

SUPPORTING SUCCESS: INSIGHTS INTO THE COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH OF STUDENTS ON A SATELLITE CAMPUS

Ashley J. Carpenter

Appalachian State University
carpenteraj4@appstate.edu

Shanan Fitts

Appalachian State University
fittss@appstate.edu

Dionne Sills Busio

Appalachian State University
sillsbusiodm@appstate.edu

Abstract

This study examines how students attending a satellite campus of a large regional university in the U.S. Southeast utilize their community cultural wealth to access, navigate, and succeed in postsecondary education. Drawing on Yosso's (2005) framework of community cultural wealth, we employed a mixed-methods approach to examine how students at the newly established satellite campus leverage familial, social, and navigational capital to overcome challenges and persist in college. With a student body that includes first-generation, racially minoritized, and nontraditional students, the campus offers a unique setting to explore how rural learners build on various forms of capital to achieve academic and personal goals. Findings from this study offer insights into how institutions can better support the success of rural students.

Keywords: satellite campuses, non-traditional students, community cultural wealth, cultural capital, rural students.

Introduction

For many people in the United States, earning a postsecondary degree is a significant step toward achieving their personal and familial goals. This study was conducted in the southeastern US, where approximately 38% of high school graduates are enrolled in postsecondary education, with lower enrollment rates in rural counties. While

interest in rural populations' participation in higher education has increased (see McNamee, 2024; Swanson, 2024), these populations remain undervalued in mainstream narratives about college access, success, and ultimate retention. In this study, we employ the lens of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) to explore the factors that contribute to access to and success in postsecondary education for individuals in rural counties¹.

Scholars (see López et al., 2023) have long explored the factors contributing to student success, recognizing that institutional structures and the unique assets students bring, essentially cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), shape achievement. Building on a broadened conceptualization of cultural capital, we explore how students at a branch campus of a large regional university in the southeast, Sunny Valley satellite campus², used their community cultural wealth (CCW) to navigate their academic and social environment (Yosso, 2005). Yosso developed the framework of CCW to describe the tools that people of color utilize to survive and thrive in institutions that have historically been situated within contexts of white supremacy. In this study, we apply this framework to examine how rural students strategically utilize their resources to navigate their institutions intentionally. The purpose of our exploration is to gain a deeper understanding of these students' experiences, networks, and motivations, enabling us to better support their success and retention.

The Sunny Valley satellite campus opened in a mid-sized rural community in Fall 2023 to address the need for improved access to affordable higher education in the region. In 2023, the satellite campus enrolled 363 students; by 2024, enrollment had grown to 511 students. Satellite campuses, also referred to as regional campuses, are "uniquely placed to serve the needs of their localities" (Rossi & Goglio, 2020, p. 35) and have the potential to make unique contributions to the university as a whole. For underserved or geographically isolated student populations, satellite campuses provide increased accessibility for students who may be unable to commute to the main campus due to distance, financial constraints, or other factors, while potentially minimizing the cost of earning an advanced degree.

¹ Citations for state and institutional data are redacted to protect the confidentiality of participants.

² All names of participants and locations have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Given the limited access to higher education in rural areas (Swanson, 2024), satellite campuses like Sunny Valley offer community members important opportunities to advance their personal and professional goals (Almaden, 2024). Additionally, students attending satellite campuses can remain within supportive family and community networks rather than needing to move or undertake long commutes, which can add further stress to already stretched lives (Hope & Quinlan, 2021). As this institution is located in the southeast, we find it important to find comparable multi-site strategies that address how regional public universities scale rural access. For example, Utah State's campuses enroll thousands across distributed rural locations, aligning offerings with local labor markets, indicating a mature version of the same access logic (Utah State, 2025). Similarly, a sister institution like the University of North Georgia's (UNG) Blue Ridge campus has dual-enrollment pipelines, which illustrate how smaller rural sites can serve traditional students, adult completers, and high school learners without duplicating the main campus (UNG, 2025).

