

**RURAL STUDENTS IN TRANSITION: THE FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY
EXPERIENCE FROM A RURAL PERSPECTIVE**

by

**Leanne B. Dietrich
Faculty of Education**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education**

**Faculty of Graduate Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario
April 1999**

© Leanne B. Dietrich 1999



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-39817-X

Canada

ABSTRACT

While a number of studies have documented issues surrounding the transition students make in going from a secondary school to a university environment, few have specifically examined this topic from the rural student's perspective. This is a significant oversight insofar as the transition experienced by rural students may differ substantially from that of their urban counterparts. This research effort endeavors to examine the unique experiences of rural students as they make the transition from secondary school to university. The data upon which the study is founded include questionnaire and interview responses from first-year university students living in university student residences, on campus at The University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario. While the questionnaire data suggest minimal differences between rural and urban students in making the transition, a closer examination, through one-on-one interviews, reveals that some rural students face unique social and lifestyle challenges as they negotiate the transition from high school to university. Based on these findings, suggestions are made for facilitating the transition for this particular group of students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was prepared under the supervision of Dr. Aniko Varpalotai, whom I wish to thank for her guidance and support throughout the various stages of the research effort – from the inception of the initial idea, through its development and evolution into its current state. I also wish to thank Dr. Helen Harper for her thoughtful critique of both the preliminary components of my research proposal and the first and second drafts of the thesis .

I especially want to thank all of the individuals from the various student residences at The University of Western Ontario, who willingly participated in the study by completing questionnaires and/or participating in interviews.

I am eternally grateful to my good friend Querobin Mascarenhas, for allowing me unrestricted use of his computer, thereby considerably facilitating the completion of the research in its current, physical form. I also wish to thank the various presenters from the Third National Congress on Rural Education for broadening my appreciation for and conceptualization of what it means to be “rural”.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	x
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION.....	1
The Purpose of this Study.....	3
Why Should Rural Students Get a University Education?.....	4
Motivation for the Study.....	5
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
Defining “Rural”.....	12
What Does it Mean to be ‘Rural’.....	12
What Does ‘Rural’ Mean to Me?.....	14
Transition Experiences.....	14
The High School Graduate.....	16
The Group of Seven Research Effort.....	21
The Benefits of a University Education.....	24
The Rural First-Year University Student	24
Parental Expectations.....	25

CHAPTER 3 – METHODS.....	29
Rationale for Study Design.....	29
Definitions.....	31
Rural Students.....	31
First Generation Students.....	31
Commuters.....	31
Sophomores.....	31
Dons.....	32
The University of Western Ontario Described.....	32
Respondents.....	33
Limitations of my Definition of “Rural” Home Community.....	33
Questionnaire Participants.....	38
Interview Participants.....	39
The Instruments.....	40
Questionnaire.....	40
Interview Questions.....	40
Obtaining the Data.....	41
Questionnaires.....	41
Interviews.....	43
Recording and Transcription of Interview Data.....	44
Limitations of the Study.....	44
Questionnaires.....	44
Interviews.....	45
 CHAPTER 4 –FINDINGS.....	 47
Basic Demographics.....	47
Academic Demographics.....	48

Student Expectations of the University Experience.....	51
Pre-University Factors.....	53
High School Guidance Services.....	53
Familiarity With the University Campus.....	54
Perspectives on the Rural Transition Experience.....	54
Factors Which Facilitated the Transition Since Arriving on	
Campus.....	56
Academic Orientation Sessions.....	56
Orientation Week Activities.....	57
Residence Based Orientation Events.....	60
A Sense of Community.....	62
Keeping in Touch With Friends and Family at Home.....	63
Establishing New Friendships at University.....	64
Extracurricular Involvement.....	65
Factors Which Impeded the Transition to University.....	67
Anonymity.....	70
Academic Concerns.....	72
Shifting Norms.....	72
Factors Which Neither Helped Nor Hindered the Transition....	73
Norms and Values.....	74
Financial Parameters.....	75
Sources of Funding.....	75
Employment.....	77
Family Attitudes Concerning University Education.....	80
Parents' Education and Occupational Status.....	80
Influence of Siblings.....	82
Other Feedback Received.....	84
Student Assessments of the University – the Best and the	
Worst.....	85

Overall Student Satisfaction with the First Year Experience...	87
Advice to Incoming First Year Rural Students.....	88
Chapter Overview.....	89
CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION AND THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE.....	90
Revisiting the purpose of this study.....	90
Factors that assisted with the transition from secondary school to university.....	91
Factors that hindered the transition from secondary school to university	93
Financial Considerations and Concerns	94
Extracurricular Involvement.....	95
Influence of Family.....	96
Influence of Siblings.....	97
Ease of Transition.....	97
General Conclusions.....	99
Future Research Directions.....	100
Identity Issues.....	101
Post-University Plans.....	102
Delimitations, Assumptions, and Limitations.....	103
Afterword.....	103
Final Conclusion.....	106
REFERENCES.....	109
APPENDIX A	114
APPENDIX B	115
APPENDIX C.....	116
APPENDIX D.....	125
VITA.....	127

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	Description	Page
1	Differential educational outcomes of rural and urban students included in the Looker and Dwyer study (1993).	20
2	Composition of student sample completing questionnaire	39
3	Academic faculty breakdown of first-year rural students included in my study	49
4	Student satisfaction with first-year class size	51
5	Reasons cited by first-year rural students for deciding to attend university	52
6	Breakdown of education subsidization by first-year students living in residence at The University of Western Ontario (1997-98)	76
7	Birth positions of students surveyed	82

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX	Description	Page
A	Letter of Information	114
B	Consent Form	115
C	Questionnaire.....	116
D	Interview Questions.....	125

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

For many rural students, making the move to university means leaving the community in which they have lived and grown up, to go off to a new and often unfamiliar environment. While this may also hold true for urban students who choose to attend a university in a city other than the one in which they have grown up, theirs would appear to be a less dramatic transition, as the move is from one urban environment to another – with all urban environments being roughly similar in their main features (i.e., a large population, public transit systems, a relatively fast pace of living, etc...). Rural students, on the other hand, experience a sort of “culture shock” as they move into an environment characterized by features quite unlike those of a rural community, and are challenged to make a “double transition.” Not only must they acclimatize themselves to the idiosyncrasies of the university environment (as must their urban peers), but many rural students must also familiarize themselves with the way things are done in the city. By the same token, there is generally very little about the university environment to which rural students can relate directly. While the situation may differ significantly at an agricultural college, most universities can be considered essentially urban enterprises, in which rural knowledge and experiences are often either discounted or ignored. University affords minimal opportunity to apply knowledge in such areas as crop and livestock management, for example, both of which are areas in which many rural students have considerable expertise and practical experience.

It is my belief that the lack of such sources of familiarity in the university environment may lead more rural than urban students to encounter difficulties in making the transition from high school to university. They may also encounter difficulties which differ from those experienced by urban students, and for which solutions have been designed and implemented in most universities. For these reasons, it is of considerable importance that the needs of this group of students be examined through research efforts such as this one, and then addressed through various orientation and support group efforts designed to facilitate their successful assimilation, once they make the choice to attend university.

The purpose of this study

In this thesis I wanted to investigate the transition experienced by rural students entering their first year at an urban university, either lending support to or refuting the above perceptions. I have highlighted sources of difficulty, unfamiliarity, confusion, anxiety, and discouragement, as well as sources of facilitation, familiarity, clarity, confidence, and encouragement. In the process of doing so, I have considered the following questions: What are the financial parameters, limitations, and/or constraints that affect rural students aspiring to a university education? What role, if any, does extracurricular involvement play in assisting in the transition? Similarly, what is the influence of family support (or lack of support) and attitudes with respect to higher education? Does the experience differ significantly for students who have had siblings who attended university before them, in contrast to students who are the first from their immediate family to attend? These are the sorts of questions explored in this study.

Why should rural students get a university education?

There are a number of ways in which rural students can benefit from a university education. For one thing, the rural agricultural sector has not been spared the effects of the credentials spiral that is affecting virtually all divisions within the labour force. As the nature of the agricultural enterprise evolves, farming as a family run business has replaced the mixed farming approach that was typical of the past. The majority of farms now specialize in either a single strain of livestock, or a cash crop, and operate on a larger scale than was common in the past (Troughton, 1990). In order to be competitive on the contemporary agricultural scene, an appropriate education in farm management, and computer and product technology is virtually essential. At the same time, given the reduction in the number of farms overall and the increased competition for market space, the reality of the situation is that some rural students who would formerly have chosen to make a career out of farming will be forced to find an alternate form of employment.

While a university education does not guarantee a stable, well paying job, it should nonetheless remain a viable option for both rural and urban students alike, especially given the competitive job market we are currently facing. A university education is of added value to a particular subgroup of rural students, as it offers hope for this contingent to circumvent the common cycle whereby poverty and lack of education result in generation after generation of rural poor. Furthermore, a university education provides young people with exposure to the larger, global community. The experience of life on one's own, away from home demands a number of valuable skills such as time management, self-discipline, and accountability, that can be well applied to any career situation.

Motivation for the study

My own rural background and first year university experience puts me in a unique position to provide a commentary of sorts on the topic at hand. I grew up on a 100 acre mixed farm in southwestern Ontario, and remained there for all 18 years of my life prior to leaving for university. My travel experience prior to university was very limited, and included a few trips across the border into Michigan, and a limited number of visits to Toronto. I had decided to attend university in Waterloo for a couple of reasons. It was a somewhat familiar city to me, as I had an aunt living in Kitchener whom we visited occasionally. It was also in a good intermediate location for travelling to field hockey games within the OWIAA league, and I was hoping to earn a spot on Waterloo's varsity team. Of course the academic programs offered, and the aesthetic qualities of the university also had some bearing on my decision.

Based largely on the advice and urgings of others, including guidance counsellors, fellow students, and the field hockey coach, I decided to apply for a spot in the first year student residence on campus. These people pointed out the benefits of living in such close proximity to everything on campus, and to the many people I would meet living in residence. Following their advice turned out to be a big mistake for me however, as I soon realized that this was not the life for me. I found the switch from my relatively quiet farmhouse to the student residence to be a bit much all at once. While my roommate was a high school friend who had also grown up on a farm, the majority of the people on our floor came from larger urban communities. The lack of privacy, and constant pressure to take part in every event going on during the orientation week did not appeal to me. I felt as though I was being forced to do things I really wasn't

interested in, with a group of people I really didn't know or care to know. Although the question of where we were from rarely came up, and seemed to have a negligible bearing on our ability to interact with one another, I realize now that it might explain my sense of unease during my first week at university. While I know for certain that I was not the only person to leave the residence to live elsewhere during my first year, I don't know who the others were, or their reasons for doing so. It would be interesting to see if rural students are disproportionately represented among departers.

I also felt like I was living in a fishbowl, shut off from the rest of society. I had left my car at home when I found out I would be living in residence and, being unfamiliar with the public transit system, felt stranded on campus. As I look back on it now, I realize that it was probably just the unfamiliarity of it all that turned me off. Nonetheless, I opted to move out of residence, and into my aunt's home in Kitchener. The commute to the university each day meant that I had my car back, and with it came an indescribable sense of freedom and self-determinism.

Definitely one of the key things that kept me in university at all during that first year was being a member of the field hockey team. There I met people with whom I shared a common interest, and who had familiar routines and lifestyles. Having this touchstone to relate to, the confidence I developed on the playing field carried over into the other, less familiar aspects of my first year experience. Though I struggled a bit academically, I was able to persevere thanks to the outlet and the support I found in sport. Representing my university, I also developed a sense of pride in and affiliation with the university itself. I gradually felt I was becoming a part of the community, and developed a sense of ownership of and responsibility to it.

Despite the shaky start, I survived that first year and I can honestly say I even enjoyed it for the most part. There's no doubt I learned a lot that year about how to function effectively on my own in a relatively foreign environment, and how to deal with a wide variety of people. Though my transition was perhaps slower than some, it happened nonetheless, and I went on to have a successful and satisfying university experience.

In my opinion, the importance of finding people to whom one can relate during that first week is immeasurable. There is little doubt in my mind that without field hockey there is no way I would have ever completed a university degree. That fact would have changed the course of my entire life. It is largely for that reason that I decided to conduct this research. I wanted to determine whether or not there is enough embodied in the first year of university to attract, engage and retain students, specifically those from rural communities, and to hear from rural students what might be done to improve their overall experience. The current study examined these and related difficulties that are experienced by rural students as they make the transition from high school to university. Based on the findings, recommendations were made for facilitating the transition for this particular group of students.

The following chapter provides a literature review outlining past research, which will help to situate the current study. Chapter 3 describes the questionnaire and interview respondents as well as the methods used to collect data for the study. Chapter 4 describes the data collected, addressing several of the questions outlined in Chapter 1. Chapter 5 concludes the study, with a discussion and thoughts on future research directions.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

A review of relevant research helped prepare me to examine the first year experiences of rural students as they made the transition from high school to university. The literature reviewed in the following section includes a number of studies exploring a variety of aspects of these student transitions. The remainder of the chapter considers definitions of rurality, explores the nature of transition experiences in general terms, and examines the plight of the contemporary high school graduate. The "Group of Seven" research effort is described, and its key findings highlighted. The benefits of a university education are considered, as are the effects of parental expectations on a person's post-secondary aspirations.

