

# Community Leaders' Perceptions of the Small, Rural Community College Contributing to Quality of Life in Rural Communities

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This phenomenological study investigated community leaders' perceptions of the small, rural community college contributing to quality of life. Guided by the Community Capitals Framework (Flora & Flora, 2013), six focus group interviews were conducted across three communities in the Midwest that included 39 participants selected through key informant sampling. The study found that community leaders perceive the small rural community college contributing to quality of life through three major themes: a) providing access and opportunity, b) economic and workforce development, and c) partnerships. Findings suggest that small, rural community colleges contribute to quality of life by increasing human and social capital through the themes. Implications for practice include increasing student support services resources at community colleges, increasing service learning through partnerships, and developing a framework for self-assessment to further develop the small, rural community college understanding of its impact on developing human capital and social capitals.

**Keywords:** community college; community leader; quality of life; rural life

Rural and urban communities are two distinct environments. Rural communities offer natural resources, wide open spaces, less dense population, which makes them attractive to many residents. While they seek to provide a good quality of life for their residents, many rural communities experience social and economic challenges due to lack of resources including human and financial capitals (Morgan & Lambe, 2009). These communities experience declining population, higher unemployment, and insufficient resources (Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Friedel & Reed, 2019). As a result, rural communities often rely on assistance from a variety of organizations, such as non-profit groups, educational institutions, community foundations, government agencies, and public-private partnerships (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). One of the tools available to rural communities to assist with development issues is the small, rural community college.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how rural community leaders perceived the small, rural community college contributing to quality of life in a rural community. Previous studies have explored rural communities and examined particular challenges they face in today's society. In addition, previous studies have been conducted examining the concept of quality of life. Other research studies have analyzed the rural community college to help shed light on the functionality, mission, and purpose of this type of institution. Brisolara (2019) states, "Less attention at a national level has been centered on the role that institutions of higher education can play in improving conditions and possibilities for rural people" (p. 11). The existent literature is devoid of research focusing specifically on how the small, rural community college contributes to quality of life in the rural community. Rural communities represent a significant portion of places and

population in the United States. Rural community leaders play a particularly pivotal role in rural communities due to population decline. Rural communities do not have a large pool of residents to draw from to fill leadership roles. As a result, the views and perceptions of these rural community leaders become valuable sources of insight into challenges facing rural communities. In addition, rural community colleges provide educational services and programs to a large number of students across the nation who reside in rural communities. Rural students may rely on the rural community college for services and programs due to a lack of access to those services and programs elsewhere in the community. As a result, the rural community college can serve multiple purposes to rural students and residents. Therefore, it is important to know how rural community colleges contribute to the rural communities they serve. This study contributes to that knowledge by focusing specifically on exploring how rural community leaders perceive the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life in a rural community.

One research question guided this study: How do community leaders perceive the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life?

### **Literature Review**

Community colleges often have a noticeable relationship with the communities they serve (Torres et al., 2013). Yang and Venezia (2020) stated, “almost 60 million people, or 20% of the population, live in rural America” (p. 424). In the United States, there are 553 rural community college districts and 922 rural campuses. This figure represents almost 60% of all community college campuses across the nation (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). In fall 2019, 5.5 million students were enrolled in public two-year colleges. About 1.9 million students were full-time, and 3.6 million were part-time (Community College FAQs, n.d.). Rural community colleges “serve changing student populations, the result of growing numbers of non-traditional students, dislocated workers, and individuals looking to increase their work skills” (Howley et al., 2013, p. 2).

A small, rural community college is defined as those institutions with less than 2,500 annual unduplicated student enrollments (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). These community colleges show mean enrollments per district of 1,699 and 1,155 per campus (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Rural communities often rely more heavily on the community college to function as a catalyst for social and economic development in the region (Friedel & Reed, 2019; Torres et al., 2013) than their urban counterparts. Miller and Deggs (2012) stated “rural settings typically have lower education completion levels, higher than national average obesity rates, poor health, and lower than national average wage earning” (p. 331). Rural communities, according to Yang and Venezia (2020) have “struggled with low-skilled economies, poverty, outmigration of young and educated people, and lower educational attainment” (p. 424). Yang and Venezia (2020), citing Hillygus (2005), state “of all these struggles, educational attainment is probably the most critical because of its strong ties to employment, income, and civic participation” (p. 424). Citing Drabenstott, Novack, and Weiler (2004), Torres et al. (2013) noted there are important elements that rural regions need in order to grow that require the involvement of the community college: “engagement by higher education, an entrepreneurial culture, and educational and training programs that serve the region’s needs” (p. 4).

The rural community college serves a unique role, different from the urban community college (Howley et al., 2013). Previous studies have documented the role of the rural community college as a cultural center, sometimes being the only source of cultural activities and cultural awareness for students and residents (Cejda, 2012; Howley et al., 2013; Miller & Kissinger, 2007; Pennington et al., 2006). Garrett et al. (2021) stated, “The community college is a key access point for an increasingly diverse student population. The rural community college is even more critical to students given the potential distance to a more diverse and more urban institution – and the challenges a long commute can bring” (p. 108).

