examining the first-year experience of rural college students who completed AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework in high school and their progress in college English compared to rural students who completed traditional academic English classes.

**Summary**

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to qualitatively examine the implementation and effectiveness of college readiness and transitional training delivered through Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework, the perceived barriers associated with enhancing college readiness and access in the rural community, the effectiveness of supports employed to encourage college access (resources), choice (preparation), and the enrollment in the rural Louisiana public high school setting.

The central research questions gauge teacher perceptions regarding Advanced Placement (existing program and pedagogy) and the effectiveness of college readiness techniques employed to provide students with adequate academic preparation for college in the future. The research questions also focus on supports provided while examining current curricula and available resources employed within the students’ social-cultural context. The research questions and interview protocol reflect the theoretical framework of the study and it models the concept as working from the inside and moving outward and identified the four layers as the individual’s habitus or student and family context (layer 1); school and community context (layer 2); the
higher education context (layer 3); and the broader social, economic, and policy context (layer 4) (Perna & Jones, 2013):

1. What is the rural educator’s perception of the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework regarding program effectiveness in providing equitable access and college readiness in the rural public classroom (Louisiana) and to promote success in post-secondary education?

2. What supports (provisions and resources) are employed within the social-cultural context to encourage college readiness (access, academic preparation, and enrollment success) for rural students in Louisiana through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework?

3. What is the relationship between existing barriers and the rural educator’s ability to provide enhanced college readiness through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition courses?

The lived experiences of Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition and Pre-AP educators included in this study substantiated the access to college-level learning through the AP classroom and the efforts employed to provide rural, college-bound learners with the academic skills and experiences to successfully transition to the college campus. This study revealed four primary themes regarding the perceptions, supports, and relationships between Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition and the rural educator’s ability to provide college-level access learning: (a) creation and development of an academic mindset in the rural, college-bound student, (b) maintaining AP course accessibility that provides beneficial and consistent learning opportunities to the rural learner, (c) inducts academic preparation that is equitable while actively addresses the rural
learning divide, and (d) initiates a lesson platform that is autonomous for the AP educator and grants the educator with the ability to design an efficacious program that responds to the individual learning needs of the college-bound, rural student within the educational environment.

Rural students enter college and often face a lack in academic preparedness from the start (Finn & Scanlan, 2020; Wakelyn, 2009; Walsh, 2016). Providing adequate and college-focused academic preparation does not begin when a student enters their junior or senior year of high school. Finn and Scanlan (2020) outlined that for AP to operate at full capacity and serve the largest diversity of students, state and federal lawmakers, state and district educational leaders, administrators, and educators must maintain consistency in responding to gaps in excellence that exist because of geographical limitations, race and ethnicity, and income barriers. The participants identified that there is just not enough time to condense everything that there is to know to dig deep into the AP Language and/or Literature course rather than just scratching the surface of the concepts. Until there is a focus on providing a vertically aligned curriculum that begins in early middle school with a monitored progression of skills and expectations that promote analytical thinking and critical analysis, the AP scores will continue to stay midrange.

The participants included in this study corroborated that the increased access to Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework is one of the most powerful tools because it conditions the learner with the skills to function as a more enlightened thinker and engagement participant in the educational community. The participants each addressed the implementation of various curriculums employed by their districts and schools including Advanced Placement coursework, Dual Enrollment, and CLEP. The participants unanimously agreed that Advanced Placement English Language and Composition coursework (specifically) and the earliest access to Pre-AP coursework provides students with
the tools to engage in a “true” college-structured course and promotes a higher level of academic engagement (communication and socialization) both in the AP classroom and in their other courses. While dual enrollment engages students on the high school campus with college professors and the opportunity to achieve credit for college courses (saving valuable tuition dollars), the participants addressed the level of course efficacy and questioned the level of course accountability and whether it would be equivalent once the students reached the college campus. Zinth (2014) confirmed that rural students could greatly benefit from the college access provided through dual enrollment programs; however, she also identified the unique challenges that the rural area faces in providing quality dual enrollment programs as the ability to secure qualified instructors, financial stability to cover program costs, and the ability to address program logistics (technology barriers, Internet access, etc.).