Literature Review

There is documentation to show that fewer rural than urban students aspire to and attend university (Anisef, 1973; O'Neill, 1981), that rural students evidence higher dropout rates (Lichter, Cornwell & Eggebeen, 1995; Swaim & Teixeira, 1991), and that the overall university experience of rural students differs significantly from that of their urban peers (Looker & Dwyer, 1996). Past research also consistently reveals the powerful influence of parental expectations with respect to university attendance on student aspirations and actual attendance (O'Neill, 1981; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995).

While several studies have documented many of the issues surrounding the transition students make as they graduate from high school to pursue post-secondary interests, very few studies have examined this question from a rural perspective. O'Neill (1981) is one

exception. He examined the post-secondary aspirations of high school seniors from five different residential settings (rural farm, rural non-farm, village, small town, and large city) in the Regional Municipality of Durham (Durham Region), Ontario, Canada. He found that rural non-farm students had the highest overall levels of post-secondary aspiration, while rural farm and village students had the lowest overall levels of post-secondary aspiration. Parental and peer group expectations were found to account for most of the variance in this model.

The following studies have examined the experiences of first year students from a general perspective:

McGrath (1993) examined factors influencing decisions made by Newfoundland youth about furthering their education beyond secondary school, in light of the observation that Newfoundland has the second lowest post-secondary participation rate in the country, at 21.9% (Statistics Canada, 1991). McGrath identified six key factors that appeared to be most frequently associated with post-secondary participation, including academic achievement, attitudinal and resource-based barriers, value of education, success in advanced mathematics, academic attainment, and well-being. Of particular interest to me was McGrath's finding that the extent to which family variables influenced participation in post-secondary education was contingent on the value held for education in the home. McGrath also commented on interview findings suggesting that the community attachment variable was highly associated with participation for many students from small communities. More specifically, all respondents interviewed regarded community attachment to be influential in discouraging young people from participating in post-secondary education.

Sharpe & White (1993) looked at education and work related transition problems identified by a group of Newfoundland youth as they proceeded from high school and followed various transition pathways. Career plans and aspirations, work experiences, and some of the problems identified within the first two to three years after school were examined. Both those in post-secondary education, and college and university graduates, expressed concerns about funding and adjusting to college and university programs after high school. All respondents identified the scarcity of jobs and their lack of work experience as problems they faced in the early transition years.

The “Group of Seven” research effort, conducted in 1994, represents the single, largest block of detailed information available on students entering Canadian universities. In addition to the background demographic information collected in this research effort, students were also asked about their reasons for going to university, for leaving home, their social and academic involvement, their friends, participation in organized social activities, out-of-class faculty contacts, informal academic activities, formal learning experiences, academic preparation, the amount of time they committed to studying, peer relationships in the classroom, teacher effectiveness, and the learning environment. Students also provided feedback on areas in which they had experienced some difficulty during first year, as they responded to questions concerning their emotional health, stress, and self-confidence, answered questions concerning work, discrimination, harassment, and abuse, and commented on sources of help available to them. Overall adjustment in terms of orientation, and outcomes as reflected by marks, student satisfaction, and attrition rates were also examined. In terms of attrition, information collected from 13

Canadian universities revealed a range of rates, from 12% to 44%, with an average attrition rate of 24% (Wong, 1994).

Donaldson (1995) compared student profiles of two cohorts of chemistry students, in order to revamp the curriculum within that discipline and to enhance first year experience initiatives at a western Canadian university experiencing high attrition rates. Donaldson noted different demographic profiles and differing campus experiences depending on the ease of transition of the student. She further noted that, in a commuter university, the classroom dynamic is core to the campus experience, and that proactive intervention strategies on the part of faculty and administration make a difference with regard to student persistence within a discipline, within the university milieu, and upon future destinations.

Finally, Perron (1996) investigated the influence of ethnicity on educational aspirations of high school students. He found that students' educational aspirations were directly related to those of their parents and to their own academic achievement. Of particular interest was his finding that ethnic identity and other-group orientation were directly related to educational aspirations. The more students explored their own cultural group, affirmed their beliefs about it, and showed openness towards members of other cultural groups, the more they aspired to pursue post-secondary education.

With the exception of O'Neill (1981), the majority of the research on the transition to university has examined the general student population, and has not distinguished between the experiences of rural and urban students. The literature reviewed in the following section is highly relevant, and establishes the context for this study. It addresses the concept of "rural," as it has been differentially defined

by sociologists, considers the unique transition experiences of contemporary adolescents, and briefly examines the university as an institution.

Defining “Rural”

“What does it mean to be ‘rural’?”

Rurality has several connotations. Many associate it with the agricultural enterprise, while others conceptualize it in terms of a certain degree of remoteness in locality. As with such lay definitions, in academic circles there has also been considerable debate concerning the concept of rural. Traditional descriptive and socio-cultural definitions have incorporated empirical, spatial conceptualizations, such as distance from a major urban centre, and population density. During the 1940's Redfield, a sociologist, proposed a rural-urban continuum which positioned settlements along a spectrum ranging from very remote rural areas, through transitional areas, to the (then) modern city (Redfield, 1941). This conceptualization of 'rural' dominated well into the 1970's.

Speaking from a socio-cultural perspective, O'Neill (1981) uses the term, “social context” in reference to direct and/or indirect influences that an environment has on an individual's attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and aspirations. Quoting Pike (1970), he notes that “one cannot entirely ignore the argument pursued by some sociologists that a concomitant of the rural and small town environments is a set of values, beliefs, and ways of doing things (i.e., a subculture) which adversely affects access to higher education. According to this argument, the rural life – and particularly the life of the farmer – tends, by necessity, to be oriented to the concrete and the practical, and actively discourages the creation of the theoretical

and abstract case of mind which is (or is supposed to be) inseparable from involvement in high education” (p.73).

Halfacree (1993) argues, however, that such socio-cultural definitions tend to be relative to a specialized use (e.g., statistical, administrative, agricultural), and thereby fail to provide a general measure of rurality. Recognizing the need for an appreciation of rural space that neither prioritizes its empirical structure nor relies upon a false dichotomy between space and society, more recent definitions have taken into consideration distinct ways of thinking about and functioning within our everyday world. As a result, social representations theory is gaining support. Developed principally by Moscovici (1984), this theory posits that social representations consist of both concrete images and abstract concepts, organized around figurative nuclei which are “a complex of images that visibly reproduce... a complex of ideas” (p.38). Thus, while social representations are partly a description of the physical material of the world, they are irreducible to it. They are both iconic and symbolic (Halfacree, 1993). Furthermore, by being both referential and anticipatory, social representations are not simply neutral or reactive but are also creative and transformative, being used by people as they go about their everyday lives. As such, they are dynamic and ever-adapting to new circumstances.

I would like to suggest that perhaps there is a place for both theory and abstraction in one’s approach to problem solving in the contemporary rural context as well, and furthermore that the concrete and practical approach that has so long characterized rural life might very well find some application within the realm of higher education.

What does 'rural' mean to me?

When I think of what it means to be rural I reflect on my own experiences. Growing up on a farm with livestock and crops, helping with the chores, and with the planting and harvesting, driving in to town once a week for groceries, riding a bus to school each day, attending social events such as "Buck and Does," and the local Junior D hockey games, and winter activities such as snowmobiling and pond hockey, all embody the essence of the rural experience for me. When I first embarked upon this research effort it was this conception of rural that I brought with me. The more I read and the more time I spent speaking with the students who participated as subjects in the study however, the more I realized that rurality has many and varied connotations. The distinction between rural farm and rural non-farm students is also of great interest to me, in that they represent two distinctly different rural experiences and result in quite different rural identities. Clearly the concepts of rural and urban have many different meanings for different people, several of which were explored through the questionnaires and interviews that were conducted in this study.

Transition Experiences

A key question when considering student transitions from high school to university is, "What would constitute a 'successful' transition?" Sharpe (1995) notes that, "Success in transition is not easy to define, but it is generally accepted, especially under the rubric of Human Capital and Status Attainment Theory, that the goal is economic independence of the individual" (p.178). According to this theory, an important part of the transition to adulthood is developing the ability to support oneself, usually through paid, legal employment.

Human capital theory (Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1962) sees the formal and informal educational training of an individual as a form of capital, wherein investment in further increments in education are made according to rational calculations of returns on one's investment – in the form of stable employment prospects, for example. Social capital theory, as an extension of human capital theory, examines social structural arrangements and interaction patterns that foster positive relationships, conceptualizing these as investments that can yield human capital returns in terms of higher educational attainment (Smith et al., 1995). Past research efforts (Lichter et al., 1995; Smith et al., 1995) suggest that the nature of human and social capital essential to the rural experience may not correspond with that which characterizes the urban experience.

While self-sufficiency may well be an important part of the process, the youth transition to adulthood is considerably more convoluted than this. Galaway and Hudson (1995), editors of Youth in Transition, a collection of symposium proceedings intended to identify and critically assess current thinking on youth transitions, have identified the following four themes related to adolescent transitions:

- 1- transition is an ongoing process
- 2- adulthood involves more than self-support and includes the ability to maintain intimate relationships and lead a healthy lifestyle
- 3- the process of transition may vary by sub-groups within a population
- 4- transitions must be examined both in terms of individual qualities of young people as well as available socio-economic opportunities (changing social context).

While each of these themes is plausible, the third and fourth were of the greatest interest to me, for the purposes of this study. The next step is to examine these themes as they apply to the rural first year university student, and how they impact on his or her continued enrolment at and sense of 'comfort' within the university community.

The High School Graduate

The contemporary high school graduate differs in several important ways from high school graduates of the past 30 to 40 years. Whereas in years gone by a high school diploma was often adequate collateral for a well-paying job, the ante has now been upped to the point where not even a university degree guarantees such security. Myles, Picot and Wannell (1988), examining changes in the Canadian workplace during the early 1980s, concluded that they reflect a "declining middle" (p.5). Jobs are now concentrated in the bottom and upper-middle segments of the wage distribution, with little left in the middle. They attributed these changes to the growth of jobs in the service industry sector of the economy, while noting that, "the primary change in all sectors of the economy, has been a decline in the relative wage rates of young people ... [and] an increase in the relative wage rates of middle-aged workers" (p.7). Recognizing this as an age-based phenomenon, Myles and his colleagues also noted that this shift has not been due to generational or recession effects but rather, that it has occurred "in all industrial sectors, occupational groups, regions and all levels of education" (p.9).

From a rural point of view, the transition has involved the move from several small, mixed, family owned and operated farms, to fewer and larger single focus or specialty farms (Troughton, 1990). The result of this reality is that, "with declining or non-existent job

opportunities, many job seekers are adopting various educational strategies to improve their employment prospects” (Akyeampong, 1968, p.38). The vast majority of such job seekers have elected to pursue a university education, with the expectation that this will give them a foothold in the coveted upper-middle portion of the workforce. American researchers, Smith et al., (1995) note that, “whether to attend college is one of the crucial decisions in the life of an individual. As a watershed event, college attendance or nonattendance decisively shapes the subsequent life course, largely determining future occupational opportunities and income” (p.363).

There is little argument that level of educational attainment exerts a powerful effect on whether one has a job, the character of the job, and the level of earnings (Beaulieu & Mulkey 1995; Marshall & Briggs, 1989). Rural employment, however, has not traditionally depended on higher education, due in combination to its practical basis, and the independent nature of the agricultural enterprise. While a university education is still not required to be a farmer, it is becoming more important as farming becomes more of a large-scale business.

Looker and Dwyer (1996) contribute to the existing pool of research on the transition experience by challenging the conventional linear model of youth transitions to adulthood, recognizing that, “even for those who appear to be ‘on track’ in terms of the conventional mainstream models and patterns, moving into adult life involves multiple transitions and the balancing of a range of actual and intended commitments” (p.1). They argue that, “the usual tendency of defining transitions in terms of certain predetermined linear pathways fails to do justice to the actual experience and choices of young people, reducing the significance of the complexity and interplay of factors” (p.1). The cooperative mentality espoused by many farm

families requires all family members to contribute to the ongoing maintenance of the farm business. As a consequence, many students who come from a farming background commute to and from school on a daily basis so as to be able to honour their commitments on the farm. This significantly alters their university experience, and is a reality that many urban universities do not take into account. It should be noted however that there are other family businesses to which this would also apply.

Looker and Dwyer (1996) also reflect on the distinctly different economic and social contexts of contemporary youth, noting such features as the collapse of the youth labour market, the expansion of employment and life opportunities for women (including the postponement of marriage and of child-rearing), increasing social and policy pressure to pursue ever-higher levels of post-secondary education, and an increased tendency for young adults to remain in or return to the parental home well into their twenties. Each of these factors has implications for the transition from youth to adulthood for urban and rural students alike.

Considering the situation from a rural viewpoint, it is true that women are recognizing increased opportunities in the workforce, in conjunction with increased pressure to pursue post-secondary education of some sort (Varpalotai, 1997). All six of the young farm women recently interviewed by Dr. Aniko Varpalotai, for the article "Life the Farm," aspired to post secondary education, expressing interests in areas as divergent as nursing, teaching, and the sciences. Nonetheless, gendered roles and division of labour have been more persistent in agricultural communities than in the rapidly changing urban context, and so has the subsequent "occupational inheritance" (Leckie, 1991). While some rural women have found a niche in the

workforce, a number of them have committed themselves to a traditional farmwife lifestyle.