Rural community colleges face a unique set of challenges that differentiate them from community

colleges in urban settings. Other studies have shown that community colleges in rural areas experience a challenge of providing their programs and services to a population that is spread out over a larger geographic area (Cejda, 2012; Pennington et al., 2006). Geography is a challenge for rural community colleges for several reasons. Crookston and Hooks (2012) noted that “many rural Americans reside in areas that are not within reasonable commuting distance to a community college” (p. 351). Students face additional barriers such as increased transportation costs when they must travel significant distances in a rural area in order to pursue higher education (Howley et al., 2013). Other studies have noted that the limitations caused by geography may create barriers for the rural community college to recruit and retain faculty and staff (Cejda, 2010; Pennington et al., 2006).

Previous studies show that the discussion of the challenges facing rural community colleges is ongoing (Cejda, 2012; Eddy, 2007; Garza & Eller, 1998; Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Miller & Kissinger, 2007; Torres et al., 2013; Vineyard, 1979). Further understanding the role of the community college in a rural community is important to helping local students be successful in entering the college environment after they complete high school (Hlinka et al., 2015). Hlinka (2017) states, “community college freshmen tend to be less college-ready, have access to fewer financial resources, and possess lower social resources” (p. 145). Rural students have “less college access, less institutional choice, and lower graduation rates” (Yang and Venezia, 2020, p. 424). Rural communities often experience the “brain drain” phenomenon described by Sowl et al. (2022) as, “the funneling out of talented young people from rural areas in search of better opportunities” (p. 303).

With the review of literature, there are gaps in the existing literature that need to be addressed. Most of the research existing on rural community colleges is more than five years old. This presents an urgent need for additional studies examining the rural community college and its broader impact on the rural community. This study helps address that need by making an important contribution that builds on existing literature by linking together previous research that identified challenges

experienced by rural communities and rural community colleges.

## **Definitions**

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions will be used:

### ***Community Leader***

The authors operationalized the definition of a community leader based on the research question guiding this study: A person who has lived in, worked in, or both, in a community in this study and has a level of understanding of the community as a result of professional or civic involvement in the community. Due to the nature of their involvement, a person has a position, or role, in the community that could be described as a leadership role.

### ***Descriptive Coding***

Descriptive coding is defined as:

Assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data. Provides an inventory of topics for indexing and categorizing. Appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data, ethnographies, and studies with a wide variety of data forms (Saldaña, 2013, p. 262).

### ***Rural Community***

Hancks (2011) cited The Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion University of Pennsylvania as the source of two definitions for the term “rural community”. The first definition, provided by the United States Census Bureau, refers to any community with up to 2,500 people. The second definition refers to a community of up to 25,000 people living outside a metropolitan area. For this study, the second definition is more appropriate because it is a more representative description of the communities investigated in this case study.

### ***Small, Rural Community College***

A community college with an unduplicated headcount below 2,500 serving students from urban, suburban, and rural areas given the location of the campus in a rural-like setting (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007).

### **Quality of Life**

The Oxford Dictionary defines Quality of Life as: "The standard of health, comfort, and happiness experienced by an individual or group." This definition was used to operationalize the term Quality of Life in this study.

### **Urban**

In 2010, the Census Bureau provided two definitions for two types of urban areas. First, the term Urbanized Areas (UAs) refers to places of 50,000 or more people. Second, the term Urban Clusters (UCs) refers to places of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. After the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau proposed changes to how it defines urban. First, it proposed raising the minimum population threshold from 2,500 to 10,000 residents or more to define urban. Second, it proposed eliminating the previous two types of urban areas classified by the Bureau. For the purposes of this study, the term "urban" refers to a community with 50,000 or more residents.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is the Community Capitals Framework presented by Flora and Flora (2013) in their book, *Rural Communities: Legacy & Change* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). The Community Capitals Framework presents seven capitals that refer to resources that exist and come together to form what we experience as part of a community: "natural capital, cultural capital, human capital, financial capital, built capital, social capital, and political capital" (p. 10).

Two of the seven capitals were used for this study – human capital and social capital. Human capital refers to the "education, skills, health, and self-esteem" (p. 11) to increase an individual's economic and cultural power. Flora and Flora (2013) state, "Human capital includes those attributes of individuals that contribute to their ability to earn a living, strengthen community, and otherwise contribute to community organizations, their families, and self-improvement" (p. 84). In other words, human capital refers to developing the ability and aptitudes of individuals to acquire the necessary skills in order to be able to take action to improve their overall stability and well-being in life.

Human capital includes having the ability to successfully navigate "interpersonal experiences, the values an individual holds, and the leadership capacity that an individual possesses" (p. 85). Gary Becker, a Nobel Prize laureate in Economics, as cited in Flora and Flora, takes the concept of capital as many people think of it (money, equipment, stock, other physical and financial assets) and states:

But these tangible forms of capital are not the only ones. Schooling, computer skills, a healthy lifestyle, and the virtues of punctuality and honesty are also capital. That is because they raise earnings, improve health, or add to a person's good habits over much of his lifetime. Therefore, economists regard expenditures on education, training, medical care, and so on as investments in human capital. They are called human capital because people cannot be separated from their knowledge, skills, health, or values in the way they can be separated from their financial and physical assets (Becker, 2002).