In addition to helping potential students access higher education, satellite campuses can help parent universities adapt to the evolving educational landscape and better serve the needs of a diverse student body. The opening of the Sunny Valley campus has given our large regional university the opportunity to recruit an increasingly diverse student population. According to the most recent demographic data, the student population at Sunny Valley includes 21% racially minoritized and 58% first-generation students. Enrollment of non-traditional students has increased at colleges and universities nationwide (Brozina et al., 2024; Zack, 2020). Nontraditional students are those students who have one or more of the following characteristics: 24 years old or older; enrolled part-time; returning to college after a hiatus; financially independent; employed full-time; have children; or are attending college after serving in the military (NCES, 2024). While many students attending the Sunny Valley satellite campus would be classified as traditional students in terms of age, many possess one or more of these non-traditional characteristics. If educators and academic institutions believe in the potential of rural serving satellite institutions, we must thoroughly understand students' characteristics, motivations, and strategies for success and retention. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students' relationships shape their sense of belonging, motivation, and persistence in college?
2. How do students use their CCW to navigate college experiences?

Community Cultural Wealth and Non-Traditional Students

This study addresses how students leverage various forms of CCW (Yosso, 2005) to navigate their post-secondary journeys. Yosso proposed that researchers analyze cultural capital through six lenses — aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant — to better understand students' networks and cultural assets. Our review of the research focuses on the aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capitals, as these lenses appeared most salient for the students in our study.

Aspirational Capital

Current research on non-traditional students attending regional campuses emphasizes the life skills and aspirational capital these students bring to their studies (Hope & Quinlan, 2021; Jerez, 2024). In their study of learner persistence, Bergman and colleagues (2014) collected survey data from 437 adult students enrolled in a workforce development program. Their survey results showed that students with higher educational aspirations and those enrolled in more course hours were most likely to indicate that they planned to complete their program. Hope and Quinlan's (2021) study of older adult students attending a satellite campus in the United Kingdom further illuminates that the concept of aspirational capital extends beyond individual goals. The adult learners in their study were motivated by aspirations for their children, viewing education as "an investment in their futures" (p. 2549). Existing research confirms that aspirational capital for some students extends beyond personal aspirations for success to encompass a desire to expand opportunities for family members (Matos, 2023).

Familial Capital

Yosso (2005) connects familial capital to funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), the skills and knowledge we learn in the context of our families and communities. Research on both traditional and non-traditional students attending satellite campuses affirms the importance of familial capital (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012; Hope & Quinlan, 2021). Unsurprisingly, research supports the notion that students have a higher chance of

academic success and graduation if they can rely on family for financial support and if family members are college graduates (Brändle & Häuberer, 2015; López et al., 2023). Studies indicate that students whose parents attended college are more likely to see going to college as 'non-negotiable,' and are also more likely to possess knowledge of how to access financial aid or communicate with faculty (López et al., 2023).

Single parents in Hope and Quinlan's (2021) study noted that returning to school contributed to greater independence for their children, which they viewed as a positive outcome. They also explained that family members helped support them by providing childcare or taking on additional chores, allowing them time to focus on their schoolwork. Exposito and Bernheimer (2012), whose research focused on the use of narrative storytelling in college teaching, argue that nontraditional students often "live within bonded social networks that have tight links to family, friends, and their racial, cultural, and linguistic communities" (p. 180). These networks are a crucial form of emotional support as students navigate the often impersonal, alienating world of post-secondary education.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the social networks we draw on to help us accomplish our goals (Gentry et al., 2025). These networks may appear differently for students at a rural satellite campus compared to traditional residential students (Benneworth et al., 2024). Researchers are beginning to rethink social belonging for non-traditional students, who may be less interested in forming friendships and more focused on developing social networks that support their career goals (Benneworth et al.; Jerez, 2024). Students who leverage their social networks and use support programs offered by the institution are more academically successful (Bergman et al., 2014; Dauer & Absher, 2015; López et al., 2023). Students with social networks that include friends or colleagues who have attended college can also leverage social capital to help navigate institutions.

Navigational Capital

Navigational capital may be significant for nontraditional students as they may lack knowledge of the language and processes used in universities to access financial aid, internships, or academic support. For first-generation college students, institutional support programs have positive effects on students' academic achievement, persistence,

and feelings of social belonging (López et al., 2023). Institutional programs that explicitly provide students with these supports (e.g., financial aid navigation or proactive advising) are associated with improved adjustment and academic outcomes (van Kessel et al., 2025; Walton et al., 2023), which can strengthen social and academic belonging (López et al., 2023). We find that when satellite campuses pair place-based access with intentional structures that cultivate belonging and demystify hidden curricula, they acknowledge and develop students' navigational capital.

Theoretical Framework

We used Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model as a guiding theoretical framework for this study. Yosso's (2005) CCW framework identified six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant. These forms of capital are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interlinked and defined by students' experiences and reinforced through family networks.