Mrs. Kern specifically noted in her interview that some of her students have graduated with as many as 45 college credit hours by taking Dual Enrollment courses; furthermore, are often “stunned” when they encounter the expectations of a sophomore-level course before they are truly ready. She reinforced that Pre-AP and AP English Language, and Literature and Composition coursework conditioned the learner over accentuating the test taker. Mrs. Kern acknowledged that the SPS is directly linked to the educational funding that districts receive; nevertheless, she noted that the increased appeal to promote programs that provide “easier attainment of favorable goals looks good for the school but does not always best benefit the learner.” The participants also addressed the focus on CLEP and the opportunity of “testing out” of levelized coursework and the issue that arises once the student reaches the college campus and is expected to perform in a 200 or 300-level course because they technically received credit for the introductory-level course.
The participants echoed the importance of access to Advanced Placement coursework in each of their schools as the primary tool to reducing the academic divide for the rural, college-bound student. Mrs. Boudreaux reiterated in her lived experiences as an AP educator, her students that obtain a score a 2 on the AP Exam, even though they may not receive the required college credit score of 3, they are more prepared to productively integrate onto the college campus as a more highly communicative, more efficacious, and engaged learner.

Finn and Scanlan (2020) proposed that AP has the potential to narrow gaps within the educational pipeline; however, educational reform must prompt open access, increased participation (student and educator-based learning incentives) and demonstrate consistency in learner outcomes (increased student enrollment, retention, and graduation at postsecondary institutions). The participants discussed their goals to assess the programs in neighboring states to see what they were doing to yield higher passing rates and it was conclusive that they provided Pre-AP as early as sixth grade. Through Pre-AP, students began to implement the skills necessary to read critically, think analytically, and apply appropriate rhetorical devices at each junction (early intervention) of their learning and by the time that they reached high school, those skills were customary. The monitored progression of skills would also leave little room for gaps in learning and teachers would be able to assess the academic needs of their students because they would already have an idea of where their students would potentially struggle.

Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework provides the means to developing the college-bound rural learner by creating an academic mindset, improving course accessibility and opportunity, a more rigorous academic preparation and early access to Pre-AP, and providing a relevant curriculum that promotes teacher autonomy and program efficacy that is reinforced through consistent curriculum expectations is the key to
reducing the rural divide and providing the necessary and critical groundwork in advancing the rural college student.
APPENDIX A. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study. Below you will find a link to schedule your date and time for your interview. Please plan for approximately 60 minutes.

Through your participation in this research, I seek to further understand the connection (lived experiences) between Advanced Placement and preparing rural college-bound students. I am seeking your genuine lived experience associated with providing AP coursework in a rural setting and this exploration can include your thoughts and behaviors as well as situations, events, people, and places that connect with your lived experience.

The interviews will be conducted one-on-one via Zoom. Interviews will be conducted during the months of June and July 2021.

[INSERT ZOOM LINK]

You will be compensated with a Happy Teacher Pack (Paper Mate Flair Pens and Starbucks Gift card) or a $25.00 Amazon gift card.

I value your participation and thank you for your time. Should you have any questions before your interview, please do not hesitate to contact me and I look forward to meeting with you.

Thank you for your time,
Willie A. Louviere
Doctoral Candidate, Louisiana State University
wlouvi1@lsu.edu
225-456-6628
APPENDIX B. RESEARCH CONSENT FOR INTERVIEW FORM

1. Study Title: The Rural Road: A Phenomenological Study Exploring Advanced Placement Coursework and College Readiness in Louisiana

2. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the equitable access to advanced coursework opportunities (Advanced Placement) provided to rural students (in-person and distance learning) in public rural high schools in Louisiana. The study will be conducted in one phase. Subjects will spend approximately 30-60 minutes providing feedback during a semi-structured interview. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom and will be audio-recorded.

3. Risks: There is no risk involved in participating and you can choose not to participate. Individual names will not be disclosed in the research and participants will be denoted throughout the manuscript using their chosen pseudonym and transcripts will be assigned a participant code.

4. Benefits: The study will focus on analyzing the experiences of rural AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition teachers and how the coursework advances college preparation (readiness), access, and choice within the rural community.

5. Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study: M-F, 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Mrs. Willie A. Louviere (225) 456-6628
Dr. Joy Blanchard (225) 578-2192

6. Performance Site: Louisiana rural public high schools that provide Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework.

7. Number of Subjects: 10

8. Subject Inclusion Criteria:
   - Certified Louisiana educators who provide Advanced Placement English Language and Composition coursework in rural, public high schools across the state.
   - Physical location of public high schools must be in a fringe, distant, and remote area of Louisiana.
   - Educators must be a certified Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition Instructor
   - United States Citizen or Permanent Resident

9. Subject Exclusion Criteria:
   - Educators teaching outside of a rural, Louisiana public high school classroom.
   - Educators who are NOT certified to teach AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition
To participate in this study, you must meet the requirements of both the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

10. Right to Refuse: Subjects can choose not to participate in the study.

11. Privacy: Results of the survey and interview may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

12. Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. This study has been approved by the LSU IRB. For injury or illness, call your physician, or the Student Health Center if you are an LSU student. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Alex Cohen, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, or www.lsu.edu/research. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: ______________________________ Date: ______________

The study subject has indicated to me that he/she is unable to read. I certify that I have read this consent form to the subject and explained that by completing the signature line above, the subject has agreed to participate.