The second capital used in this study is social capital. Social capital refers to the "mutual trust, reciprocity, groups, collective identity, working together, and a sense of a shared future" (Flora and Flora, 2013, p. 11) that rural communities often experience. Social capital is a capital that involves people interacting with each other in group environments. It refers to the ability of individuals to establish, build, and sustain relationships through mutual customs and mutual trust. It is these relationships that collectively strengthen the rural community. Flora and Flora state, "Communities can build enduring social capital by strengthening relationships and communication on a communitywide basis and encouraging community initiative, responsibility, and adaptability" (p. 119). In rural communities particularly, more robust relationships and communications can result from nurturing increased interactions among unlikely groups "inside and outside of the community and increased availability of information and knowledge among community members" (p. 119).

### Context

The site of this study was Southeastern Community College (SCC), a public, rural two-year college situated in the southeast Iowa region along the Mississippi River. The institution is a regional institution accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and the Iowa Department of Education. It is one of 15 community colleges in the state. This open-admission, publicly supported institution has two campuses and one regional center in a four-county service area of 1,824 square miles with a population of roughly 107,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b, c, e, f). The four counties are Des Moines County, Henry County, Lee County, and Louisa County. The main campus, which is also the administrative center, is located in West Burlington, a community that borders the larger community of Burlington, the county seat and largest city, in Des Moines County. The Burlington-West Burlington community is the largest population center in the region and could be described as the regional hub of Southeast Iowa. To the south, Lee County has two county seats, Fort Madison and Keokuk, each with similar population (~10,000 each) and dominant economic activity in the healthcare and manufacturing sectors. SCC has another campus in Keokuk, in southern Lee County. In 2020, SCC opened a new center located in Fort Madison. In Henry County, SCC maintains a center in Mount Pleasant, providing a limited number of credit and non-credit courses and services here. Even though the college serves the 4 counties discussed here, in this study, participants were selected only from Burlington, Keokuk, and Mount Pleasant because those communities are where the community college has a physical presence with sites (the Fort Madison Center became operational after this study was conducted).

### Methods

This study was a phenomenological study that explored the perceptions of rural community leaders and how they perceive the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research method defined as “an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (Neubauer et al, 2019, p. 91). This method suited the study’s purpose because it focused on exploring the perceptions of rural community leaders and allowed the investigator to explore the lived experiences of participants. Data were collected from 39 participants in six focus groups across three separate communities. There were two focus group interviews conducted in each community. In selecting participants and assigning them to a focus group, careful effort was taken to make sure that there were no known relationships between participants that could lead to a power imbalance (supervisor-subordinate) in the focus groups. A range of leaders (business owner, public employee) were assigned to each group with no specific focus on selecting individuals from specific sectors to be assigned to a group (doctors, lawyers, teachers, business owners, civic activists, etc., for example). To be consistent, community leaders were assigned in an unstructured manner for all six focus group interviews.

Ryan et al. (2014) identified two types of focus group design perspectives: Type A, or Individualistic Social Psychology Perspective; and Type B, or Social Constructionist Perspective. The Type A design perspective indicated that the focus group interview was designed with “...a scientific orientation where the investigator uses his or her study skills to control bias, extract relevant information and discard irrelevant information” (p. 331). The Type B design perspective focus groups indicated that the structure of participant interaction in the focus group was free flowing, enabling participants to share observations and experiences. In Type B focus groups, the role of the investigator is “...inhibited or subordinated through the use of loosely structured protocols with a few open-ended questions” (p. 331). The focus group interviews in this study were conducted according to Type B design as indicated by Ryan et al. (2014) using an interview protocol (See Appendix).



**Table 1***Demographics of the participants in Keokuk*

<b>Participant Characteristics of Focus Group Interview #1, Keokuk, IA</b>			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Carol, age 55	Female	Administrative Assistant	45 years
Melanie, age 63	Female	Business owner	44 years
Thomas, age 65	Male	Municipal administrator	55 years
Martha, age 60	Female	Community organization director	24 years
Jameson, age 49	Male	Business owner	49 years
Alicia, age 31	Female	Municipal administrator	20 years
Lynn, age 62	Female	Retired educator	34 years

<b>Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #2, Keokuk, IA</b>			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Amanda, age 35	Female	Social Worker	14 years
Tim, age 37	Male	Business Owner	20 years
Aaron, age 55	Male	Retired counselor	28 years
Marcia, age 49	Female	Local workforce development advisor	29 years
Meredith, age 51	Female	Banker	16 years
Todd, age 60	Male	Municipal administrator	27 years
Vivian, age 30	Female	Community organization director	30 years

Participants were selected for participation in this study using key informant sampling. This method assists in identifying individuals in the community who, based on their role or position, were identified to have a knowledge and/or awareness of the community that perhaps was unique to them based on that role or position. Participants were recruited through relationships established between the investigator and community leaders and through snowball sampling. Each participant in this study participated in one focus group which lasted approximately 1 hour in length and included 6-8 participants. Invitations to participate were sent by email and social media (LinkedIn and Facebook). An audio recording of each focus group interview was made by using a portable audio recording device.