The general tendency noted by Looker and Dwyer (1996) for children to return to the parental home well into their twenties, often after completing a university degree or college diploma, also has a somewhat different impact on rural children, many of whom have traditionally tended to stay at home, working with the family on the farm. There are also those rural students who marry at an early age, and move out on their own, but remain within the home community. The need for a steady income in order to provide for one's young children may explain the decision by many rural residents to forego post-secondary education altogether, in favour of immediate employment. However, with the collapse of the youth labour market in North America, the availability of jobs requiring no post-secondary education is fast diminishing. This reality is affecting people in rural settings too. Heavy machinery and the large-scale nature of the farming enterprise have reduced opportunities for youth in farming, by requiring less manual labour, much of which was formerly provided by young men and women. As opportunities for employment in both the rural and urban sectors continue to disappear, and as the minimum level of education required for a given job continues to increase, rural students are finding themselves faced with an uncertain future. Higher education, while no guarantee for employment, offers some degree of hope for future stability.

Further exploring those complexities related to education, Looker and Dwyer (1996) examined such areas as educational aspirations, drop-out patterns, and employment trends. They found that as many as half of the youth surveyed reported a mix of school and work, with the majority studying full-time and working part-time during the

academic year, then working full-time during the summer months. They also found that urban students tend to engage in more part-time paid work during the school year than do rural students, due to the fact that part-time work is generally more accessible to urban students. Rural students, on the other hand, tend to be employed mainly during the summer months. It should also be noted that the majority of rural students are already working on the family farm throughout the year (often with little or no fixed income).

Table 1: Educational outcomes of the rural and urban students included in the Looker and Dwyer study (1996)

	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
No post secondary	23	17
Non-University Post Secondary	33	23
University	44	60

These data suggest that rural youth do not stay in school as long as urban youth, and that fewer rural than urban youth go beyond high school. Of those rural students who opted for a post secondary education, roughly equal numbers chose college or university. The majority of urban students, on the other hand, chose university over college. Perhaps one reason is that most rural youth do not have a post-secondary institution in or near their community. Consequently, these youth would have to leave their community, as well as their parental home, in order to pursue a post-secondary education. For many students this is neither economically nor socially feasible or desirable. Furthermore, in the minds of some rural families, a university education may not be seen to be, in and of itself, an

inherent necessity. That is to say, they do not see attending university as being imperative to the rural student's well being. It is also worth noting that a two year college program is considerably less expensive and arguably more practical than a university education for many rural students. The purpose and value of a university education will be furthered explored in the upcoming section, which examines the university as an institution.

For those rural students who do move to an urban centre in order to attend university, several challenges present themselves, including finding housing or accommodation, using the public transit system, budgeting financial resources, and coping with occasional feelings of isolation in a new environment. The contemporary rural student must deal with several interconnected transitions while attempting to negotiate adult status. In addition to educational concerns, decisions must be made regarding jobs, moving away from parents and community, marriage, and parenting. As Looker and Dwyer (1996) note, "it is clear that for rural youth the choice of an educational pathway beyond high school has an impact on family relationships and can carry extra financial and personal burdens that impact in turn on their studies" (p.9).

The Group of Seven Research Effort

Given that high school graduates are pursuing university degrees in ever-increasing numbers, a group of researchers recognized the importance of examining the nature and results of the first year experience at Canadian universities, in the interest of developing policies aimed at enhancing the success of first year students overall. In 1994, students entering seven different Canadian universities (The University of Calgary, King's College at the University of Western Ontario, the University of Toronto, Nipissing University, Ryerson

Polytechnic University, the University of Guelph, and Brock University) completed the same questionnaire, which was distributed by the Student Environment Group at the University of Guelph (Chapman, J., Gilbert, S., Dietsche, P., Gardner, J., & Grayson, P., 1997). Students were asked various questions related to their high school experiences, backgrounds, aspirations, and so on. The data collected through this research effort represent the single, largest block of detailed information available on students entering Canadian universities.

In addition to background demographic information, students were also asked about their reasons for going to university, for leaving home, their social and academic involvement, their friends, participation in organized social activities, out-of-class faculty contacts, informal academic activities, formal learning experiences, academic preparation, the amount of time they committed to studying, peer relationships in the classroom, teacher effectiveness, and the learning environment. Students also provided feedback on difficulties they had experienced during first year, including emotional health, stress, self-confidence, work, discrimination, harassment, and abuse, and commented on sources of help available to them. Overall adjustment in terms of orientation, and outcomes as reflected by marks, student satisfaction, and attrition rates were also examined. The following list highlights some of their findings:

- Students entering Canadian universities come from a wide variety of socio-economic and ethno-racial backgrounds.
- The expectations of students entering the first year appear to be based on their years in high school rather than on sound knowledge of what awaits them.

- First year students seem to be minimally involved in the institution apart from attending classes. To the degree that involvement is a desirable experience in itself, and contributes to the overall first year university experience, lack of participation is a problem.

- While contacts with faculty are limited, in general they appear to be positive experiences.

- For the large numbers of first year students who live at home with their parents, the transition to university may not involve the re-ordering of life's priorities.

- Students who live in residences generally have higher quality experiences than those who live off-campus.

- The first year experience is a source of stress for many students.

- Large numbers, if not the majority, of first year students work at a part-time job, either on or off-campus.

- In terms of marks, the vast majority of first year students do not achieve their beginning-of-the-year objectives; nonetheless, overall, students are satisfied with the first year experience.

The sheer magnitude of this research effort, not to mention the tremendous wealth of information it yielded about the transition experience in general, makes it an invaluable source of information for policy makers, educators, parents and students alike.

The Benefits of a University Education

The current research effort is concerned primarily with the transition of rural students from secondary school to university. It is therefore important to examine the nature of the environment the student is entering. This will be accomplished by examining the “purpose” of a university education, and by examining measures which could be taken to facilitate the student transition between the two environments.

Most would argue that what sets a university education apart from a college education, or from an apprenticeship or similar learning arrangement, is the notion that whereas the latter options confer specific skills and knowledge required within a restricted domain, a university education provides a more “liberal” perspective. That is to say, the knowledge acquired in university is more general in nature, the skills more generic. Students are taught to think and reason critically for themselves. In our ever-changing economic environment, where adaptability is key, a university education would appear to confer a distinct advantage.

The Rural First year University Student

Despite the ongoing debate surrounding what it means to be ‘rural’, and the current trend towards social representations, the majority of past research to which I will refer in this study assumes a socio-cultural perspective. Evidence from previous rural-urban surveys, as well as other related works suggests that rural youth,

especially males, have lower levels of post-secondary aspiration than their small-town or large city counterparts. In order to confirm this O'Neill (1981) examined post-secondary aspirations of high school seniors from five different residential settings (rural farm, rural non-farm, village, small town, and large city) in the Regional Municipality of Durham, Ontario, Canada. O'Neill was concerned primarily with unearthing a contextual explanation for the variability he observed in the post-secondary aspirations of Canadian high school seniors. Using a linear regression model, O'Neill sorted out simultaneous effects of residential locale, on the levels of educational and occupational aspiration, with relevant control factors held constant. He found that differences between groups were minimal as residential locale accounted for only a small proportion (2.2%) of the variance in aspirational levels. Nonetheless, as previously stated, rural non-farm students, as a group, were found to have the highest overall levels of post-secondary aspiration, while rural farm and village students had the lowest overall levels of post-secondary aspiration. Two variables in particular, parental expectations and peer group, accounted for most of the variance in the model. In an effort to account for these findings, O'Neill notes that, "better transportation and communication nexuses between rural and urban communities may have eliminated much presupposed rustic isolation and conservatism" (p.64). He also provides a 'migratory' explanation, suggesting that "many urban dwellers might be recently arrived, former ruralites, while many rural dwellers may be former urbanites (still commuting to and interacting with people in the city)" (p.64).

Parental Expectations

"Because rural students perceive less support for college from their parents, teachers, and guidance counselors, they tend to report lower occupational aspirations and demonstrate less confidence in

their ability to do college work.” (Hanson & McIntyre, 1989, p. 57). Perhaps parents of rural students do not value a post-secondary education as greatly as do their urban counterparts. This may be because the experiences and values associated with the “urban” university experience are relatively foreign to rural parents, the majority of whom did not attend university themselves.

University is an essentially urban enterprise, in terms of the physical location of the campus, opportunities for practical application of acquired knowledge and skills, examples used in lectures and in textbooks, and the selection of extracurricular activities available for consideration. Consequently, it seems conceivable that rural students might encounter some degree of difficulty in negotiating the transition from secondary school to university, faced with such cultural disparities. If this is the case, it is very disconcerting, in light of the rapidly changing economy which more or less demands post-secondary education of some sort in order to establish financial self-sufficiency. If the human and social capital, the intellectual and social investments, developed by rural students are incompatible with those required for them to comfortably negotiate and complete a successful transition from secondary school to university, a large number of rural students will be denied the opportunity to fully recognize their potential at university, and may end up dropping out.

Alternatively, and equally distressing, is the possibility that such rural students will end up trading off their rural human and social capital for the urban equivalent demanded for success at university. As long as higher education continues to espouse an urban perspective, rural students are either excluded or forced to assume an urban mindset. It seems quite clear that one of two things must happen. Either we need to ensure that rural students realize

opportunities to acquire and develop the requisite human and social capital required to live successful adult lives (by urban standards), or we need to consider reconceptualizing and restructuring our existing system of higher education, so that “rural” human and social capital are equally valued and rewarded, possibly through rural high schools, colleges and universities. If we fail to do so, we run the risk of losing the cultural input of a very capable sector of the contemporary youth population. As long as drop-out rates among rural students continue to be disproportionately high, and attendance rates disproportionately low, the “objectives” of human and social capital theory – financial self-sufficiency, independence, and the capacity to make a strong, positive contribution to the robustness of society in general – are not being fully met. This, in turn, impacts on the overall global competitiveness of Canadians.

Astin’s Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984) suggests that finding common links between past and present experiences considerably facilitates transition efforts. By becoming actively involved in aspects of the university experience which are familiar to them, rural students facilitate their own transition. Unfortunately however, there is often little about the university experience that is familiar to the incoming rural student. For this reason, providing new opportunities for extracurricular involvement in activities of a “rural” nature might considerably increase rural student involvement, further facilitating and personalizing the transition process.

While the “Group of Seven” research effort (Chapman et al., 1997) endeavoured to shed some light on student perceptions of the first year university experience, no distinction was made in that study between the urban and rural student experience. The current study proceeds to examine student perceptions of rurality, and of their own

experiences as rural students at university. Chapter 3 describes the process I went through in designing my own study, in an effort to examine some of the key issues outlined in Chapter 1 from a rural point of view, specifically, "What are some challenges faced by rural students making the transition from high school to university?"

CHAPTER 3

Methods

Rationale for Study Design

As stated previously, my main objective in conducting this research effort was to examine the first year experiences of rural students as they made the transition from high school to university. I also hoped to heighten awareness by others of this group, and of their experiences within the university setting. I hoped to enlighten faculty and staff at the university about rural students as a significant subgroup, and as an invisible minority. I also wished to suggest that the university experience need not necessarily be an exclusively “urban” one, and to identify specific areas which could be addressed, perhaps by The Centre for New Students at the University of Western Ontario, or by the organizers of the academic orientation sessions, to facilitate the transition process for rural students.

In order to get an overview of the perceptions of a large number of rural first year students, and to gain insight into their backgrounds and experiences as a first year student at a large urban university, I developed a questionnaire addressing the most salient first year transition issues as identified in the literature. I then proceeded to explore some of these issues in greater depth with a smaller number of students via an interview. I chose to take this approach with the interview data because I wanted to capture, as authentically as possible, the experience of the rural first year university student. As Bogdan and Biklen (1992) note:

“The qualitative researcher’s goal is to better understand human behavior and experience. They seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are. They use empirical observation because it is with concrete incidents of human behavior that investigators can think more clearly and deeply about the human condition” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.49).

The responses obtained from the students questioned during the interview sessions provided further insight into their perceptions of the first year university experience.

To a certain degree this research effort was also designed to empower its informants – the rural students themselves. As such, it shares some common characteristics with feminist and action research. By engaging students in a discussion about their experiences of events and activities at the university, it was hoped that these students would gain a greater sense of control over their experiences through their analyses of them. I was hopeful that perhaps, as a result of participating in the study, these students would develop a heightened awareness of some of the issues in the current system, and that this heightened awareness might alter their expectations of the university experience. Finally, I hoped that the results of this study would set the wheels in motion for the consideration of rural student issues at The University of Western Ontario.

Definitions

I elected to define as rural those students who come from communities of fewer than 8 000 citizens. This includes a population range with a lower limit of an independent farm, and an upper limit of a "town" (2000 to 15 000 residents) (Ontario Municipal Act, 1995, Section II, Items 3 and 4). I chose an upper limit of 8 000 because it falls roughly midway between the upper and lower population limits designating a community as a town.

First generation students are those students who represent the first child from their immediate family to attend university (Rendon, 1996). This factor was included in the study due to my expectation that first-generation rural students would be at an added disadvantage attending a large, urban university. Not only would the urban lifestyle be somewhat unfamiliar to them, but there would be no siblings who had gone before to provide them with information as to what they could expect from the university experience. These factors combined might, conceivably, make for a more challenging transition experience.

Commuters are those students who do not live in student residences on the university campus. This includes those students who live within the city and commute either from their family home or an independent residence. It also includes students who live outside the city and travel to the university on a daily basis – either from their rural home or from another urban location.