Signature of Reader: ______________________________ Date: ______________
APPENDIX C. RESEARCH CONSENT FOR INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Thank you for volunteering to participate in the study and meeting with me today for the interview. I appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal experiences associated with educating rural students and providing them with advanced coursework opportunities. I am a doctoral candidate at Louisiana State University, and I am conducting research on the lived experiences of rural educators in Louisiana who teach Advanced Placement (AP) English Language and/or Literature and Composition courses. In the interview today, I will ask you to explore several topics through a series of open-ended questions about your educational experiences associated with providing AP coursework in the rural Louisiana classroom. We will be discussing your personal and professional experiences, so please note that there are no wrong or right answers.

Through your participation in this research, I seek to further understand the connection (lived experiences) between Advanced Placement coursework and preparing rural college-bound students. I am seeking your genuine lived experience associated with providing AP coursework in a rural setting and this exploration can include your thoughts and behaviors as well as situations, events, people, and places that connect with your experience. I value your participation and thank you for your time. I will be recording our interview today and I will transcribe it later. I will contact you if I need any additional information or clarification.

The recording will not include any personally identifiable information and you will be denoted in the manuscript using your chosen pseudonym. Assigning a pseudonym and a transcript code to your recording will assist in organizing the transcripts and cannot be connected to your name by anyone but myself and my dissertation chair. In the week following your interview, you will be supplied with a transcript that includes your responses to ensure your thoughts, feelings, and responses were interpreted correctly. You will remain anonymous, though I will collect personal and contact information for record keeping.

Please let me know if you would like for me to turn off the recorder at any time or if we encounter a question that you would prefer not to answer, we can skip it and proceed. I would like you to feel comfortable enough to speak freely about your lived experiences.

Do I have permission to record this interview? Do you have any questions?
APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant:
Time of Interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer: Willie A. Louviere, Doctoral Candidate at Louisiana State University

Overview:

- Welcome/Introduction

Thank you for volunteering to participate in the study and meeting with me today for the interview. I appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal experiences associated with educating rural students and providing them with advanced coursework opportunities. I am a doctoral candidate at Louisiana State University, and I am conducting research on the lived experiences of rural educators in Louisiana who teach Advanced Placement (AP) English Language and/or Literature and Composition courses.

- Interview Process

The interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes and you will be asked a series of open-ended questions (no right or wrong answers). Your name will not be disclosed on any published material to keep your responses anonymous and to protect your privacy. The recording will not include any personally identifiable information. Assigning a pseudonym and a transcript code to your recording will assist in organizing the transcripts and cannot be connected to your name by anyone but myself and my dissertation chair. You will remain anonymous, though I will collect personal and contact information for record keeping.

I will utilize Zoom and the interview will be audio-recorded to help with the transcription process that will resume later. In the weeks following your interview, you will be provided with a transcript that includes your responses to ensure your meanings and intentions were interpreted correctly.

- Focus of the Interview

The focus of this interview is to examine perceptions and experiences of educators regarding the equitable access and college readiness through advanced coursework opportunities (Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition) provided to rural students (in-person and distance learning) in public rural high schools in Louisiana and the connection to college readiness.
Pre-Topic: Warm-up questions

- Q1: Tell me a little bit about yourself. Background (education, professional training).
- Q2: Describe your personal teaching experience (in a rural setting). Challenges?
- Q3: What enticed you to teach an Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition course?

Topic 1: Perception and preparation regarding college readiness training [Perception]

- Q4: What perceptions do you have regarding Advanced Placement coursework in providing college readiness?
- Q5: How is the school environment different for those students who participate in the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition program? How do rural students perceive AP coursework?
- Q6: How has the program availability of Advanced Placement coursework affected your classroom and students?
- Q7: How do you gauge program effectiveness (student knowledge and growth regarding college access, choice, and readiness) in the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition curriculum/coursework?
- Q8: What do you regard as the strengths in current AP program to educate and prepare rural students for the rigor of college coursework? Weaknesses?
- Q9: What challenges do rural students face in the current AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition program at your school?
- Q10: How do the curriculum and lessons differ for those students who participate in AP courses?
- Q11: How did you adapt or modify the curriculum knowing that rural students (underserved population) would be participating in the course?
- Q12: How did you address educational inequities (existing gaps in academic preparation)

Topic 2: Accessibility and Resources [Supports]