The data collected in this study were coded using two cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2013). The purpose of first cycle coding is to initially summarize segments of data (Saldaña, 2013). Codes were

determined by the researcher according to the words and phrases used by participants to answer questions during the focus group interviews. The first cycle coding method used in this study was descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013).

The second cycle coding method used in this study was Pattern Coding (Saldaña, 2013). Pattern Codes are "explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation" (p. 236). As regularities were identified, they were documented as a theme in the transcripts.

Data analysis started with the focus group audio recordings being transcribed. A transcript of each audio recording was used to start the data analysis process. Each transcript was coded manually instead of using data analysis software. Lichtman (2006) recommends developing a broad list of codes. Descriptive coding was used to develop a list of initial codes that summarized passages.

**Table 2***Demographics of the Participants in Burlington, IA*

<b>Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #1, Burlington, IA</b>			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Kevin, age 56	Male	Non-profit administrator	12 years
Clyde, age 40	Male	Municipal administrator	40 years
Brian, age 50	Male	Business owner	25 years
Jack, age 65	Male	Retired police officer	43 years
Steven, age 50	Male	Firefighter	50 years
Kathy, age 46	Female	Education administrator	46 years
Edward, age 55	Male	Municipal administrator	55 years
Tammy, age 50	Female	Nurse	31 years

<b>Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #1, Burlington, IA</b>			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Dale, age 58	Male	Municipal administrator	51 years
Darren, age 51	Male	Municipal administrator	12 years
Clark, age 40	Male	Business owner	36 years
Ben, age 39	Male	Municipal administrator	14.5 years
Richard, age 60	Male	Education administrator	8 years
Betty, age 62	Female	Retired educator	61 years

**Table 3***Demographics of the Participants in Mount Pleasant, IA*

<b>Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #1, Mount Pleasant, IA</b>			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Joanna, age 27	Female	Education administrator	4.5 years
Barbara, age 40	Female	Nonprofit director	15 years
Denise, age 44	Female	Local workforce development advisor	44 years
Jennifer, age 55	Female	Local economic development official	34 years
Marlene, age 45	Female	State government employee	45 years

<b>Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #2, Mount Pleasant, IA</b>			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Robert, age 59	Male	Municipal administrator	30 years
Kay, age 59	Female	Educator	30 years
Anne, age 55	Female	Educator	35 years
Lisa, age 30	Female	Community development official	8 years
James, age 57	Male	Education administrator	22 years
Shawn, age 56	Male	Healthcare administrator	23 years

The initial codes were compiled into a document that was used to start identifying patterns and narrowing down the codes. Pattern coding was used to narrow down the broad list of initial codes. During this process, the large number of first-cycle codes was collapsed into a smaller number of codes. The transcripts were reanalyzed using the pattern codes and this led to the development of themes. Based on Creswell (2013), "the themes are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (p. 186). To establish trustworthiness, triangulation and member checking occurred in this study. Triangulation occurred using multiple data sources (six different focus group interviews) and multiple sites (three separate communities). Member checking was performed as the data were reviewed by the participants themselves to make sure that the data (transcripts) were accurate.

### **Positionality**

The positionality of the investigator was disclosed to the fullest extent to the study participants. Participants were informed that the investigator was born and raised in a small town in the Midwest and had a unique interest in better understanding rural communities and rural community colleges. Participants were informed that the investigator had a curiosity in this topic due to being a community college practitioner and an employee of Midwestern Community College study who resides in Carpenter County, one of the counties within the college's service district. The investigator informed participants of his intent of this research, which was to explore their perceptions of the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life. The investigator was deliberate to inform participants of the relationship with the Midwestern Community College so that participants had a full disclosure of the relationship between the investigator and the college. Participants were informed that due to this relationship, effort was made to be transparent and purposefully remaining

as neutral as possible while conducting this research so as to explore their perceptions as objectively as possible and allow them to freely exchange perceptions in the interviews without influence. During the interviews, the investigator had opportunities to ask more probing questions based on individual responses but decided against doing so. This decision was made based on positionality and wanting to remain as neutral as possible during the interviews so as to not lead the conversation in a specific direction.