Early literature on persistence and retention for non-traditional or minoritized students is often informed by Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) contended that the knowledge of upper- and middle-class groups is deemed valuable capital in a hierarchical society. He argued that if one was not born into a family with these forms of knowledge, they could be acquired through formal education. However, Bourdieu's cultural capital framework does not encapsulate the complex identities or dynamic experiences of minoritized students in the U.S. (Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005).

Within higher education literature, some scholars (see Sheeran et al., 2007) have used Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital framework to examine students through a deficit-based lens, assuming they lack a relevant culture of their own. As a result, many education systems work from this assumption and construct ways to help "disadvantaged" students, whose race, class, and other minoritized backgrounds have left them lacking the necessary capital for social mobility (Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) was concerned that researchers were applying Bourdieu's framework in ways that reinforce deficit narratives rather than acknowledging the strength of minoritized or low-income students' communities.

While Yosso (2005) developed the CCW framework to analyze the strengths and resources of families and communities of color, we argue that the model is also useful in analyzing the experiences of non-traditional, rural students, as it validates how they employ various forms of capital to navigate their post-secondary experience. The CCW model “refocuses attention on the deficiencies of the schooling processes that failed to provide adequate academic preparation for the students, shifting some of the major responsibilities for the students' academic needs from their families and toward the schools” (Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005, p. 21). The model places less emphasis on students' deficiencies and critiques the educational methods used to sustain inequity through social reproduction.

Methods

To examine how students' cultural wealth shapes their experiences on a satellite campus, we used a mixed-methods design incorporating descriptive surveys and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative survey captured student demographics (e.g., age, enrollment status, first-generation status, commute distance, employment hours) and perceptions of key campus features (e.g., advising/financial-aid navigation, instructional quality, and awareness/use of student services) using Likert-type items. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews that invited participants to narrate how they interpreted and leveraged resources within their satellite campuses. The interviews help expand upon aspects of the quantitative survey.

Data Collection and Analysis

Survey Data Collection. The online survey consisted of 55 Likert-scaled and open-ended questions. Content was organized into four domains: (a) demographics and enrollment context (e.g., age, work hours, commute distance, first-generation status); (b) awareness and use of campus facilities and student services; (c) academic and social belonging; and (d) perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion in a Qualtrics platform. Questions used a 5-point agreement scale and an optional text box, allowing participants to elaborate on their responses if needed. To disseminate the survey, we first contacted instructors at the satellite campus, who helped distribute surveys to students. Second, we visited the satellite campus to distribute flyers, spoke directly with students, and conducted

in-person and online classroom visits to promote the survey. This process yielded $n = 210$ students who completed at least part of the survey, and $n = 117$ individuals completed the entire survey. These numbers represent 23% of the student population as of Fall 2024, which is considered a reasonable response rate for an online survey (Fosnatch et al., 2017).

Because of our multi-channel approach, the sample may reflect self-selection bias (e.g., some students could be more engaged or present on campus), nonresponse bias (e.g., students with heavier work/family demands are less likely to participate), and coverage bias (e.g., students not enrolled in contacted sections or not physically present during visits). We also acknowledge that inconsistent broadband access may have differentially limited participation among rural and working students (Samane-Cutipá et al., 2022). Therefore, we found it important to engage in multiple forms of collecting survey data.

Survey Data Analysis. To analyze the survey data, we first screened and cleaned the dataset in Qualtrics, deleting responses that did not meet the *a priori* completeness threshold ($\geq 90\%$ of required items). After cleaning, we used Google Sheets to aggregate responses. We created categories in Google Sheets, recoded Likert responses into numbers, and developed composite scales using Yosso's CCW model.

Semi-Structured Interview Data Collection. After the survey closed, we invited selected respondents to semi-structured interviews guided by Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model. We used purposive sampling based on various demographics (e.g., first-generation status, age, employment hours, commute distance, program) and survey response patterns (e.g., high/low scores on belonging, classroom engagement, and perceived support) to capture a broad range of experiences. We invited 26 students, and all the invitees agreed to participate. Interviews were also audio-recorded and transcribed via Zoom. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and focused on students' academic identities, perceptions of academic support, social belonging, and equity and inclusion on the Sunny Valley campus, with additional probes about how students locate and navigate resources (e.g., advising, financial aid, tutoring) within a satellite-campus context.