Sophomores (sophs) are second year students who volunteer their services to keep first year students informed about and involved in the life of the university. Sophs are designated as either "on-campus" or "off-campus," depending on whether they serve residential

or commuter first year students. Usually sophs are assigned to small groups of roughly 15-20 students.

Dons are upper-year undergraduate students who actually live in the student residences with first year students. Each don is responsible for a specified number of first year students, and is basically there to provide support and information about upcoming University events.

The University of Western Ontario Described

The University of Western Ontario has a total student population of approximately 26 000. Of these, approximately 24 000 are undergraduate students, while the remaining 2 000 are graduate students (D. Dawson, personal communication, June 1997). According to Debra Dawson, Director of the Centre for New Students at the University of Western Ontario, the vast majority of these students come from central and southwestern Ontario. Of those who are daily commuters, the majority travel from a community within a one hour drive of the university; that is, London, Middlesex and surrounding counties. The university is somewhat unique in that there are three smaller affiliated residential and academic colleges where first year students may both live and study. It should be noted that the 1997-1998 academic year was a bit of an anomaly in terms of student housing. Because all first year students were promised residence accommodation, and because there were not enough rooms to accommodate every first year student, additional housing, in the form of the King's Inn in downtown London, was found. Students were also tripled up in one residence on main campus, which normally provides double rooms for first -year students. These factors may have influenced the satisfaction levels expressed by the students in this study, with respect to living in residence.

Respondents

Limitations of my definition of “rural” home community

Taking into account contemporary trends in conceptualizing what it means to be rural, I elected nonetheless to employ a socio-cultural definition in this study. That is to say, the main criterion by which one's 'ruralness' was determined for inclusion in this study was population of the home community. For the purposes of this research effort, students were classified as rural if they came from a home community of 8 000 or fewer people. In this sense a community might be a single farm, a village, a town, or a township. My main motivation for employing this point of distinction was logistic. In order to get a large enough student sample it was necessary to keep the definition fairly open. Clearly, applying such a broad definition provides a very diversified sample population. It was expected however, that the subsequent follow-up interviews would provide further information about individual circumstances, while also yielding insight into student conceptualizations of what it means to be rural.

Upon contacting the Housing and Admissions department at UWO, I received some demographic data related to first year students. These data were provided by James MacLean, whose responsibilities include Institutional Planning and Budgeting for the university. The data consisted of a list of all first year students' home addresses (minus the corresponding identification by name, in order to respect the privacy of each student). Along with the list of home addresses, students living in residence were so designated. The specific residence was not indicated; rather, students living in residence were identified by the presence of a "1," whereas students living off campus had no such identifier associated with their home address.

Not all of the addresses indicated a specific town or city, and due to the fact that I had no master list of the populations of such communities, I needed an alternate means of determining whether each student should be classified as “urban” or “rural.” Upon contacting Canada Post I was informed that the best way to determine by address alone is to let the postal code be your guide. Most rural codes have a zero (0) in the middle of the first set of identifiers (e.g., N0M), and the second set of identifiers for rural residences usually ends in a zero as well (e.g., 1N0). The other way to distinguish rural and urban addresses is that rural addresses are often expressed as “rural routes.” Based on this fact, I was able to roughly determine whether each student came from a rural or urban community.

From these postal codes I was then able to calculate the percentage of first year students who came to university from a rural community ($536/4175 = 12.84\%$), as well as the percentage of rural students living in residence ($366/2598 = 14.09\%$). This compares to an overall provincial rural population of 1 794 832 citizens or 16.69% of the total population for the province of Ontario (Statistics Canada, 1996). While these numbers are close, rural students appear to be slightly underrepresented at this university, in relation to their numbers in the general population.

Because the percentage of rural students living in residence was very close to the percentage of rural first year students overall, I decided that distributing questionnaires only to students in residence should provide a fairly representative sample of the overall first year rural student population at UWO, while considerably facilitating the data collection process. It should be acknowledged, however, that the first year experience of a rural student living in residence is, no doubt,

considerably different from the first year experience of a rural student who commutes to and from school each day.

An additional shortcoming of this approach is that it does not automatically include those students whose families now live in urban centres, but who grew up on a farm. It is entirely possible however (especially given question 5 b), which asked the student to provide an estimate of the population of the community in which they spent the majority of their life), that such students may have completed a questionnaire or interview. Input from these students would be especially interesting, as they represent a portion of the student body which has maintained a strong rural identity, despite moving from a rural to an urban community at some point during their lives. Unfortunately there is no way to identify such students.

The following data were also provided by Mac Lean upon request:

As of November 01, 1997

- # of F/T first year students = 4 210

As of February 17, 1998

- # of F/T first year students = 4 143

- # of P/T first year students = 29

- # who withdrew = 38

It is interesting to note that, of those who started in the fall of 1997, only 1% had withdrawn by February 1998. Of the 38 first year students who withdrew, 29 (76.3%) came from home communities which would be considered urban according to their postal codes, while nine (23.7%) came from rural home communities. While 12.84% of the first year students at this university came from rural

communities, 23.7% of the first year students who dropped out came from rural communities. This finding suggests that the drop out rate for rural first year students was nearly twice as high as that for urban students, during the 1997-1998 academic year.

For the sake of comparison, I contacted the University of Guelph and Ridgetown College, both reputable educational institutions specializing in rural education. I was curious to see whether rural students would drop out of programs addressing subject areas with which they were more familiar, at a comparable rate to which they were seen to drop out of programs at a relatively large, urban university (The University of Western Ontario) which offered no rural education courses. I also hoped to compare drop-out rates between colleges and universities, to test the commonly held perception that rural students tend to favour a college education over a university education.

Ridgetown College is an agricultural college offering two-year programs in a variety of agricultural areas. While the vast majority of the students attending the college come from a rural background, there are some urban students there too, many of whom are enrolled in the horticulture and veterinary programs. Upon contacting the Office of the Registrar at Ridgetown I learned that the college accommodates 313 full-time students, 180 (57.5%) of whom are first year students. There are no part-time students at the college. Of the 313 full-time students in attendance, 50-60% live in the student residences located on campus. Upon further inquiry I learned that, during the 1997-1998 academic year, 2% of the first year student body dropped out of their academic programs. Of these students, three did so during the academic year, while two did not return for the second year of their academic program. Unfortunately I was unable to locate

anyone who could tell me the number of first year students who had dropped out of the student residence.

The University of Guelph is an urban university, which offers a wide variety of academic programs, while specializing in veterinary medicine, and offering numerous agriculturally based courses. Both urban and rural students attend this university, which had a total student population of 13 786 during the 1997-1998 academic year. Of these, 12 232 (88.7%) were undergraduates, while 1 554 (11.3%) were graduate students. Upon contacting Ann Hollings of Enrolment Statistics at the university, I further learned that first year students comprised 24.2% of the total student population during the 1997-1998 academic year. Of these first year students, 3 018 (90.4%) attended full time, while 320 (9.6%) attended part time. Of the 3 338 first year students, 2 379 (71.3%) lived in one of the student residences during their first year. Unfortunately drop out rates from residence were unavailable. Overall and program specific dropout rates for first year students were also unavailable.

While I was not permitted access to student home postal codes at this university in order to distinguish between urban and rural students, I was provided with a summary table, which identified the percentage of students attending from each of the counties in Ontario. By checking the population of each of these counties via the Statistics Canada website (<http://www.statcan.ca>), I was able to determine that roughly 17.1% of the first year students at this university came from rural home communities, while 82.9% had urban backgrounds. These numbers are quite close to those revealed at Western.

Questionnaire Participants

For the purposes of this research effort, I have defined as “rural” students who come from a community of fewer than 8 000 residents. The participants from whom data were collected consisted of 38 students in total. Of these 33 were in first year, 2 were in second-year, and 3 were in third-year. All were students from The University of Western Ontario living in one of six student residences (Saugeen, Medway-Sydenham, Essex, Delaware, King’s, and Brescia). King’s and Brescia are affiliated colleges, both of which are located off-campus, but within a five minute walk to main-campus. It should also be noted that I had originally intended to distribute questionnaires to first year students only. The two second-year and three third-year students either failed to note the criteria for participation in the study, or said they would like to fill out a questionnaire anyway – even if the data they contributed would simply be used for comparison purposes, which, in fact, they were. The sample of students who completed questionnaires numbered 38 in total – 25 females, 13 males -- and had an average age of 19.03 years. Students representing each of the five different undergraduate faculties (arts, science, social science, engineering science, and health sciences) responded. Of the students who completed questionnaires, five were actually classified as “urban” by my definition. I decided to keep all students who completed questionnaires in the sample, regardless of whether or not they were in first year, and regardless of their rural/urban status (though special note was made of these cases). My decision to do so was motivated by the opportunity for comparison and perspective afforded by their inclusion. Of the students who actually came from urban home communities, four were in first year, while one was in third year. The average size of the home communities from which the urban students came was 341 300, with a range from 11 500 to 1 000 000 citizens. Home communities were located, on average 629 kilometers from the

university. It should be noted however that one student, who lived 2 400 kilometers from the university contributed significantly to this number. Excluding this individual's data, the average distance from the home community to the university, for this group of urban students, was 186 kilometers. The average size of the home communities from which the rural students came was 2 150, with a range from 1 to 7 500 citizens. Home communities for this group were located, on average, 418 kilometers from the University of Western Ontario. The following table summarizes these data.

Table 2 – Composition of students completing questionnaire

Academic Year	Rural	Urban	Total
1 st Year	29	4	33
2 nd Year	2	0	2
3 rd Year	2	1	3
Total	33	5	38

Interview Participants

From this sample of 38 students, nine were contacted for a follow-up interview. These nine students came from a pool of 23 respondents who had indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview at the time they completed the questionnaire. At the time of the follow-up contact call, only the nine students who provided interviews indicated that they were still willing to provide data. The interview participants included six males and three females. A gender-balanced distribution was not possible, as these were the only students contacted who were available and/or willing to participate. Two of the students interviewed were in third year. Both were male, though one had grown up in an urban community, while the other was raised in a rural environment. As volunteers, the students who participated in follow-up interviews may have brought with them special issues and characteristics which would contribute to a

sort of 'volunteer effect'. That is to say, the students who agreed to a follow-up interview may not have been representative of the questionnaire participants, or of first year rural students in general. For example, it is entirely possible that only students who were making a smooth transition felt confident enough to offer further commentary on their experiences. While males were disproportionately represented among those who actually completed an interview, more females than males indicated on their questionnaires that they would be interested in a follow-up interview. Those students who actually did participate in an interview were selected solely on the basis of their availability and willingness to do so at the time they were contacted by telephone.

The Instruments

Questionnaire

The preliminary test instrument employed in this research effort was a 28 item questionnaire, with questions based on those included in the "Group of Seven" research effort (Chapman et al., 1997) (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was designed to elicit information of a basic demographic nature, in addition to information that would serve to situate the student within the university environment. Questionnaire responses yielded insight into several specific aspects of the student's personal first year experience and their ease of transition from secondary school to university. Students were also afforded an opportunity to provide feedback on the efforts of various university organizations to facilitate the transition for first year students, and on their general efficacy in fulfilling these objectives.

Interview Questions

Twenty-two interview questions (see Appendix B) constituted the follow-up test instrument. These questions were the same as those employed by Michael Benjamin (1990) in his study of first year students. There was no pilot administration of these questions. The

interview items were intended to provide further insight into both the background and transition experiences of rural, first year students living in residence. The initial 13 questions attempted to elicit a personal profile of each student, as well as a first-hand account of how they perceived the transition experience. Questions asked about such things as residence life in general, issues faced by rural first year students, and the degree of their involvement in various aspects of university life. The remaining nine questions also included many of those asked by Benjamin in his study of freshmen students. While they required simple "yes" or "no" answers, most of the students willingly elaborated on their responses. These questions might best be described as self image/ identity checks.

Obtaining the Data

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were distributed on seven different days, between mid-November 1997 and the end of January, 1998. The following protocol was observed at each of the residences, with the exception of Brescia College (where questionnaires were made available to students by Brescia staff, over the dinner hour, in the cafeteria):

I arrived at the residence around 4:30 pm and set up a table outside the cafeteria entrance, in anticipation of the dinner crowd which, I was advised, tended to dine anywhere between 4:30 and 7pm. I sat at the table, with a sign reading,

RURAL STUDENTS!**Are you a first year student?****Do you come from a farm or a small town
($< 8\,000$ people)?****Pull Up a Chair and Fill Out a Questionnaire!**

Students who volunteered to participate in the study were first fully apprised of its objectives, as they read through the Letter of Information provided (see Appendix C). They were then required to fill-out a Consent Form (see Appendix D) which indicated that they fully understood and agreed to the terms and conditions of the study as specified in the Letter of Information. There was also a place at the bottom of the Consent Form where students could indicate whether or not they were interested in participating in a follow-up interview. Respondents were asked to provide their telephone number if they responded in the affirmative.

There were always a couple of additional chairs at the table for students who elected to complete the questionnaire on location, but several students opted to take one with them to fill out over dinner, while others took them back to their rooms and returned with them upon completion. Of course some students never returned.

Upon completion of all of the questionnaires, data were coded in order to distinguish between rural and urban respondents, first, second or third year students, males and females, etc... and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet facilitated comparisons between students, and allowed some simple summary statistical calculations (i.e., frequencies, means, ranges, rank order responses, etc...) to be made. A summary of the questionnaire results can be found in Chapter 4.

Interviews

As Bogdan and Biklen note:

“The interview is used to gather descriptive data in the respondents’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how respondents interpret some piece of the world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.96).