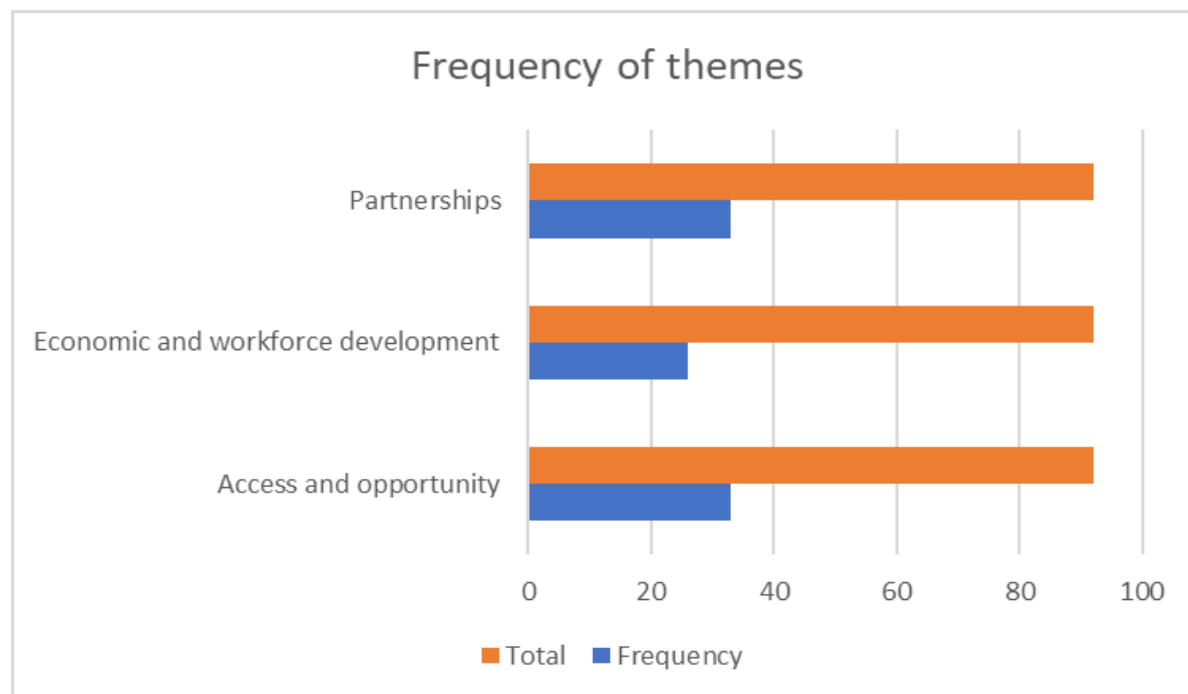
### **Findings**

Through analysis of the data collected from the participants in the focus group interviews, three major themes were identified from the data related to the research question, how do community leaders perceive the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life? The findings of this study suggest that the small, rural community college contributes to quality of life by providing 1) access and opportunity; 2) economic and workforce development; and 3) partnerships. By offering academic programs for credit and non-credit, athletic, and cultural events, and other supportive services, the small rural community college provides access and opportunity to residents in the community. Community leaders also perceived the impact of the small rural community college on the rural economy and workforce development through the adaptability of the community college to be able to respond to the changing economic and workforce needs of the community. Finally, community leaders identified ways in which they perceived the community college impacting quality of life through interactions with K-12 districts and developing partnerships to create opportunities for students. The frequency of how often participants mentioned words associated with each theme is presented in Table 4 below. There were 92 total instances of participants mentioning words included in the three themes presented here.



Table 4

*Frequency of major themes from data.*



### Theme 1: Access and Opportunity

Participants discussed how access to education means more than just classes leading to a degree. To them, it meant participation in athletic and cultural events as well as continuing education programs. Participants saw a connection between the community college and a quality-of-life impact in the community in which it was located. Participant Carol commented, "If you have an education and then you get a job, then you contribute more to the community because you aren't worrying . . . You have more time. You can volunteer more." The opportunity to explore individual interests and build human capital was expressed by Clyde: "Having the opportunity to learn about whatever your interests are, different resources to learn and educate yourself will enhance your quality of life. The opportunity is there." Jennifer agreed and echoed similar sentiments:

You can enhance your quality of life because it offers the learning opportunities. Whether it's to get a degree or just your general interests or wanting to upgrade your skills in computers it

will enhance that quality of life through the educational component.

Darren commented on access to opportunities in the areas of athletic events that are the result of the community college:

You can go to basketball games, soon to be soccer, soon to be other things too so I think that alone is pretty good addition to the quality of life. Adding things to do. Also, I think some people in the community, although most people are from around here, it brings in some of the athletes, it brings in a little different mix into the community and that always kind of improves the quality of life somewhat.

Participants also noted the access to opportunities at the community college and the flexibility of program offerings at the community college. Joanna noted: "In a flexible way too, which I think is important. Not everyone can jump into a classroom and spend the day if they are working full-time." Participants also commented on recognizing the low cost of the community college and personal attention provided by the community college. Betty stated:

It is a less expensive way to go to school and smaller class size and I just think that traditional and nontraditional students get a lot more assistance, there's more available, more people to talk to if they are having problems. You kind of get lost in a university, or you can, and at the community college there is always someone available to help the students out.