Semi-Structured Interview Data Analysis. To analyze the interview data, we coded it using the online platform Taguette (Rampkin et al., 2021). First, we began coding one of

the interviews together to discuss and establish our preliminary codebook. The resulting codebook includes 20+ codes, including CCW model, challenges, success, student identity, campus resources, campus perceptions, and demographic information. After establishing a common understanding of our codebook, interviews were coded independently. To ensure consistency between coders, two people coded one-third of the interview transcripts. As we coded, we met weekly to discuss discrepancies and questions that arose. After completing open coding of all interviews, we reviewed the codes and quotes to create umbrella themes, consolidate overlapping codes, and connect related codes, corresponding to the CCW model.

Demographic Overview of Participants

Survey Participants. Of the 117 people who completed the survey, approximately 70% of respondents identified as cisgender women, and about 80% identified as white. 95% of participants indicated that English is their first and only language. Seventy percent of respondents were between 17 and 23 years old; thus, ~30% would be considered non-traditional in terms of age. Approximately 36% of respondents have one or more dependents, and about 38% of students work more than 20 hours per week. Additionally, around 50% of survey respondents are the first in their families to attend college. While respondents reported a wide range of household incomes, 63% reported family income of less than \$60,000, and 25% reported household income of \$20,000 or less.

Interview Participants. Of the 26 interview participants, 69% identified as cisgender women, and 69% identified as white. Around 65% of interview participants were of the “traditional” college-going age, with about half (~54%) identifying as first-generation college students and 35% having one or more dependents. Approximately 69% of interviewees had attained an associate's degree or higher prior to enrollment at Sunny Valley, with ~35% being education majors and ~35% accounting, business, or marketing majors.

Findings

The primary question we seek to address in this study is how students attending a regional campus of a state university use their CCW to navigate their social and academic environments. We found that familial and social capital were often essential—even when

friends and family had not attended college—providing emotional and material support that fueled students' academic aspirations and encouraged their persistence, including plans to return to Sunny Valley the following year. We also found that positive and meaningful faculty relationships were necessary for most participants, and a key source of navigational capital.

Familial Capital

Yosso's (2005) concept of familial capital highlights how students draw from their extended familial and community networks to navigate higher education. Familial capital does not solely refer to direct academic support but encompasses the values, encouragement, and resilience instilled through family relationships. The students' narratives illustrate how familial capital manifests in their educational journeys. For many students, familial support was rooted in encouragement and the expectation of academic success, rather than hands-on assistance. Kelly, a white Social Work student, reflected on the significance of education within their family:

My family always encouraged me to finish high school and college, to get a good job. Currently, my older brother and I are the only two who have (or will be) getting a four-year degree. My mother ended up going to college, but she couldn't finish it. And then my dad was never able to finish high school due to health issues. So, it's always been important to them that we get the education they never received or finished.

Several first-generation college students shared that, although their parents did not attend college, education remained a priority for them. These students often felt a sense of responsibility to fulfill their families' aspirations. Kat, a white Education student, acknowledged the effort required to navigate higher education without a direct familial blueprint:

My mom really wanted me to go to college, too. They really pushed me to do my best in school. My dad dropped out of high school and got his GED when I was 17, so it wasn't too long ago. My mom did maybe a semester at a community college once, and that's the most we all have. It took a lot of effort to be a first-generation college student.

Jorge, a Latine Accounting major, similarly noted the importance of his degree, “I feel like they prioritized me getting [a degree] just because they didn’t have the same opportunity. My mom is always telling me that.” Jorge and others’ narratives demonstrated how familial capital can be expressed through emotional and motivational support rather than direct academic assistance.

Beyond encouragement, familial capital also extended to respecting students’ academic commitments. Kelly described how her family adapted to her needs, “Anytime I have a Zoom, I usually let them know, and they will either leave, or they’ll just go outside or do something. They’ll wait, which is very nice and respectful, and I absolutely appreciate them for that.” Similarly, Cody, a white Criminal Justice student, shared, “Anytime I have to write a paper, or work on a project, they just understand that I won’t be able to help around the house as much that day... they understand that.” Overall, these narratives reflect the diverse ways familial capital operates. While some students received encouragement and emotional support, others drew strength from their families’ aspirations and sacrifices. The presence, or arguably absence, of hands-on assistance did not negate the impact of familial capital but rather shaped how students navigated their academic journeys.