- Q13: What does access to the AP learning experience provide for the rural, college-bound student?
- Q14: How are students chosen to participate in the AP program?
- Q15: What resources/supports do you find are most beneficial to students in providing college rigor and readiness through AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework?
- Q16: What barriers pose the greatest challenge(s) for the AP English educator in the rural classroom in providing opportunities that employ college readiness for students?
- Q17: How do those barriers affect student engagement and success in AP coursework?
- Q18: What are the main concerns for an educator in providing an equitable college-structured AP learning experience within the rural classroom?
**Topic 3: College Readiness [Relationship]**

- Q19: From your experience as an AP educator in the rural classroom (working with both emerging college students and their support group), what do you consider are the major concerns with transitioning to the college campus?
- Q20: How could AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition educators serve rural students more? What is working? What improvements could benefit educators to better serve rural students?
- Q21: How would you describe the relationship between Advanced Placement English Language and/or Literature and Composition coursework and the ability to provide advanced academic preparation and college readiness for the emerging rural college student?

**Closure**

- Q22: Open Checkbook. If you could have an open checkbook, how would you address the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition program at your school or in your district?

**Post-Interview Data Management and Protection**

- Assign participant codes and pseudonyms during the start of the interview process and used throughout the publication of dissertation
- Denote participants in the manuscript using their pseudonyms
- Conduct Zoom interviews in a secure and private location to maintain participant anonymity
- Store hard copies of interview data and codebook in a locked filing cabinet (audio will be stored on a flash drive and a paper copy of the manuscript)
- Use a digital audio recording device (Otter.ai)
- Store audio recordings separate from each other and in a secure and locked location
- Use a password-protected laptop throughout the study
- Back up documents and data on an external hard drive
• Use a password encrypted One Drive to electronically store transcripts and assist with data management protocol [3 years storage]
APPENDIX E. THANK YOU EMAIL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with Advanced Placement in the rural classroom. The study heavily relied upon your willingness to share your unique personal and professional thoughts, feelings, events, and situations. I appreciate the time and commitment you granted me as you shared your story.

I have attached a transcript of your interview to this email. Please review the text to be sure it fully captures your experience of a rural AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition educator in a public Louisiana high school classroom. You are denoted in the manuscript by the pseudonym that you chose at the beginning of the interview. Should you find it necessary, please email me with any necessary revisions. Once you have reviewed the transcript and made any revisions or comments, please return the manuscript to me via email within five days.

If I do not hear from you within five days of receiving the manuscript, I will assume you are satisfied with the information you provided during the interview and have no additional comments. I greatly value your voice, your lived experience, and your time as essential components of this study. Thank you again for sharing your story with me. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
Willie A. Louviere
Doctoral Candidate, Louisiana State University
Wlouvi1@lsu.edu
(225) 456-6628
APPENDIX F. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FOR INTERVIEWS

TO: Blanchard, Joy Lynn
   LSUAM | Col of HSE | Education
FROM: Alex Cohen
DATE: 15-Jun-2021
RE: IRBAM-21-0632
TITLE: THE RURAL ROAD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING ADVANCED PLACEMENT COURSEWORK AND COLLEGE READINESS IN LOUISIANA

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application
Review Type: Expedited Review
Risk Factor: Minimal
Review Date: 11-Jun-2021
Status: Approved
Approval Date: 11-Jun-2021
Approval Expiration Date: 10-Jun-2022
Expedited Categories: XXXXXXX
Requesting Waiver of Informed Consent: No
Re-review frequency: Annually
Number of subjects approved: 10
LSU Proposal Number:

By: Alex Cohen, Chairman

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the
study ends.

5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.

6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.


8. SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/research

Louisiana State University
131 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803