## **Theme 2: Economic impact and workforce development**

Community leaders also acknowledged the impact of the small rural community college on the rural economy and workforce development. Kevin stated, "Impacts on quality of life I think would be economic. The facilities that are provided, the infrastructure that is out there. That's a big thing for the community. I think the economic value of the community college is huge." Participants also observed the importance of the community college role in contributing to workforce development, with focus on the broad range of impacts the community college can have. Joanna stated her observation:

I think workforce. I think there has to be a thriving workforce. We need education for . . . soft skills, hard skills, trade, business degrees and further education (to continue our) quality of life. I am big proponent of culture and athletics. Anything where you can broaden that experience in the community. And the community college can do all of that.

Participant Brian reflected on the ability of the community college to change programming to meet specific industry needs by stating:

Doesn't the community college kind of become molded by the community itself? Based on the local hospitals needing good nurses, the community college has a nursing program. To manufacturing needing certain skills, they depend on the community college to provide that service. Community colleges are able to adapt to what's going on or what they think the future might need.

Participant Ben spoke to the notion of how the community college contributes to quality of life by potentially impacting workforce development:

Workforce is the number one thing. It doesn't matter union or nonunion, it's just people, you got to have the right people. Regionally we are able to tell a much better story about how we can develop and train and retrain our workforce with the community college. If we didn't have the community college here, and we had to go to larger metro areas, I think it would be a really big disadvantage.

## **Theme 3: Partnerships**

Community leaders identified ways in which they perceived the community college impacting quality of life through interactions with K-12 districts and businesses. Participant Kathy made this observation about partnerships and the small, rural community college:

The community college has to be more than just an open door, it has to be a partner with agencies. The community college creates community partners, demonstrating that we are all in it together and we're building what we need because it's not just there for us.

Specifically, participants discussed opportunities for high school students to take college courses through dual credit opportunities. Aaron commented:

Well, good or bad, dual-credit courses. We have high school students who are, you know, getting a year . . . at least a semester, if not more. There's a lot of initiatives out there for people to get education, whether it's online, whether it's night classes."

Other participants also noted the partnerships that the community college has with industries in the region and how the college is able to respond to the needs of industry. Alicia observed:

I think the community college is an amazingly powerful asset to our community. I think they're amazingly responsive to the needs of our community, especially with this new technology center. Industry identified a very specific need and within a very short amount of time, we now have a building and a plan. In education, it takes longer to get those pieces into place, so I feel

like the community college was quick to act based on a need.

### Discussion

Community colleges provide open access to postsecondary education services to students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds as well as providing economic and workforce development training programs to help individuals acquire new knowledge and skills leading to high quality employment. Community colleges are flexible and responsive to local needs of the community. Using the Community Capitals Framework, one of the ways in which the community college contributes to quality of life is by developing human capital. As stated in the Theoretical Framework, "human capital can be referred to as education, skills, and training" (Flora and Flora, 2013, p. 11). Through providing access and opportunities, economic and workforce development, and partnerships within the community, the small, rural community college directly impacts increasing human capital in rural communities

Access and opportunity in higher education are sometimes difficult to obtain for a variety of reasons (economics, transportation, childcare, job loss). The findings suggest that human capital can be increased by the small, rural community college because of the way that the institution creates opportunities for individuals regardless of what their interests are. The small, rural community college offers residents the chance to take classes to earn a degree and to take a particular class to increase specific skills (using spreadsheets, computer-aided design, and computerized accounting, for example) or of general interest (birdwatching and knitting, for example).

Through providing a broad range of course offerings to suit different needs and interests, the community college contributes to quality of life by providing opportunities to develop relationships and connections between people and directly increases human capital in the rural community. Residents in rural communities are likely to have limited access to opportunities to increase their skill level without the community college. If the community college were not located in the rural community and accessible to residents, then the access and

opportunity of residents to increase their educational attainment and increase their skills and employability would be limited. The consequences would have a negative impact on the rural community due to the challenges already facing them (declining population, stagnant economy, declining infrastructure).

As rural residents become more aware of the community college programs and services available, and participate in the education, training, and workforce development classes and training opportunities, residents continue to increase their human capital. Increased human capital is a community development tool because as people increase their education, skills, and training and are able to work for a higher wage, they have more money to contribute to the rural economy. If they are able to increase their skills and training, they are able to increase their standard of living, thus enhancing their quality of life. This could mean that individuals are allowed more time and resources to contribute to the collective quality of life of the rural community.

The small, rural community college is a vital tool in the toolbox of rural communities to use in building human capital and social capital. Not only does the community college provide tools and opportunities necessary for individuals to increase their educational attainment and employability skills, the institution also can serve as a conduit for communities to build social capital. By offering a variety of programming on their campuses, small rural community colleges are creating opportunities for residents to come together in groups and not only learn about a new topic or experience an athletic or cultural event but also those residents the opportunity to meet other residents and build relationships with people in the community that they may not normally encounter. As mentioned in Flora and Flora (2013), this group function is an important step in building social capital in a rural community because social capital is not built at the individual level.