Aspirational Capital

Aspirational capital refers to how goals and aspirations motivate people (Yosso, 2005). Participants described pursuing higher education due to intrinsic motivation, a desire to make their families proud, and a commitment to contribute to their communities. Students who identified as the first in their families to attend college often said that their first-generation college experience shaped their aspirations. Amber, a Hmong Computer Science student, explained:

My grandpa, dad, and grandma actually came from Thailand. They have a really strong opinion about school. They really want us to go to school and graduate with a degree. They always told me, ‘Hey, we just want you to go to school, get a good degree, live a good life.’ It was harder for them when they came here. So, that’s really all they wanted for their grandkids was to go to school and get a good education.

Several other first-generation participants echoed this sentiment, often stating that their family supported their goals, even if they did not have the financial means or prior

experience to provide specific guidance. Mike, a Latine Business major, explained that his parents encouraged him, but did not have the “tools to do a lot more than that.” Mike also stated that by earning his degree in international business, he hopes to use his “bilingual skills to assist others who may not speak English.” Most participants noted the intergenerational impact of being first-generation. Students with children also discussed their long-term educational goals as acts of care and modeling for their families. Brandy, a white nontraditional student studying psychology, explained:

I'm okay if I don't get my doctorate until I'm in my 50s or older. I'm seasoned enough now to know, especially with being a mom, that things happen sometimes, and it slows you down. But my plan is to finish up my bachelor's, and that way I can go above and beyond that.

Aspirational and familial capital often operate in tandem, with students' hopes for the future deeply intertwined with the dreams and sacrifices of their families. Many participants expressed their desire to honor their family's support and create opportunities for themselves and future generations fueled their drive to succeed in higher education.

Additionally, professors at this satellite campus took the time to learn about students' aspirations. Interview participants discussed how their professors recognized and supported their interests, academic pursuits, and professional goals – notably, 59% of survey participants felt that their voices were heard in the classroom. Amber noted how her computer science professors made her “feel proud,” especially as the only woman in the class: “They've been very helpful. Not in a way that's discriminating against me, but very proud of me... It's motivating as well.” For participants, taking advantage of faculty support and expertise was crucial, as evidenced by our survey, which found that 52% of respondents met with faculty at least 2 times a month outside of classroom hours. For example, Cody found inspiration in faculty members who engaged them beyond classroom content: “I've stayed after class and talked with [Sunny Valley professor] several times. I feel that he can give pretty good insight into any questions I have.”

For some students, these interactions opened new academic and professional possibilities. Sandra, a white adult learner re-entering higher education with extensive professional experience, shared that she was “invited to join a research project on healthy

food access” because her psychology professor “recognized her strengths.” Collectively, these accounts emphasize how aspirational capital is sustained not only by students’ internal motivation and family narratives but also actively fostered through institutional relationships. Instructors who listen and invest in students’ futures — of which 79% of survey respondents reported feeling respected by faculty — can help expand students’ horizons for what is possible, reinforcing their persistence in higher education and beyond.

Social Capital

According to the survey and interview data, participants reported drawing on various forms of social capital, including their communities, friends, peers, and professors. Most interview participants —about 77% —grew up in or near the rural county where Sunny Valley is located. Those participants who grew up as “locals” frequently described their hometowns as “tight knit” places where news travels quickly. As Brenda, a Latine Elementary Education student, explained, “Everyone knows everyone. If something happens, rumors tend to spread around pretty fast. I would say it's a very rural town. Country, huge farming, tobacco fields, all that kind of stuff is very present here.” Social capital may be especially consequential in rural communities where everyone knows everyone (for better or worse). In tight-knit communities, support often extends beyond the immediate family, with people looking out for one another. As Kelly put it, “I could ask a stranger on the side of the road for help, and they would end up helping me. It's a very meaningful community to me, to have that kind of support.” Many, but not all, of our local student participants valued that sense of interconnectedness and support.

Some participants' social networks directly supported their academic goals. For example, Diane, a white Elementary Education student, shared that her friends support her with schoolwork and the goal of becoming a teacher: “My friends have been a really big support. They're all teachers, believe it or not. One's three years older than me, and the other one's two years older than me. So they had experience before me.” Similarly, Sarah emphasized that having an academically motivated and competitive friend group throughout high school had conditioned her to use her friends as sources of academic support. The elementary education program at Sunny Valley employs a cohort model, where students study together across multiple classes and participate in concurrent

internships in public schools. This model encourages students to work together on assignments, providing one another with social and academic support, and a clear strategy for student retention and success. Approximately one-third of the interview participants were enrolled in this program, and several mentioned that they found this model helpful when facing academic or personal challenges.