Students who had expressed an interest in participating in a follow-up interview at the time they completed the questionnaire, were contacted by myself (by telephone) between mid-February and mid-March, 1998. Students were given the opportunity to schedule an interview at their convenience or, if the timing was favourable, to proceed with the interview as part of the initial contact call. Nine students agreed to interviews, which were conducted over the telephone, and lasted anywhere from 35 minutes to an hour and a half in duration. Respondents were reminded of the purpose of the study (as outlined in the Letter of Consent which they had read prior to completing the questionnaire), and were advised that if there were any interview questions they could not answer, or that they would prefer not to answer, this was perfectly acceptable. They were also encouraged to ask for clarification, if a question was unclear to them. These interviews went extremely well overall, and I was especially pleased by the interest the students showed in the research project. For the most part they seemed willing to go into considerable detail with their responses, and seemed quite at ease conducting the interview over the telephone.

Recording and Transcription of Interview Data

During the course of the telephone interviews, I took extensive written notes. Student responses to each of the questions asked were recorded in shorthand form. Upon completion of all of the interviews, responses were carefully re-examined, and categorized according to the various aspects of the transition process to which they were most directly related (i.e., positive or negative influences on transition, or effects of demographic, financial, extracurricular, family or sibling variables). Trends and anomalies were noted. These data were not entered into the Excel spreadsheet. A descriptive account of student responses is presented in Chapter 4.

Limitations of the Study

Questionnaires

As with any research effort, possible sources of bias in this study must be identified and addressed. Because subjects for this research effort were self-volunteered, there is a possibility that the sample is biased in terms of its “representativeness,” in so much as students who volunteer to participate in research projects may not provide a sample which is reflective of the general student population.

Another potentially biasing situation arose when students opted to complete the questionnaires in the company of friends. In these cases, one cannot be certain as to whether or not the responses they gave truthfully and accurately reveal the student’s personal opinion, or if they were influenced by their friends’ responses. I can also not be sure as to the effect I might have had on students who opted to sit at the table I was at to complete the questionnaire. While I remained silent unless assistance was solicited, some of the students made casual conversation while completing the questionnaire.

The fact that questionnaires were distributed over such a length of time (from mid-November 1997 to the end of January 1998), may also have had an effect. Students who completed questionnaires at the end of the first academic term (November – December 1997) may have been in a significantly different frame of mind from their counterparts, who completed them at the beginning of their second academic term (January 1998). Perhaps this is not all bad however, in that a more representative sense of the various aspects of and emotional responses to the first year experience as a whole is afforded.

In more general terms, my interpretation of some of the questionnaire responses may contribute some bias. In an effort to categorize replies I sometimes needed to make a decision about data which didn't perfectly 'fit' the categories I had devised. Furthermore, by defining as "rural" all students coming from a community of fewer than 8 000, I have limited the generalizability of my findings to my own sample population. My findings will, almost certainly, not find application to communities in the mid-western regions of Canada where, I have been informed, a community of 8 000 would be regarded as a city. Finally, my own background as a rural student, may have biased my interpretation of student responses to a certain degree.

Interviews

Interviews were also conducted with volunteers, and may reflect a somewhat biased sample for the same reasons noted with respect to the questionnaire respondents. That is to say, students who volunteered to participate in a follow-up interview may not be representative of the general rural student population.

The fact that the interviews were conducted over the telephone, rather than in person, has both positive and negative implications. While all of the students initially contacted for a follow-up interview had indicated their willingness to participate when they completed the questionnaire, they were given the option of declining participation at the time of the follow-up contact call. The students who did participate were given an opportunity to choose a date and time that would be best for them in terms of conducting the interview. The fact that the interviews took place over the phone further preserved the subjects' anonymity – though several stated during the course of the interview that this was not a concern to them. It also made less of a demand on their time in that they were not required to "go" anywhere to meet with me. While a more personal interaction would have been afforded by a face to face meeting, the telephone interviews seemed to go well. Students gave extensive answers to the majority of the questions asked of them, and requested clarification where necessary. A major limitation is the lack of a verbatim transcript.

The next chapter will summarize the data collected via questionnaires and interviews. An attempt is made to identify recurring themes and sentiments, as these were expressed by the rural students themselves, in addition to examining the answers to some of the questions outlined in Chapter 1.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

This chapter describes the questionnaire and interview responses. The questionnaire data are presented mainly as descriptive statistics, and are summarized either in tabular or written format. The interview data are presented exclusively in a written descriptive form. In summarizing my findings, I have addressed the questions and issues outlined in the Purpose section in Chapter 1.

Basic Demographics

In order to accurately interpret the questionnaire and interview results it was important to first get a basic understanding of the demographics of the sample of people providing the data. A number of survey questions were asked of respondents in order to provide a broad overview of their backgrounds. Data were collected from 38 subjects in total (13 males, 25 females). The average age of respondents was 19.08 years. Thirty-three of the students were in first year. Of these students, 24 were female, and nine were male. Two of the students who completed questionnaires were in second-year; one was male one female. All three third year respondents were male. Of the entire sample of 38 questionnaire respondents, 33 came from rural regions, while five acknowledged that they were from urban communities, but completed the questionnaire anyway, for reasons outlined in Chapter 3. Three of the rural first year students identified themselves as urban, but were actually rural according to my definition. All students polled were full time students at The University of Western Ontario. The average population of the home communities (i.e., community in which they grew up or spent the majority of their life) of students surveyed was 46 776 people. Excluding the five

students from urban home communities, this average drops to 2 150 people. The range for such communities spanned from individual farm dwellings, to a community of 7 500 residents. Students had lived in these communities for 16.42 years, on average.

Question four asked students to indicate their religious affiliation (if any). I included this question in order to determine whether or not I would be handling data from students whose religious background might be expected to, in some way, alter their first year university experience. The students sampled indicated that they were either Anglican, Christian, Protestant, Baptist, Jewish or Roman Catholic. Forty-two per cent of the students specified no particular religious affiliation. None of the students questioned indicated religious commitments that in any way limited or significantly altered their involvement in their first year at university.

Academic Demographics

Due to the nature of the enterprise, a successful academic transition is integral to one's university experience. Students who provided data for the current study came from the academic faculties and programs listed in Table 3. As mentioned earlier, all of the students who completed questionnaires and interviews were attending university on a full-time basis. Based on questionnaire responses, average class sizes for first year students ranged anywhere from 40 to over 100 students. The majority, 24 students, stated that their average first year class size was over 100 people. This would seem to make sense, since the majority of the students questioned came from one of the larger faculties (General Arts, Science, or Social Science). These data also seem to correspond quite closely with those provided by Housing and Admissions via James Mac Lean.

Table 3 – Academic faculty and program breakdown of first year rural students included in the study

FACULTY	PROGRAM	NUMBER POLLED
Arts	Philosophy	02
	English	04
Engineering Science		03
Health Sciences	Kinesiology	09
	Foods & Nutrition	02
Music		00
Sciences	Science	03
	Computer Science	02
Social Sciences	Administrative & Commercial Studies	03
	Sociology	05
	Political Science	03
Undeclared		02
Total		38

Average first year class sizes (by faculty) – 1996-97 (MacLean, personal correspondence):

-Arts (53.5)

-Business (65.4)

-Nursing (60.6)

-Music (27.0)

-Science (135.5)

-Social Science (270.5)

It is worth noting that, based on these divisions, 79% of the students surveyed fall into the Science or Social Science faculties, which are clearly the largest in terms of class size. While satisfaction with these numbers ranged from “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied,” the majority of students, 45%, indicated that they were “satisfied” with this class size. On the other hand, 13% indicated that they were at least “somewhat dissatisfied” with their class size. This is noteworthy, especially if one considers transfer and dropout rates following completion of the first year. While dissatisfaction with class size does not necessarily indicate dissatisfaction with one’s academic experience as a whole, it does suggest a less than ideal transition experience and the potential for future difficulties. Table 4 summarizes these data.

Table 4 – Student satisfaction with first year class size

Satisfaction Rating	%
Very Satisfied	13.2
Satisfied	44.7
Somewhat Satisfied	21.0
Somewhat Dissatisfied	13.2
Dissatisfied	02.6
Very Dissatisfied	05.3

Student Expectations of the University Experience

A number of questions on the questionnaire were asked to elicit student expectations of the university experience, and the purpose of a post-secondary education. One such question asked students, "Why did you decide to attend University?" The most commonly cited reason for attending was "to get a well-paying job." Table 5 summarizes student responses.

Another question from the questionnaire asked, "What made you decide to come to Western (as opposed to going to university elsewhere)? A variety of reasons were given here. The most common response was that UWO was highly recommended and was perceived as having a good all-round reputation. Thirty-two per cent of students indicated that this had been a factor in their decision, while 11% said they came exclusively for that reason.

Table 5 – Reasons cited for deciding to attend University

	Males	Females
Intellectual Development	3	3
To Get a Well-Paying Job	4	12
Intellectual Development and a Good Job	5	5
Intellectual Development and to Get Away	1	2
Specific Career	1	1
Life on Own and Specific Career	0	1

Other reasons given for choosing UWO included the fact that a scholarship was offered to the student by UWO, that the university offered the program the student was interested in, that the campus was close to home, that the student found the campus atmosphere to be appealing, that London was perceived as being a relatively small city, that the campus was already familiar to them (due to the fact that their high school had visited the university for parts of some classes), and "in order to experience life in the city." It is interesting to note that reasons such as the campus being relatively small, and being close to home suggest that qualities associated with ruralness, and proximity to ruralness were important features in attracting some rural students to this university. Several students also commented on the Scholar's

Elective option as being a strong drawing card. This option is available to incoming students with a high school average of 90% or higher. Students accepted into this program essentially define their own university degree by selecting programs of their choice, with the condition that they must maintain high standing for the duration of their degree.

A related survey question asked, "*When did you decide that you would be attending university? (as opposed to community college or entering the work force).*" The age at which this decision was made was surprisingly young for many, and was indicated by a specific grade in which the decision was made. Thirty-four per cent indicated that they "just always knew," while a further 45% said they knew before entering high school. The remaining twenty-one per cent said they decided during the time they were attending secondary school. This is an interesting piece of information, in terms of planning, from both the university and the high school points of view. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Huneycutt, Lewis, and Wibker (1990) found that about half of the samples of students they surveyed had already made their initial 'cut' of schools sometime before the middle of their third year of high school. Based on this finding they recommend sending recruitment materials to students at the end of the second year, or at the latest, at the beginning of the third year of high school.

Pre-University Factors Which Facilitated the Transition to University

High School Guidance Services

Question 21 on the survey asked students to briefly describe the nature of the guidance services provided by their high school in preparing them for university. A second part to this question

proceeded to ask students to rate their overall satisfaction with these services. All but six of the students surveyed indicated that their high school had provided them with some form of guidance services. Satisfaction with this service ranged from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. While 60.5% indicated that they were at least somewhat satisfied with their guidance services, 37% indicated that they were at best somewhat dissatisfied. One student did not fill in this portion of the questionnaire.

Familiarity with the University Campus

Question eight on the survey asked students, "Before coming to Western to pursue a degree, how many times had you been on campus, and what was the purpose of your visit(s)?" My expectation here was that students who had visited the campus frequently should be more familiar with the university environment, and would make a smoother transition. The average number of previous visits indicated was 2.5, with one student indicating 10 and another 20. The remainder of the students surveyed had visited campus anywhere from 1-3 times before arriving in September. Nine of the 38 students (24%) surveyed indicated that they had never visited the campus prior to arriving in September as a student. This was a surprising finding, given that I was led to believe that the summer academic orientation sessions were mandatory for all incoming first year students.

Perspectives on the Rural Transition Experience

The first interview question asked students to "describe the experience of coming from a relatively small rural community to an urban university." While a variety of responses were given, several similarities surfaced. The majority of the students I spoke with admitted that they had experienced some apprehension initially, and that they were a bit overwhelmed by the large masses of people they

encountered. Three students (two males, one female) noted that while their initial experience at university was a bit stressful, they had been ready to leave their home communities to experience life from a different and broader perspective. One female student noted that there were as many people in her university residence as there had been in her entire home community. Two other students commented on the wide variety of people and cultures in residence, and on campus in general, noting that they really didn't ever feel out of place in the company of such diversity. They also noted the spectrum of lifestyles, along with the tremendous range of activities accessible to them, both in residence and on campus in general.

A second part to this interview question asked students "Do you feel you've been treated any differently at university, coming from a rural community?" One student noted that some of the people she had met jokingly made fun of her 'hick' accent. A second student stated that he felt that people treated him differently until they got to know him, and were able to dismiss their misinformed and stereotypical impressions of small town residents. Five students indicated that they did not feel that they had been treated differently at all. One student attributed this to the fact that "the university accommodates a variety of people, cultures and backgrounds." Another student noted that almost half of the students on his floor in residence came from small towns in rural communities, so he felt quite at home living in residence. Two other students commented on the fact that they themselves tended to joke among their rural peers about being 'hicks.'