Why do rural residents continue to live in an area with declining population and job scarcity? They like the quality of life that the rural community provides. They like the wide-open space where

everyone knows everybody and people look after each other. They also like the fact that they have access to what larger communities provide but at a distance. The colleges are a valued part of rural life, providing cultural activities and sporting events as well as opportunities for further education and skill development; they help keep existing industry there. The results highlight that community colleges should engage the community in determining needs that can be served through the community college.

Career and technical program faculty utilize local employers to serve on their advisory committees and connect their students to industry internships and post-college job opportunities. Faculty expertise may be utilized to serve on local conservation boards or the board of a local social service agency. The college facilities are a community asset. Classrooms may be used for industry training and retraining, and gymnasiums and sports fields may be used by the K-12 school districts for a variety of community events. The child development center may be utilized to provide daycare for families in the community. The college auditorium may be utilized to host speakers, cultural events, and other performances for the public. These kinds of activities may be especially appealing to the older rural residents and foster their support of the college (i.e., the college foundation, scholarships, tax levies). Professional development activities can be provided to K-12 teachers in use of distance learning and other technologies.

### **Implications for Practice**

#### **Targeted investment in providing intrusive student supportive services**

The community college has an opportunity to address a vital need in the rural community regarding access and opportunity. Rural residents may not even attempt to pursue postsecondary education after high school because they do not believe they can be successful at it, they cannot afford to go to college, they do not know how to get started applying for college, or maybe the thought of going to college is intimidating to them and so they give up on the idea of doing so.

Increasing human capital requires individuals to pursue postsecondary education to acquire new

information, develop knowledge, and learn new skills for employability. The small rural community college needs to act by making an investment of resources to provide adequate staff to help ensure that each student is assigned an advisor during the time they are enrolled in either a non-credit or credit program at the institution. These positions can take on different names – student success coach, student success advocate, pathway navigator. The purpose of these positions is to guarantee that students at the community college have an individual assigned who will assist that student through each step of their academic journey – from discussing short- and long-range goals, navigating admissions and registration, discussing financial aid programs available to help pay for training, and providing supportive services to the student while they are enrolled and completing their training program.

Rural residents and rural students graduating from high school and looking at postsecondary educational opportunities could benefit from additional supportive services at the postsecondary level to assist them with navigating the higher education environment. By creating a stronger support system within the community college, rural students arriving on campus could have a stronger chance at increasing their human capital through successful postsecondary educational attainment. By investing in human resources to provide information, guidance, and one-to-one interaction with rural students to assist them through each step of their educational journey, community colleges are playing a vital role in increasing human capital in rural communities.

Not only would high school or traditional college-aged students benefit from this type of resource at the community college, non-traditional students would, too. With the changing economic activity in rural communities, companies have closed plants as a part of their business plan. When plants close, employees become dislocated workers, are laid off, retire, relocate, or find another job locally. One option for dislocated workers is to further their educational attainment and possibly retrain for a new career field. For these individuals, some of whom may have been out of the educational environment for several years,

including decades, the thought of going back to school can be overwhelming and frightening. The small, rural community college can provide that supportive environment to help these potential students to successfully navigate the higher education environment, providing supportive services along their way to help them be successful in completing their training program. This direct action would lead to an increase in human capital and social capital in the rural community.

### **Utilize key partnerships to increase community- and service-learning opportunities.**

One way to build social capital in communities is through service-learning opportunities. The small, rural community college should utilize partnerships with agencies and local companies to provide students with opportunities to apply concepts and theories learned in the classroom environment to a workplace environment. This type of learning can increase social capital in the rural community. Increasing social capital means that individuals are building relationships, strengthening interpersonal interactions, identifying problems in their communities, and working together to find workable solutions – all things that can lead to a stronger quality of life in the community. The small, rural community college has an opportunity to increase social capital by creating access and opportunity and providing supportive services to help rural students navigate the higher education environment.

Rural students develop interpersonal skills, along with technical skills, and build relationships with faculty and other students during their time enrolled at the community college. They have discussions related to course content and other ideas in the classroom environment and perhaps outside of the classroom as well. It is this type of social interaction for rural students that can help increase social capital in the rural community because rural students learn new information, develop knowledge, learn concepts, and improve social skills, all of which they are able to bring back to the rural community and incorporate them into their daily lives. Perhaps they form a committee to develop a new economic development plan for the rural community or they decide to develop a new

festival as a community attraction to draw outsiders to the rural community during the summer months. Whatever the case, the small, rural community college has the opportunity to further increase social capital in rural communities by providing the environment for rural residents to develop the skills and abilities needed to build and strengthen interpersonal relationships, work to identify problems that affect their communities and share ideas on developing short- and long-range solutions to those problems, which can lead to an enhanced quality of life in the rural community.