For students not from the rural southeast, fitting in and benefiting from those tight, often close-knit networks may be more difficult. This presented an additional challenge for students who grew up in more racially and linguistically diverse communities. For example, Jorge grew up about an hour north of New York City in an area that he described as racially diverse. He expressed that finding his footing at Sunny Valley, “has been difficult just because I'm used to seeing people that look like me, and it's not really the case. And also, physically, the looks of places are different than what I'm used to.” Jorge observed that the main campus is more racially and socially diverse, noting the absence of multicultural organizations on the satellite campus. Beth agreed, calling for more social events and student groups:

I just wanted to make it clear that I wasn't expecting parties or anything. I'm actually expecting extracurricular activities within the university... I would like that. The [main] campus came up with the *Women and Information Technology and Computer Science* related club.

Students described the need for a non-traditional student club or events that acknowledge family and work demands while still prioritizing connection, whether the programming is social or academically focused.

Navigational Capital

Navigational capital refers to the skills and knowledge that minoritized individuals develop to navigate systems, including educational institutions (Yosso, 2005). Our data highlights the pivotal role of faculty support in helping students navigate the often inequitable university campus environment. They viewed the guidance and knowledge shared by the instructors as instrumental in building their capacity to navigate coursework, technology, and other factors that impacted their educational experience. Participants attributed their satisfaction—84% in our survey—to supports such as flexible due dates

and empathetic accommodation of nontraditional students' multiple roles. Rev, a Latine Marketing student, aptly captured a sentiment expressed by many participants: "God bless the professors. If it weren't for them, I don't think I would be as successful as I am today." Even Beth, who admitted to struggling academically, identified instructor support as beneficial, stating, "Even though I failed his course, he was still very motivational and understood that I was genuinely trying to pass the course."

Although students encountered gaps in required major courses at the satellite campus, they used navigational capital (by working with faculty) to arrange online or hybrid options. These actions illustrate how students use strategic problem-solving to overcome institutional barriers, with faculty support serving as a key resource. Faculty accessibility and willingness to help were key supports that, according to participants, facilitated progress through their degree. Not only did survey data indicate that 90% of students felt comfortable asking their professors for help, but interviews also highlighted the high value students placed on their instructors providing the help they needed. Mack, a white man in the Social Work program, said that "The professors I have here for my general education class and science education class are really awesome. And they're like, 'email us whenever.'"

Campus staff also played a key role in cultivating students' navigational capital by helping them understand and access institutional resources. Participants consistently described advisors, help-desk attendants, and other support personnel as approachable and informed, which was an asset to their success on campus. For example, Adair, a white Computer Information Sciences student, specifically praised the library staff for their "knowledge and patience in demonstrating how to use various library resources." Although the satellite campus did not offer the full range of amenities available at the main campus (e.g., recreational facilities, dining options, or outdoor gathering spaces), students still felt that the staff were responsive and ready to assist when needed. In addition to one-on-one staff interactions, students also gained navigational knowledge through the university's broader communication efforts. Brandy, for instance, highlighted the importance of simply knowing where to find help, even if time constraints prevented her from using those resources immediately:

“I do appreciate all the information that [Sunny Valley] has for us. If we need anything, they really help. Because even though I haven't used [some] services yet, I know they're available to me. And I know how to access them because I get communication from [Sunny Valley] constantly about it, and not in a bad way. I think that helps set me up for success, too, just knowing that I have support there if the time comes that I need it.”

Her experience reflects a broader pattern found in the survey data: over 88% of respondents reported being aware of academic resources and support available on campus. For many nontraditional students—who often balance school with work, parenting, or caregiving responsibilities—access to timely, clear information and supportive staff was a crucial factor in successfully navigating the university environment.

And yet, for some nontraditional students, navigating campus support systems presented added complexity due to their unique responsibilities and expectations. While many demonstrated navigational capital in finding alternative pathways to meet academic requirements, others found institutional support lacking or misaligned with their needs. Faith, a white Elementary Education student, ultimately stopped seeking help after experiencing what she perceived as her professor's instructional inflexibility. When she requested math support (a subject she found especially challenging), her instructor advised her to find a tutor. As a working student, Faith found this response dismissive and burdensome, explaining, “I don't think it should be on me to find a tutor to teach me something I'm supposed to be learning in class, especially at the time I had a job.” This sentiment reflects a reality for some nontraditional students, who are already balancing work and school, may interpret institutional suggestions as inadequate or even alienating, prompting them to disengage rather than seek further support.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how students attending a regional campus of a state university leverage community cultural wealth, particularly familial, aspirational, navigational, and social capital, to navigate their educational experiences. We found that familial capital plays a powerful, if often indirect, role in students' educational persistence. Many participants noted that their families offered encouragement and flexibility, even if