Factors Which Facilitated the Transition to University Since Arriving on Campus

Academic Orientation Sessions

The fifth interview question asked, "Did you attend any of the academic orientation sessions offered at UWO last summer?" Five of the seven first year interviewees reported that they had attended one of the day-long summer sessions (which ran for 35 days --from early July into the first week of August). Of the two students who did not, one said she had opted not to attend because it was too far to make the trip from her rural home community. She felt, however, that the Orientation Week events more than made up for her missing out on the summer session and, aside from not knowing her way around the campus, she was quite comfortable with everything upon arriving. The other student, also from a rural community, while not in attendance at the summer orientation session, had visited the campus during the March Break, at which time he attended a Computer Science presentation with which he was quite impressed. While these students evaluated the alternate methods of information dissemination as being adequate alternatives to the academic orientation, these examples highlight the importance of the outreach programs in place at the university. Efforts must be made to ensure that those who can not afford the opportunity, time or money to attend special information sessions are not overlooked.

The students who did attend one of the summer academic orientation sessions said that they found them to be quite helpful. Among the most beneficial aspects they noted the opportunity to receive some academic counselling as a big advantage. Being able to select their courses and sort out their timetables well in advance of arriving on campus in the fall, was a source of relief for most students.

They also appreciated the opportunity to mix and mingle with fellow students, and to share questions and concerns in a supportive and knowledgeable environment. Other benefits accruing from the sessions included a sample lecture from a university professor, information about the many services and organizations available on campus, and the opportunity to take care of details such as getting a parking permit, photo identification, and an e-mail account, visiting the campus libraries and bookstore, and touring the student residences.

Orientation Week Activities

The sixth interview question asked students to estimate the degree to which they had participated in Orientation Week activities. In addition, it asked them to identify specific events they found to be the most and least helpful or enjoyable, and finally to recommend any changes they felt could be made to improve the Orientation Week experience overall.

Of those interviewed, the vast majority indicated that they had attended just about all of the Orientation Week events (75-100%), and that they had made a conscious effort to become highly involved so as to get the most out of the experience. The most popular events among the students interviewed included the "cheer off" on the University College (UC) Hill, where all first year students gathered for a cheering competition, with teams represented by the various residences; and the free concert by the "Travoltas" which was also held on the UC Hill. Both events were identified as highlights of the week, mainly due to the impressive sense of student unity and power they were able to convey and inspire among those in attendance. Part of this effect was due to the massive number of first year students gathered in the same place at the same time. Students definitely got the sense that they were not alone! Events, such as pubs organized

through the student residences, were also strongly endorsed for the opportunity they provided students to become better acquainted with the people in their own residence, and to ask questions.

Included among the events which received negative feedback were “Shinerama,” the “Frosh Olympics,” and the opening and closing remarks from the President and the rest of the university administration. While the “Frosh Olympics” were acknowledged to be a great idea, in terms of uniting students from various faculties and residences, their main downfall was in the amount of time students had to wait between events, with nothing to do. “Shinerama” was dissatisfying mainly due to the fact that it was poorly organized, and the information dissemination process was found to be lacking. Students commented that, while they were aware of the event, the actual details in terms of when and where to meet were very sketchy and resulted in more than a few wild goose chases. The speeches from the President and associated administration were not fully appreciated due to their flavour and timing (serious and academic amidst a very social experience).

In terms of recommendations for improvements, the following suggestions were made: Several students suggested that the program would be enhanced by lengthening it, to include the weekend (essentially making it a full, 7-day week in duration). Many also felt that the focus of this week should be almost entirely social, and that it should be organized and run by students, as opposed to university administration. These students felt that a social focus during the first week would encourage students to put their priorities into perspective, and to get the “party bug” out of their systems early on.

Several students expressed considerable concern over the recent announcement regarding reduced numbers of Sophs in upcoming years. Sophs are second year students who volunteer their services to keep first year students informed about and involved in the life of the university. They are designated as either "on-campus" or "off-campus," depending on whether they serve residential or commuter first year students. The main concern here was that, with a reduced number of Sophs, the quality and form of Orientation Week could not possibly be maintained at its current level. A final recommendation was to increase the number of events that afford students the opportunity to mix and meet with other people from their faculty, who may live in other residences on campus.

Only two students differed considerably from this general consensus. The first, a rural male, said he participated very little in the Orientation Week activities. Instead, he spent a good deal of time with his sister, who also attends Western, and who helped him to sort through his belongings in order to determine how much he could fit into his crowded three person residence room. He stated that his relative lack of participation in the events of the week was really, "no big deal," as he was of the opinion that while you *meet* new people during that first week, you really get to *know* them over the course of the rest of the year. Perhaps his opinion was not unlike mine, in that I felt there were plenty of interesting people around to get to know, but that there was no rush to meet them all, en masse, merely for the sake of meeting a whole bunch of people.

The second student, also from a rural community, participated in all but 1.5 days of the Orientation Week activities. This particular student opted to sit down in the middle of the week to set some goals for the rest of the year, and took advantage of the opportunity during

the day to buy his books and to check on the location of his classes. He continued, however, to take part in the morning and evening events. He said he felt that the length of the Orientation Week was optimal, and that if it were any shorter it would not be long enough to fully appreciate the experience. On the other hand he also felt that, were it any longer, it would start to drag out and to “lose its energy.”

It is interesting to note that both of the aforementioned individuals took measures to distance themselves somewhat from the often frenzied pace of orientation week activities. While I can't be sure of how they were feeling during this time, I can certainly recall my own perceptions of orientation week. I often felt like I needed to get away from things once in a while, in order to maintain a sense of control over both myself and the unfamiliar environment into which I had entered. I am sure this is a common reaction for many first year rural students who are unaccustomed to such consistently high levels of activity, and to such large masses of unfamiliar people.

Residence Based Orientation Events

The second interview question asked students to, “describe the experience of living in a university residence during your first year at The University of Western Ontario.” Many remarked that the communal nature of residence life took some getting used to, as did the cafeteria food, but for the most part comments were very positive. The social events organized through the residences were especially favourably evaluated, as were the information and services provided by sophs. As second year students with special training, the role of sophs is to assist the group of first year students to which they are assigned in making a smooth transition to university life. Eric, a third-year student with an urban background, noted that sophs are an excellent idea, as they “permit you to experience university life with the

help of others who've done it before you." He also commented on the fact that "living in residence permits you to see university life from many perspectives, and encourages you to learn to get along with people of all types." Claire, a rural student in her first year, noted that living in residence had been a very positive experience for her in that, by allowing her to live in such close proximity to the university, she was able to meet a lot of people, which made for a much easier transition experience. Another rural first year student, Melissa, felt that living in residence made it easier for her to find out about the university and to find her way around, especially during the first few weeks.

James, a male student in his first year, with a rural background, commented on the fact that the social atmosphere of residence life is not especially conducive to getting work done, but nonetheless stated that he felt that all first year students should have the opportunity to live in residence just the same. Adam, also a rural first year student agreed, saying that "with such a high density of people there are lots of distractions, and there is always lots of opportunity, and support, to procrastinate." He described the experience as a sort of "sensory overload," but acknowledged that the people in his residence are like his immediate family, and that he has no problem at all sharing stuff with them.

Aside from an incompatible roommate and a lack of privacy Karen, a rural student in her first year, commented on the benefit of having so many people in one place to hang out and work on homework with. The way James sees it, with so many people all in one place, you can essentially "pick and choose" your friends, and it is highly unlikely you will find yourself "stuck" with someone with whom you are incompatible. He did note however that, had he known it was

an option, he would have requested a single room instead of a double, due to the fact that he was accustomed to spending a lot of time on his own when he was still living at home. Overall, the students polled gave quite positive feedback regarding the residence experience, and highly recommended it to other first year students.

A Sense of Community

Past research (Kuh, 1991) suggests that the climate and culture of any educational institution have a significant influence on the type of students who are attracted to and attend that institution. Students are attracted to the image conveyed by the school, and strive to become a part of it. At The University of Western Ontario, the motto is "Purple and Proud." The university is particularly well known among other schools in Canada for its spirit and enthusiasm, especially as these pertain to athletic and social events.

One of the questions included on my questionnaire asked students, "Do you feel a sense of *community* at UWO?" I was especially interested to learn of possible sub-communities on campus – places where students found other people to whom they could relate and identify. By far the most common response to this question was that there was a definite sense of community within the student's own residence. Eighty-two per cent of the students surveyed indicated that they felt a definite sense of community in their residence. Many described it as being like an extended family, the people "friendly and helpful ... with lots of organized events." The negative responses received in answer to this question were mainly directed toward the less personal atmosphere on main campus, and the simple fact that, "there are a lot of people here for one big happy family to exist." Clearly the sheer size of most of the major universities in Canada has the potential to render them somewhat impersonal. In the absence of

a group with whom the student can identify, and gradually get to know others who share similar interests, personalizing the university community could be a considerable challenge.

One might expect that this could, potentially, be even more difficult for commuter students who, by virtue of the amount of time they spend on campus in comparison to students living in residence, have less opportunity to discover familiar aspects which would serve to ease the transition process. For this reason the role played by off-campus sophs and dons is an important one. By linking commuter students with one of the student residences, these students are afforded a better opportunity to develop an affiliation with the university, and to partake more fully of the total university experience. Future research into the experiences of commuter students would, no doubt, provide further instruction in this regard.

Keeping in Touch with Friends and Family at Home

The fifth interview question asked students, "Have you found it difficult to maintain contact with the friends you had prior to coming to university?" The replies were pretty much evenly split, with four students indicating "yes," and four indicating "no." Those who were finding it difficult said that it was hard to find the time to get together with these people, but that it was no problem getting "back into it" once they did see each other. This was attributed to many past shared experiences, and a true knowledge and understanding of one another. Several students indicated that they were planning to return to their home communities during the summer, and that their friends would do the same. They said they were looking forward to seeing everyone and being together again. One rural first year student described life at Western as, "living in a bubble," explaining that he even finds it difficult to keep in touch with three or four friends at Fanshawe, the local

college, and with one friend at Huron College, one of the affiliate colleges of UWO! Those students who indicated that they were not having difficulties keeping in touch with friends from home attributed this to the fact that they were communicating via e-mail and the occasional telephone call. Two students distinguished between close friends and more casual acquaintances, saying that they weren't having a problem keeping up with their closest friends, but that they did seem to be "drifting apart" from their other friends from home. Finally, one third year urban student said he wasn't having a problem in this regard, because 70% of his secondary school graduating class is also attending Western.

Establishing New Friendships at University

"Have you made friends with or established ties to new people since arriving at university? Please estimate the number of new contacts you have made since arriving at university." This was the sixth interview question asked of students. Each of the nine students interviewed indicated that they had made new contacts and friends since arriving at university, though several distinguished between "casual acquaintances" and "closer friends" in answering this question. Because I did not give them a definition of either, it was a matter of interpretation on the student's part, in terms of what distinguishes a friend from an acquaintance. Estimates of the number of casual contacts ranged anywhere from 20 to 1000, and were identified mainly as people they had met in residence, around campus, at work, or through friends who were mutual acquaintances. The number of closer friends ranged from three to 30 or 40. These were identified as people who live on the same floor in residence, and with whom they would feel comfortable discussing problems or just "hanging out." One rural first year student said that he had intentionally tried to keep his circle of friends small, while another rural student in his third year of

university claimed that he is still closer to his friends from home than those he has met at university.

Extracurricular Involvement

There is little doubt that one's extracurricular experiences play a very important role in the overall university experience. Memories of such undertakings often last well beyond most recollections of what transpired in the lecture hall or lab. As noted in Chapter 2, Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984) suggests that finding common links between past and present experiences helps to considerably facilitate transition efforts. By becoming actively involved in aspects of the university experience which are familiar to them, rural students can ease their own transition. Past research suggests, however, that although students entering into their first year of university fully expect to become actively involved in a variety of extracurricular pursuits, very few actually realize such a high level of involvement. As Baker and Siryk (1984) have noted: "First year students seem to be minimally involved in the institution apart from attending classes. To the degree that involvement is a desirable experience in itself, and contributes to first year outcomes, lack of participation is a problem" (p.187). Students really do not settle into their academic programs and their extracurricular activities until well beyond their first year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), and it is a well-documented fact, that first year student drop-out rates tend to be highest among students who are less actively involved in some aspect of the life of the university (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1987). Baker and Siryk similarly found that, "the greater a student's institutional and/or goal commitment, the less likely a student is to discontinue his or her education at the institution of original enrolment as a freshman" (p.180). However, Baker and Nisenbaum (1979) have also noted that "students who experience difficulties in adjustment tend NOT to

respond to or participate in programs offered to student bodies at large” (p.179). Clearly it must become a priority to ensure that all first year students are encouraged and given ample opportunity to become involved in extracurricular activities and programs that might be of interest to them.

The students polled for this study were involved in a variety of extracurricular activities, as was revealed by their responses to the interview question, “Outline your involvement in the university community in terms of clubs, teams, employment, volunteer work, etc...” Participation levels varied considerably. Several students mentioned participating on intramural sports teams, including volleyball, soccer, water polo, and baseball. Others indicated that they were members of clubs on campus, including the “Waterbuffalos,” the “Pre-Business Club,” “the Purple Spur,” and the “Formula Mustang Racing Team.” Additional involvement included volunteering for Western’s “Foot Patrol” program, and volunteering at a day care centre. By far the most common response was that they were involved in their residence in some capacity, either on an Activity or Sports Committee, or as a member of Residence Council. One rural male student mentioned organizing and participating in fundraising efforts, while another first year rural student mentioned his participation in floor competitions and group outings.

A few students indicated that they, “had no time for clubs this year,” but that they were, “hoping to get more involved next year.” While many had anticipated greater involvement prior to arriving at University, the reality of living in residence was such that it was quite a challenge just to keep up with all the academic work. In addition, there seemed to be plenty to do, in terms of social functions, with the people in residence, without having to look beyond for involvement.