### **Providing a framework for institutional self-assessment**

Another implication for practice from this study is that it provides a framework for other institutions to conduct similar self-assessments aimed at providing important insight from members of their communities in helping the institution better understand how the work performed impacts the communities. This type of study can be replicated by institutions in order to enhance their awareness of how the community perceives the work that they do and what additional actions can be taken to improve the impact of this work on stakeholders in the community (residents, businesses, the regional economy, and workforce). This study assists community leaders and community college administrators in further developing their understanding of the work and functions performed by the small, rural community college and the perceived role of the community college in the community. The results of this study tell the boards of trustees, administrators, faculty, and staff that the small, rural community college is viewed as an important part of the community. Visibility in community organizations and events is the role of everyone at the community college.

### **Limitations**

Although the number of participants allowed for exploration of perceptions of rural community leaders, the perceptions explored in this study may not represent those of all rural community leaders. Rural community leaders are not a homogenous group, regardless of their shared experience of living and/or working in a rural community. Additionally, the focus group method may have



restricted the expression of some participants who felt uncomfortable sharing their perceptions within a group setting.

Another limitation of this study was that the investigation was led by an employee of the community college under study in this research. Participants were made aware of this relationship between the investigator and the community college at the start of the focus group interviews. With this disclosure, some participants may have limited their responses to hide perceptions that they felt would have been damaging or not well-received. For future research, or replication of this study, using an independent investigator with no affiliation to the community college under study would be advantageous to conducting research to gather insights.

### Conclusion

Rural and urban communities are two dissimilar settings each with their own unique characteristics, features, and challenges. Rural communities offer natural resources, wide open spaces, and less dense population, which makes them attractive to many residents. While they seek to provide a good quality of life for their residents, many rural communities experience social and economic challenges due to lack of resources including human capital, financial capital, social capital, and built capital. Over time, rural communities sometimes experience deteriorating infrastructure along with other socioeconomic challenges due to the lack of resources needed to adequately support and sustain their environments. These communities experience declining population, higher unemployment, and insufficient resources (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). As a result, rural communities often rely on assistance from a variety of organizations, such as non-profit groups, educational institutions, community foundations, government agencies, and public-private partnerships (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). One of the tools available to rural communities to assist with development issues is the small, rural community college.

The small, rural community college is a vital tool available in rural communities to help directly strengthen rural communities by increasing human

capital and social capital through the functions of providing access and opportunity, economic and workforce development, and partnerships. By taking deliberate action to create access and opportunity for residents in rural communities to pursue higher education, the small rural community college increases human and social capital. Creating chances for rural residents to access and pursue programming at the community college produces a direct benefit to rural communities because the institutions is constructing opportunities for rural residents to become prepared and qualified to participate in the local economy and workforce by gaining new information, creating knowledge, and learning skills. Without the small, rural community college, these opportunities may not exist in rural communities.

The small, rural community college contributes to quality of life in a rural community by increasing social capital as well. The opportunities for rural residents to learn new skills and increase their knowledge through post-secondary education can increase social capital by increasing residents' ability to establish and build effective relationships, increase their skills in interpersonal interactions, and increase their ability to identify problems in their communities and share ideas about solutions to solving those problems.

Social capital in rural communities can be increased when rural students access the small rural community college. Participating in class discussions, where course content is discussed in depth, ideas are talked about and exchanged, and knowledge is constructed can increase social capital by increasing the ability of rural students to go back to their communities and establish new relationships and strengthen existing ones, become more involved in identifying problems facing their communities and having the skill sets needed to identify solutions to these problems through sharing and implementing ideas.

Human capital and social capital are two important ways that rural communities can strengthen their growth and development. Human capital reflects the ability of rural residents to participate in the local economy and workforce, and social capital reflects the ability of rural residents to

contribute to the continued development and improvement of the rural community through social action designed to improve the existence of the community for the people who inhabit it. These two capitals are important for continued sustainability of rural communities, and the small, rural community college plays an important role in building these two capitals in these communities.

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**Janice Friedel, PhD**, is a professor of education at Iowa State University where she joined the faculty in the Educational Policy and Leadership Studies Department within the College of Human Sciences in August 2011. She has more than 30 years of experience in community colleges in Iowa and Kentucky where she has served in a variety of executive level community college positions, including the community college presidency, and as the state administrator for a system of community colleges and the state director for career and technical (vocational) education for secondary and postsecondary education. Other community college administrative experience includes vice chancellor of academic affairs and planning for a multi-college community college district, director of curriculum development and program evaluation, and dean of community and continuing education. A native of Iowa, she earned her doctorate, master, and bachelor degrees at the University of Iowa. Friedel's scholarship include over forty articles, books, and chapters on program evaluation, labor market assessments, environmental scanning, strategic planning, the community college mission, workforce development, the role of community colleges in high school reform, and the economic benefits of attending the community college. Her current research interests center on rural community colleges, higher education public policy, community college leadership development, the community college mission and governance, career and technical education, the economic benefits of community college attendance, and dual/concurrent enrollment.

## **Appendix**

### **Interview Protocol**

1. How does “quality of life” exist in this region?
2. Tell me about the ways in which you perceive the community college contributing to “quality of life”?
3. Describe your perception of the relationship between the community and the community college today.