they lacked the knowledge or financial means to provide academic guidance (Jerez, 2024). This aligns with Yosso's (2005) conceptualization, which posits that familial capital includes emotional support, cultural values, and the intergenerational transmission of strength (López et al., 2023). Rather than perceiving the absence of hands-on academic help as a limitation, students framed their familial relationships as sources of motivation and success. For participants in this study, familial capital was a root source of aspirational capital, which included not only personal ambitions but also collective responsibility. As in Hope and Quinlan's (2021) research, we observed that many students were driven by the desire to fulfill their families' dreams or serve as role models for children or younger siblings. Students saw their success as a pathway to uplift their families or communities, reflecting collectivist values often overlooked by dominant narratives in higher education (Boettcher et al., 2022).

Our findings also demonstrate that social capital is key to participants' academic success. Like other studies of rural students (Hope & Quinlan, 2021; McNamee et al., 2025), participants who grew up in rural areas described being embedded in tight-knit networks that extended beyond the university. Universities can leverage these networks by creating and sustaining relational ecosystems within campuses that reflect and enhance the social resources students already possess.

Recommendations

Our research suggests that as universities seek to recruit and support more rural, adult, or non-traditional students, our methods for supporting them need to shift from a narrow academic lens to a more holistic, culturally attuned understanding of how students are uplifted by their families. This finding suggests that it is worth the university's time and effort to plan events catered to families and community involvement, such as university-sponsored block parties or sporting events. Data gathered from Latine and Hmong participants indicate that the university should develop targeted ways to improve engagement for multilingual students and their families. These kinds of events and engagement strategies do more than build goodwill; they foster a sense of belonging and affirm the cultural contexts from which many students draw strength. In doing so, institutions can contribute to long-term student retention by affirming students' identities

and providing environments where cultural wealth is seen and valued. Additionally, while many universities are moving away from cohort models to allow for ease of entry and exit from programs, our findings suggest that programs that intentionally cultivate peer relationships (e.g., cohort models, mentorship initiatives, and learning communities) should be expanded and embedded as retention strategies.

Our final recommendation is to develop more mentoring and career development resources for students. Students consistently desired more robust support in achieving their long-term goals, particularly through resume building, skill development, and career-oriented networking. This reveals a critical gap in the literature: how institutions, particularly satellite or regional campuses, understand and cultivate navigational capital for survival and student flourishing. When faculty invested time in understanding students' goals, aspirations were amplified and made actionable. Participants emphasized the motivational and practical value of professors who listened, offered guidance, and created space for students to see themselves in professional and scholarly futures. These relational investments (e.g., research invitations or extended office hour conversations) helped transform aspirational capital into navigational capital.

Retention is often framed in institutional terms—credits completed, degrees conferred—but our findings indicate that student persistence is deeply relational, cultural, and communal. Institutions must therefore take a more expansive view of what constitutes "student support." Academic advising, mental health services, financial aid, and career planning must be culturally sustaining, not just technically efficient. Student success is not merely about grit or individual responsibility; it is a collective endeavor that must be structurally and ethically supported by the institution.

References

- Almaden, C. R. C. (2024). *Economics of Satellite Campuses* (Working Paper No. DP 2024-33). Philippine Institute for Development Studies.
<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/311722>
- Beckwith, N. (2023). Barriers for Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education. *Educational Research: Theory and Practice*, 34(2), 75–79.
- Bergman, M., Gross, J. P. K., & Berry, M. (2014). If life happened but a degree did not: Examining factors that impact adult student persistence. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 62(2), 90–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2014.915445>
- Benneworth, P., Maxwell, K., & Charles, D. (2024). Measuring the effects of the social rural university campus. *Research Evaluation*, 33, 1–10.
<https://doi:10.1093/reseval/rvac027>
- Boettcher, M. L., Lange, A., Hanks, S., & Means, D. R. (2022). Rural Black and Latinx students: Engaging community cultural wealth in higher education. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 38(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.26209/jrre3801>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Brändle, T., & Häuberer, J. (2015). Social capital of non-traditional students at a German university. Do traditional and non-traditional students access different social resources? *International Journal of Higher Education*, 4(1), 92–105.
- Brozina, C., Johri, A., & Chew, A. (2024). A systematic review of research on nontraditional students reveals inconsistent definitions and a need for clarity: Focus on U.S.-based studies. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, 1434494.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1434494>
- Dauer, R. A., & Absher, B. (2015). The influence of student support programs upon the academic success of nontraditional students. *International Journal of Education*, 7(4), 97–119.
- Exposito, S., & Bernheimer, S. (2012). Nontraditional students and institutions of higher education: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 33(2), 178–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2012.675942>