These findings seem to both support and contradict those noted in past research. While first year student involvement in extracurricular activities at this university appears to be greater than would be expected, based on past research, it is worth noting that the involvement described by the students in this sample was mainly restricted to residence-related functions. This seems to be a common theme, which continues to resurface as the data are examined. While residence-based participation is clearly a positive thing, I think it is also important to recognize the fact that not all first year students live in residence. Efforts must be made to ensure that a disproportionate emphasis is not placed on such activities, to the exclusion of other equally viable opportunities available to the entire university population.

Factors Which Impeded the Transition to University

One interview question in particular asked students to focus on the most difficult aspect of making the transition from high school to university. While a variety of responses were provided, several common problem areas were identified. These included, "Learning to study properly," "Learning to process information outside of the classroom," "Learning to read a textbook properly," "Learning to budget my time so as to keep up with all my courses," and "Learning to say no, and to discipline myself to get work done in residence." Two rural students, one female and one male, commented on difficulties getting used to "Scan-Tron testing," and the emphasis that is put on multiple choice tests as opposed to assignments. This was perceived to have significantly reduced the academic averages of the two students concerned. One rural first year female student also commented on life in residence, and the fact that there is, "no privacy in such close quarters – it's like you're caged in!" This comment

provided a rather stark contrast to the earlier, more favourable assessments of residence life. Finally, another rural first year student indicated that he had struggled initially with leaving all his friends from home, and moving to a place where he was "surrounded by strangers."

The majority of these difficulties would appear to apply to both rural and urban students. Students from either background might be equally likely to struggle with such issues during their first year of university. Interestingly, none of the rural students questioned identified concerns from a distinctly rural perspective, such as urban culture shock, or pressure from family and friends to forget about university and return home. This finding would seem to suggest that the gap which previously distinguished rural and urban students has narrowed significantly, to the point where rural students have been exposed to urban life to such a degree that they are not nearly as overwhelmed by the transition as might be expected. As a consequence, the transition from secondary school to university is a relatively smooth one. Of course there are other possible explanations for this observation. The make-up of the interview sample, as well as how and when this information was obtained, may have influenced my findings to some degree. It is also possible that some of the students questioned did not have what might best be described as a "rural consciousness." That is to say, they were not so fully immersed in the rural culture of their community as to see themselves as being distinctly different from their urban counterparts.

The third interview question was more general in nature, and required respondents to "identify some of the issues faced by rural students attending university for the first time." Interestingly, several students commented here on the need to acquaint themselves with

the public transit system. Claire, a first year student with a rural background felt that there are “a lot more standards” at university, citing the “need” to conform in terms of personal appearance as an example. She also noted that “people are not as friendly here as they are at home.”

Eric, an urban male in his third year at the university, similarly commented on the constant influx and influence of people around you, and on the importance of one’s image, and of presenting an air of affluence. He noted that this is especially prevalent during “rush week,” when people are pledging sororities and fraternities in hopes of gaining membership. Eric also commented on what he described as the “urban perspective” that seems to permeate the university system, encouraging competitiveness as opposed to co-operation among students, as an aspect of university life that required adjusting to.

Adam, a rural student in his first year, identified having to learn how to budget money as a challenge he faced. He noted that when he was at home, he was able to save up his money to make a trip into the city 1-2 times each month, whereas living in the city meant that he would see things he would like to buy on a more frequent basis. This made it difficult for him not to go through his money more quickly than he could afford to. He also noted that, growing up in a relatively small community where “everybody knew everybody else,” he had become a very trusting person. This became a cause for concern to him upon arriving at university as, he noted, it was difficult for him to know when people were “feeding him a line.” This posed certain security concerns, which forced him to relinquish his trusting nature in favour of a more cautious mindset.

Karen, a rural student in her first year, commented on having to deal with being alone among complete strangers as an issue she had to face. With only one other student from her high school at this university, she found herself on her own, without the support of her many friends from home to fall back on. This sense of anonymity proved a bit disconcerting for the first while, until she met some new people with whom she made friends. From a similar perspective Tim, a rural male in his third year, commented on the fact that “you can get lost in the system if you don’t actively seek out help.” He noted that, “this is quite different from the situation in a small high school, where everyone knows you, and they watch out for you.” Melissa, a rural first year student, noted a feeling of being “lost” in such a big place, as she struggled to find her way around during the first few weeks. She also identified homesickness as a potential issue to deal with at this time.

Anonymity

One of the interview questions proceeded to ask, “Have you ever experienced a sense of being all alone or “anonymous” within the university community?” Seven of the nine students interviewed indicated that they had felt that way at one time or another, while two said they had not. Those who responded in the affirmative offered the following qualifications: One rural first year student said she felt that way only when she was on main campus. The residence environment was identified as a much more friendly and family-like atmosphere, in which she felt quite at ease.

Another rural first year student acknowledged feeling alone during the first month of school, after having just been separated from his friends from home, and prior to establishing new contacts. He commented that the transition was a gradual one for him, as he invited

friends from home to visit him at university early on, and eventually met new people from his residence and classes later in the term.

Another rural first year male student, who completed the questionnaire in January, observed that it has been “a lot more difficult meeting people since December.” He attributed this to the fact that most people have established their friends by this time and have had their fill of meeting people, while also noting that it is crunch time, both academically and financially, for most students.

One rural first year student indicated that she felt as though she was just a number, especially in terms of administration, and when doing such things as filling out Intent to Register forms or completing her Course Selection. Two other students, both rural males in their first year, said they felt anonymous in large, first year classes of 200-800 students, and one said he felt intimidated asking questions in such an atmosphere. In the words of the second student, “there’s no way the prof cares... you are on your own.” This same student later acknowledged however that, “the profs probably do care, but there are just too many students to reach each one individually.” This person went on to say that, “even the teaching assistants are very busy, and have little time to talk.” This was directly compared with high school experiences where, “everyone knew everyone else ... they knew you and what you were doing.” While students from large high schools would, no doubt, be somewhat more accustomed to the relatively impersonal nature of large institutions, students coming from smaller schools seemed unaccustomed to the anonymity they felt in their classes, in the student residences, and on campus in general.

Academic Concerns

One rural first year student talked about being unsure about her courses and her program in general, and spoke of not being clear as to who she should talk to about it. She noted however, that the dons and sophs in her residence were extremely helpful in pointing her in the right direction, as were the academic advisors within her faculty, once she sought them out. Generally speaking, several students commented on the need for students to, "take the initiative and make the first effort to get involved," and "to actively seek out the information you are looking for."

Shifting Norms

"Have you found that you needed to learn a new set of norms or "operating assumptions" upon arriving at and immersing yourself in the university community?" This was the third question asked of interviewees. Eight of the nine students interviewed indicated that they had, while one claimed that things were much the same at university as at home. Students identified quiet hours in the residences, earlier classes and longer (later) days, less sleep, and keeping up to the hectic pace set by people who are "always rushing from A to B to C," as aspects of the university experience to which they needed to become adjusted. One first year rural student commented on learning not to get down on herself when her achievements fall short of her expectations. Several students commented here again on the racial, ethnic and religious diversity at university, and the opportunity provided for them to broaden their "reality" and expand their minds. To this end, one third-year rural student commented on his experience that it is much easier to interact with people of different racial, ethnic or religious backgrounds at university, than it was at home, where people held certain stereotypes and prejudices.

The rural first year student who felt that he hadn't changed much said, in comparing his hometown to the city of London, that the two were very similar, and shared many common ideals. The only differences he noted were the fact that London is bigger, and that it was perceived as being "younger and more energetic." It is interesting to note that this particular student's perception of the city of London had some bearing on his assessment of his overall first year university experience.

Factors Which Neither Helped nor Hindered the Transition

A seventh interview question asked, "Have you experienced a change of pace in your daily life since arriving at university?" Six of the nine students said they found the pace at university to be quite a bit faster than it had been at high school, while two found it to be the same, and one said he found university to be "ridiculously slow." Those who were finding university to be faster, attributed this to increased academic demands, including the "constant flow of exams," and a less structured daily schedule which demands that you budget your own time, including the extremes of being done class one day at 11am, and not until 5pm the next. One rural first year student said that while she is busier at university than she had been in high school, she is also more organized, which allows her to keep up and get everything done.

Those students who indicated that they found the pace at high school and university to be similar, said it was more just a change of direction. Both described themselves as being "very active" in secondary school, and one had worked 9-12 hour days during the summer. The rural third year student who found university to be "ridiculously slow" compared to his high school experience, had also

been very active in high school, participating on varsity teams, holding a job outside of school, and maintaining a busy social schedule. He said of himself that he had “a strong work ethic,” but found it hard to maintain his focus and drive in such a “lackadaisical” university environment.

Question 23 on the survey asked students to please estimate the amount of time they spend with friends during a typical week (while at university). I speculated that those students who did not have family nearby, or those who did not return to their home community often, might be more inclined to spend time with friends, and that this might assist them in making a smooth transition to university. Results showed that students who indicated that they spent more than 16 hours per week with friends had a home community located, on average, 601 kilometers from the university campus. Distance to home community ranged from a low of 100 kilometers, to a high of 2 400 kilometers however, suggesting that it was not necessarily only those students who were far from home who spent considerable time with friends at university. Clearly other variables contribute to this tendency.

Norms and values

The fourth interview question was closely related, and asked students, “Have you adopted new norms/values since arriving at university?” While most indicated that they had, those who did not, were quite adamant about this fact. Several students also made the distinction between norms and values, indicating that, while they may have adopted new norms they did not feel they had really changed their basic values. Some of the changes noted included, “learning to lower my expectations of myself,” “being more conscious of things because of living in the city, especially when going out at night, and in

terms of social norms” and, “being more tolerant and accepting of others, and being given the opportunity to practice my personal beliefs.”

One first year rural student commented on the fact that, while there are several different accepted norms at university, these are not necessarily adopted. The example he used was that of people with multiple body piercings, and/or unconventional hair styles and colours. He noted that “when people look different in the city, no one really makes a big deal of it,” whereas the people in his home community would see such comportment as a fairly serious aberration, suggesting deeper problems and cause for concern.

One third year urban male student said that he is, “a completely different person,” in comparing himself to the way he was in high school, while another first year rural student indicated that she is less sure of herself and what she wants now, because of the dramatic increase in opportunities she has found herself presented with. Those students who claimed not to have adopted new norms or values, offered no further comments.

Financial Parameters

Sources of Funding

Given that, in past research, rural students have attributed their decision to not attend university to financial concerns (Sharpe, 1995), a question was included on the survey which asked, “How are you subsidizing your education?” A variety of responses were given here, with the majority of students (29%) indicating that their parents were paying for their education. Table 6 summarizes the breakdown of

Table 6 - Break-down of education subsidization by first year students living in residence at The University of Western Ontario (1997-98)

	Personal Earnings	OSAP/ other loan	Parents	Other
Personal Earnings	09		01	02
OSAP/ other loan	04	03	01	00
Parents	01	01	11	00
Other	02	00	00	06

responses given. Table 6 should be read in the following manner: The number at the junction of two identical headings represents the number of students who subsidized their first year exclusively through that source. The number at the junction of two dissimilar headings represents the number of students who paid for their first year of studies at university by combining the two financial resources indicated. Although the question asked that students circle only one of the options listed, the fourth possibility (other), resulted in combinations of the other options being indicated as financial resources.

A subsequent question on the survey asked students to, "Describe any concerns you have with regard to financing your university education." While some students (21%) indicated that they were not at all concerned because they felt finances were adequately covered by either themselves or their parents, 66% indicated that they were concerned about financing their education. The cost of tuition, whether or not they would need to take out loans to finance their studies, and whether or not they would be able to pay back such loans, should the need for them arise, constituted the main concerns expressed by UWO students. Five students did not respond to the question at all.

Employment

As a follow-up to this question, students were asked in the questionnaire to indicate whether or not they are employed during the academic year and, if so, to indicate whether they are working on- or off-campus. Students were also asked to provide an estimate of the amount of time (in hours) they devote to work in an average week during the academic year. While the vast majority of students (76%) indicated that they are NOT working while attending university, of

those who ARE employed, eighty-nine per cent (89%) stated that they work off-campus. These students devoted an average of 12.4 hours per week to their part-time jobs. Fifteen hours per week was the highest number of hours devoted to work, by the sample of first year students surveyed.

These findings are interesting, in light of research documenting the effects of employment during the university years. According to Astin (1975), "in short, any form of on- or off-campus employment during the freshman year presents an opportunity to enhance the student's chances of completing college if the student is not receiving other forms of financial aid" (p.211). The fact that such a small portion of the students I questioned were found to be holding down a part-time job, might suggest greater future difficulties for these students in completing their university education. It would appear, however, that since the majority indicated that they were receiving financial support from their families, very few would be forced to withdraw solely based on financial reasons.

Research conducted by Chapman, Gilbert, Dietsche, Gardner, and Grayson (1997) suggests that more important than whether or not students work is where they work. Jobs on-campus have been positively linked to academic development. However, shifting from on-campus or no employment to off-campus work, is associated with an increase in drop out probability. Also important is the amount of time devoted to work. Students who work a moderate number of hours may achieve higher grades than those who do not work. Furthermore, if employment is less than full-time (i.e., less than 25 hours per week), the absolute benefits to the student can be substantial. Decreases in dropout rates of anywhere from 10-15% have been documented (Astin, 1984).