O 225-578-5833
F 225-578-5983
http://www.lsu.edu/research
APPENDIX G. CODEBOOK

This document provides an overview of the lived experiences of the interview participants included in this study and their perception, supports, and relationships established in the current implementation of the AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition program in the rural Louisiana public high school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rigor</td>
<td>AP coursework: Participant perceptions to providing college readiness [Interview Q4-5]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum and lesson efficacy [Q10-12]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assess and address educational inequities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to Pre-AP curriculum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Increased academic expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Analytical Thinking</td>
<td>Classroom Environment and Culture [Q5]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural student’s perception of the AP classroom dynamic</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ownership in the advanced educational setting; increased sense of belonging [Q21]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Global Accountability</td>
<td>Program availability and effectiveness in providing student knowledge and skill base expansion [Q6-7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Diverse Perspectives</td>
<td>Academic preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Addressing learning gaps</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Develop written and spoken ability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Providing evidence in analysis and claim-based assessment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Limited access to big world perspectives in a “small town”</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. School Culture</td>
<td>Promote student engagement [Q16-17]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges/Barriers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of belonging in the advanced educational setting [Q19-20]</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Relevance in Curriculum</td>
<td>Strengths in the current AP English Language and/or Literature and Composition program in the rural Louisiana classroom [Q8-9]</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Communication</td>
<td>Developing skills associated with progressive communication and socialization [Q13-15]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Socialization</td>
<td>Academic Preparation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Vertical alignment of curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Academic Confidence</td>
<td>Providing equitable college-structured learning [Q19-21]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Self-esteem</td>
<td>Benefit resources and supports required to provide a college-styled classroom setting and advanced learning dynamic [Q15; 19-20]</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Encouragement</td>
<td>Addressing the “Not smart enough” mentality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Independence</td>
<td>Big fish in a little pond (rurality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Engagement</td>
<td>Socialization within the personal community (school and home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Work ethic</td>
<td>Creating a sense of academic independence within the rural academic community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Academic Counseling</td>
<td>Addressing barriers while providing opportunities for student engagement and stakeholder buy-in [Q16-18]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Gatekeeping</td>
<td>College Board and gatekeeping (concept of open enrollment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Opportunity</td>
<td>ACT score does not factor into student’s choice or access to advanced coursework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Limited Faculty</td>
<td>Access to advanced coursework and opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Program Stability</td>
<td>Providing and maintaining a system of support [Q16-18]</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **a. Longevity** | Federal and State support  
District and Administrative support |
| **b. Financial Support** | School Performance Score (SPS)  
Obtaining credit with dual enrollment and CLEP options with more ease; Districts moving away from AP programs |
| **c. Financial Insecurity-Family** | Academic gain for rural schools and districts  
NMSI and additional funding sources to address resource deficit [Q15-16]  
Home and financial insecurity and the need to work [Q16-17]  
Poverty and source of family support |
| **9. Technology** | Addressing learning barriers and resource divide [Q10-12] |
| **a. Access to Equipment** | Limited resources and Internet access (school and in the home) |
| **b. Computer Skills** | Computer access-COVID funding provided necessary funds for most of the participant schools to reach the 1:1 technology ratio |
| **10. Reading Comprehension** | Addressing the learning divide [Q10-12] |
| **a. Growing critical readers** | Improved access to resources |
| **b. Rigorous Literature** | “How to” College mentality |
| **c. Rhetorical devices** | Early access to Pre-AP stylized concept of critical reading/analytical thinking  
Timely implementation of rhetorical devices in literature and writing  
Progressive academic expectations  
Growing learners and effective communicators |
<p>| <strong>11. Access to Pre-AP</strong> | Limited faculty [Q15-16] |</p>
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<td>b. <strong>Continuity</strong></td>
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<th>13. Connectivity</th>
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VITA

Willie A. Louviere earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a minor in Spanish from Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana, in 1999. Her Spanish studies would include study abroad at the Universidad de las Américas in Puebla, Mexico. She began her teaching career in the rural classroom while she completed her teacher certification through the Alternative Certification Program in Secondary English Education through Southeastern Louisiana University in 2003. She received her Master of Arts degree in Educational Leadership K-12 with a concentration in Educational Technology from Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, in 2018. She would simultaneously complete her Master of Arts Plus +30 degree in Educational Leadership from Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana, by 2018.

Willie was accepted into the doctoral program at Louisiana State University in the Educational Leadership & Research: Higher Education Administration in the fall cohort of 2018. From the start of her quest to advance her education in the summer of 2016, Willie would continue to teach in the rural Louisiana public high school setting. Her extensive teaching experiences during the past 21 years included maintaining an appropriate and respectful classroom that is both driven and disciplined in advancing the student; implementing rigorous and appropriate lesson plans, assignments, and assessments that are purposefully designed to advance needs of the emerging college-bound student; and analyzing student assessment data to measure progress and to propel informed instruction within her classroom and within the department that challenges the learner.

Willie has committed her time and experience in the rural, public high school classroom to attending to the personal health needs and to creating opportunities that yield academic
success of her students; engaging families into the classroom community of learning; collaborating within professional learning communities at the school and district level; providing an equitable scope and sequence within the curriculum that engages students in quality college-ready instruction; contributes in professional development opportunities that encourages best teaching practices within the classroom; demonstrates inquiry techniques that encourage investigation, experimentation, and problem solving; and drives student and personal achievements by maintaining a high level of expectation and consistent accountability for herself as an educator and for her students as they emerge as more enlightened and engaged members of society.