- Fosnacht, K., Sarraf, S., Howe, E., & Peck, L. K. (2017). How Important are High Response Rates for College Surveys? *Review of Higher Education*, 40(2), 245–265.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2017.0003>
- Gentry, A. N., Martin, J. P., & Douglas, K. A. (2025). Social capital assessments in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Frontiers in Education*, 9.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1498422>
- Hope, J., & Quinlan, K. M. (2021). Staying local: How mature, working-class students on a satellite campus leverage community cultural wealth. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(12), 2542–2555.
- Jerez, E. (2024). Exploring the contribution of student engagement factors to mature-aged students' persistence and academic achievement during the first year of university. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 72(3), 304–319.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2023.2279797>
- López, M. J., Santelices, M. V., & Taveras, C. M. (2023). Academic performance and adjustment of first-generation students to higher education: A systematic review. *Cogent Education*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2209484>
- Matos, J. M. (2023). Utilizing Latinx cultural capital for the retention and graduation of Latinx students in higher education. *Journal of Latinos & Education*, 22(3), 1250–1267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2021.1941030>
- McNamee, T. C., Ardoin, S., Cooper, N. D., & Sansone, V. A. (2025). “Because I’m from a rural background”: An examination of rural students in higher education through a critical, non-deficit framework. *Journal of Higher Education*, 1–31.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2025.2455333>
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Postsecondary outcomes for nontraditional and traditional undergraduate students. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.
<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/ctu>

- Rampin, R., Rampin, V., & DeMott, S. (2021). Taguette: Open-source qualitative data analysis (Version 1.0.0) [Computer software]. *Journal of Open Source Software*, 6(68), Article 3522. <https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.03522>
- Rossi, F., & Goglio, V. (2020). Satellite university campuses and economic development in peripheral regions, *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(1), 34–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1506917>
- Samane-Cutipa, V. A., Quispe-Quispe, A. M., Talavera-Mendoza, F., & Limaymanta, C. H. (2022). Digital gaps influencing the online learning of rural students in secondary education: A systematic review. *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*, 12(7), pp. 685–690. doi: 10.18178/ijiet.2022.12.7.1671
- Sheeran, Y., Brown, B. J., & Baker, S. (2007). Conflicting philosophies of inclusion: The contestation of knowledge in widening participation. *London Review of Education*, 5(3), 249–263.
- Swanson, E. (2024). Pathways to opportunity: Insights into college access from a Rural Research Network. Center for Education Policy Research. Harvard University. University of North Georgia. (n.d.). *Blue Ridge Campus*. Retrieved September 23, 2025, from <https://ung.edu/campuses/blueridge/>
- Utah State University. (n.d.). *Utah State fast facts*. Utah State University. Retrieved September 23, 2025, from <https://www.usu.edu/about/fast-facts/>
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. State University of New York Press.
- van Kessel, G., Ryan, C., Paras, L., Johnson, N., Zariff, R. Z., & Stallman, H. M. (2025). Relationship between university belonging and student outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 52, 2511–2534. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-025-00822-8>
- Villalpando, O., & Solorzano, D. (2005). The role of culture in college preparation programs: A review of the research literature. In W. Tierney, Z. Corwin, & J. Colyar (Eds.), *Preparing for college: Nine elements of effective outreach* (pp. 13–28). SUNY Press.

Walton, G. M., Murphy, M. C., Logel, C., Yeager, D. S., Goyer, J. P., Brady, S. T., Emerson, K. T. U., Paunesku, D., Fotuhi, O., Blodorn, A., Boucher, K. L., Carter, E. R., Gopalan, M., Henderson, A., Kroeper, K. M., Murdock-Perriera, L. A., Reeves, S. L., Ablorh, T. T., Ansari, S., ... Krol, N. (2023). Where and with whom does a brief social-belonging intervention promote progress in college? *Science*, *380*(6644), 499–505.

<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ade4420>

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, *8*(1), 69–91.

Zack, L. (2020). Non-traditional students at public regional universities: A case study. *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*, *9*(1), Article 1.

<https://doi.org/10.58809/FXDX3287>