By way of explaining these findings, Astin (1984) has suggested that a part-time job on-campus facilitates retention, in much the same way that living in residence does the same. That is to say, spending more time on campus increases the student's likelihood of coming into contact with other students, professors, and university staff, who may share common interests. On a psychological level, relying on the university as a source of income can result in a greater sense of attachment to the institution, thereby fostering retention. Conversely, full-time work off-campus is generally detrimental to retention rates, due to the fact that it requires the student to spend considerable time engaged in non-academic activities, which are usually unrelated to student life. In the process, it also decreases the amount of time and energy the student has to devote to his/her studies and other campus activities.

Another key question on the questionnaire asked students, "What are your career aspirations?" Again, a variety of responses were given. While 15 students indicated that they had professional school aspirations (e.g., doctor, lawyer), 20 indicated "non-professional" employment goals (e.g. novelist, movie director, work in the music industry, own business in the field of computer science). Two students did not indicate specific aspirations -- instead one responded that she wanted to be "successful," while the other indicated that he wanted to "get rich." Another student stated that he was undecided. It is interesting to note that one student indicated that he is planning to "work for a couple of years, then take over the family farm." He was the only student to mention farming as a future aspiration. This is significant in that it leads one to wonder how many of these students plan to return to their rural communities upon

completing their university degrees, either as a farming or as a non-farming resident.

It is also interesting to note that several students indicated that they hoped to achieve a lifestyle of comparable quality to that of their parents. While it would seem to make sense that, having obtained a higher degree of education, this objective should be attainable, many fail to recognize the fact that a unique combination of factors, including the interaction between several economic and demographic variables during the postwar decades, prevailed at the time their parents were coming of age in the workforce. As Venne (1996) has noted, "Current groups just entering the labour force, or in their early career stages, may not realize that part of the preceding group's career success was due to an interaction effect between being a small generation and enjoying an unprecedented period of economic expansion that lasted during a good part of their careers" (p.153).

Family Attitudes Concerning University Education

Parents' Education and Occupational Status

In order to determine student perceptions of parental and familial expectations with respect to higher education, students were asked in the questionnaire to assess the importance of a university education to their family. It is interesting to note that higher education was not necessarily reported as being more highly valued by those families whose parents had attended university themselves, although most who had done so indicated that it was very important to them. Again, a variety of responses were provided. While 81% of the students questioned felt that a university education was either very important (47%), or important (34%), 19% of respondents indicated that they believed a university education was not very important in the opinion

of the members of their immediate family. This would suggest that roughly 20% of the students in this sample were attending university based primarily on their own convictions about the value of a university education. Bearing in mind that the opinions of family members, especially in times of uncertainty or stress, may considerably influence a student's decision to either persevere at, or drop out of university, this is a noteworthy finding.

Questions 17 a) and 17 b) in the questionnaire asked students to, "Indicate the highest level of education attained by (each of) your parent(s)/guardian(s)," and to, "Indicate your parent(s)/guardian(s)' occupational status" respectively. A variety of responses were given for question 17 a), ranging from high school drop-outs to those who had completed professional school. Fifty-five per cent of the female care givers, and 61% of the male caregivers had completed either a college or university degree. With respect to the question about female caregiver's education, I found it interesting to note that several of the responses indicated that the mother/female caregiver, despite having as much, if not more, education than the father/male caregiver, was not currently applying that education, but was instead working in the home as a "house wife" or "home maker." While the list of "home makers/house wives" included three women with a high school diploma or less education, it also included one with a B.Sc., one with a B.Ed., and one C.A. It is also interesting to note that there were only five "farmers" among the occupations identified, and that most of those whose employment was so identified (three) were also said to hold a second job away from the farm. While there might be any number of reasons for these situations, it seems to be a sign of the times that farming must either be engaged in on a grand scale or as more of a hobby. There is no longer a happy middle ground for the "traditional" farm family. This occupational scenario may also reflect a common

trend during the 1970s and 1980s, whereby a considerable number of educated and relatively affluent people opted to move from the city to nearby rural communities, in what might be described as a “back to the land movement.” Finally, while it is not necessarily the most educated parents whose children are attending university, they did appear to constitute the majority in this study. In my own study I found that less than half (33/76) of the students interviewed had parents with a university education.

Influence of Siblings

Question 18 in the survey had two parts. The first part asked students to, “Outline the birth order, including the sex, and age (if known) of the members of your immediate family, including yourself.”

Table 7 summarizes these data.

Table 7 – Birth positions of students surveyed

Eldest	Middle	Youngest	Only
14	10	09	04

The second part of this question asked students to, “Outline the corresponding educational attainments of each of your siblings.” Thirty-four per cent of the students surveyed reported that they had siblings who had either previously attended or were presently attending university. My reason for including this question on the survey, was to learn of the influence of older siblings’ university attendance on the subjects questioned, as well as to gain some insight into the attitudes and outlooks of eldest and only children who represent first-generation university attendees. My expectation was that students with older siblings who have attended university before them, should make the transition from high school to university more

easily than would students who are the first in their immediate family (i.e., first generation) to attend university. Older siblings may confer the advantage of a more familiar university experience upon their younger brothers and sisters, by affording them an opportunity to vicariously learn from their mistakes, and by simply being able to offer informed advice. First-generation students on the other hand, in the absence of a reliable reference group, are likely to find the experience somewhat more foreign and stressful.

The issue concerning ease of transition was further explored during the follow-up interviews, with the question, "Do you have siblings who have attended or are currently attending university? If so, what influence (if any) have they had on your own university experience?" This question, also found on the questionnaire, was included in order to get a better sense of the individual circumstances of each of the students being interviewed. While most of the students interviewed did have siblings, many of them were younger, and were reported to have had a minimal influence (if any) on the decisions of the interviewees to attend The University of Western Ontario. Two of the people interviewed actually had older siblings who had gone through the "university experience" before them, and acknowledged that they had been able to learn vicariously from them, either by way of stories or pure advice. One student noted that his sister was a major factor in his decision to attend U.W.O., especially in light of the fact that only one other student from his high school was at Western. His sister's advice and support were especially valuable during the first few weeks, when he was acclimatizing himself to university life. While these findings would seem to support my expectation that older siblings with university experience assist with the transition of their younger siblings, the numbers are not large enough to make any definite conclusions.

Other Feedback Received

Question six on the survey asked students, "What kinds of things do you do in your free time?" When I included this question initially, I was intending for students to indicate activities in which they were engaged in their home communities. I anticipated comparing the activities of rural students to those offered by the university community, and considered the possibility that incorporating some "rural" activities into the university extracurricular program might enhance the first year experience of rural students, while facilitating their transition by providing them with some familiar sources of involvement. On reading the questionnaire responses however, it became evident to me that this question had been misinterpreted by some of the respondents, who instead provided information concerning activities in which they engaged themselves while at university. Due to the confusion embodied in the wording and interpretation of this question, I elected not to pursue it further.

Another question for which minimal follow-up analysis was done, was question 20 on the survey. This question asked students to indicate who they would ask if they required assistance with schoolwork, finances, or their personal life. They were asked to consider friends, classmates, professors/instructors, counselors, and parents in answering this question. This question was included so as to provide insight into whether or not students were comfortable asking for help when it was needed, and to see if they would be inclined to consult with the most appropriate resource person available to them. While responses to this question varied, most of the students indicated that they would feel comfortable consulting with classmates, counselors or professors as required.

Question 25 on the survey proceeded to ask students why they chose to live in residence as opposed to living either at home or off campus, within the city of London. Seventy-one per cent indicated that they had chosen to live in residence in order to meet people, while 24% said they had done so because it was more convenient than searching for housemates and a place off campus. The remaining 5% did not complete this question. There did not appear to be any discernible difference in responses between rural and urban students.

Student Assessments of the University – the Best and the Worst

The eleventh interview question asked students to comment on what they liked the most and what they liked the least about the university. Some of the most positive aspects of the university, as identified by students, included “the general atmosphere and appearance of the place,” “... a clean, well-kept place with lots of trees,” “... the appearance of the people, the buildings and the campus overall.” Others were impressed by the level of spirit, and with the friendly, laid-back nature of the people around campus. Several students commented on the fact that, “it’s a reputable academic institution, but has a great social aspect to it as well, that provides a nice balance.” One male third year urban student felt that there are endless opportunities to get involved, saying, “you just have to look around and you will find it – anything’s possible here.” Finally, one rural first year student commented on his perception that the university is really a community unto itself, as there is really no *need* to leave the campus for anything.

Some of the more negative aspects identified included, “The overall size of the place” (large), “Unreturned smiles,” and “The elitism and value systems espoused by fraternities and sororities.” Other students complained about the University administration and politics in

general, and about the approach taken to tuition increases and Orientation Week “decreases” in particular. One urban student in his third year at the university commented that he was, “not impressed with the city of London,” while a rural male in his first year was disappointed by the fact that, “some people question the academic integrity of this institution, and don't respect a UWO degree.”

Another interview question that provided insight into the academic transition asked students, “Have you found your first year university courses to offer a greater academic challenge than the classes you took in secondary school?” Seven of the nine students interviewed responded affirmatively to this question, while the other two indicated that they did not. From those who indicated that they felt their university courses were more difficult, the following qualifications were provided. One rural female student, currently in her first year, suggested that more extensive knowledge was required, and that topics were explored in greater depth, while another rural first year student, said she felt that there was simply a greater quantity of work to do. Another student, a rural male in his first year at Western, commented that he felt he was not putting much more effort into his studies than he had in secondary school, but that he was learning more. On the other hand, one rural female student in her first year commented that, “you actually have to do the work –either go to class or read the text. In high school you just went to class and asked some questions, and got your 80's and 90's.” Finally, one rural male engineering student evaluated his course load by saying that, “all of my courses are hard, but the ‘new ones’ (i.e., the ones he had not taken in secondary school) are the toughest, and the most relevant.”

Those who felt their first year courses were not more challenging than their secondary school courses had been, indicated that the

challenge posed was actually very similar. One rural student, in his first year, went on to say that the biggest difference is that he just doesn't do as much work at university as he did in high school. Another third year rural student, in the Social Science faculty, even went so far as to describe his first year as, "a joke." One first year rural student expressed frustration with the "generality" of his first year engineering program, describing some of his courses as "completely irrelevant." Finally, one rural first year student commented on his perception that, while the material covered was not very different from that encountered in secondary school, the testing format (Scan-Tron evaluation of multiple choice questions) was quite a change, and took some getting accustomed to.

The variety of responses to this question suggests that the first year academic experience is uniquely perceived by each student. The nature of this perception depends on the student's own work ethic and attitude, his/her expectations of university, the program the student is enrolled in (and the "fit" between the student's academic strengths and the demands of the program), and the preparation received in high school (and the "fit" between such preparation and the demands made of students in university).

Overall Student Satisfaction with the First year Experience

When asked to provide an overall assessment of their satisfaction with their first year experience, 95% indicated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied. The two rural female students who indicated that they were not satisfied with their overall first year experience qualified their comments by saying that, "you learn things you would rather not know," and "it's a whole different world here." These students came from home communities of 200 and 900 citizens, and lived 200 and 100 kilometers from the university campus,

respectively. Both had older female siblings who had attended university before them.

Advice to Incoming First Year Rural Students

In response to question 28 on the survey, the following pieces of advice were offered to OAC students from a rural community regarding university:

- “keep an open mind”
- “try to be well-rounded”
- “save up your money”
- “get involved”
- “it’s a great experience”
- “it’s a lot of hard work”
- “there are tonnes of great opportunities”
- “don’t come if there’s no O-Week”
- “discuss your plans with others who have gone before you”
- “don’t be intimidated by the big city”
- “you will meet great people”
- “don’t be intimidated”
- “don’t be shy”
- “work through your problems”
- “find out about scholarships and awards”
- “stay focused on education”
- “it’s nothing like home – stay disciplined”
- “choose a city that appeals to you, so you won’t feel out of place”
- “read a lot – it opens up different perspectives”
- “be friendly and helpful, and you will get the same back”

-“ask lots of questions”

-“be unique”

Chapter Overview

This chapter has revealed much about the experiences of first year rural university students. It has highlighted a number of factors which students felt assisted them in making the transition from secondary school, as well as outlining several inhibiting factors. Distinctions have been made between pre-university influences, and factors that have had some effect since the students' arrival at university. Neutral influences have also been noted, along with the effects of finances, family and siblings, and extracurricular involvement. Chapter 5 will briefly summarize the key findings, suggesting possible future research directions in this area.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Thoughts on the Future

This final chapter will re-examine the questions raised in Chapter 1, based on the information obtained through this research effort. It will also identify possible future research directions in this subject area.

Revisiting the purpose of this study

Through this research effort I wanted to investigate the transition experienced by rural students entering their first year at an urban university. I proposed to highlight sources of difficulty, unfamiliarity, confusion, anxiety, and discouragement, as well as sources of facilitation, familiarity, clarity, confidence, and encouragement. In the process of doing so, I hoped to gain insight into the following questions. What are the financial parameters, limitations, and/or constraints that affect rural students aspiring to a university education? What role, if any, does extracurricular involvement play in assisting in the transition? What is the influence of family support (or lack of support) and attitudes with respect to higher education? Is the experience significantly different for students who have had siblings who attended university before them, in comparison to students who are the first from their immediate, (and possibly their extended) family to attend?

Based on the data collected for this study it appears that there are some fairly subtle differences between the experiences of rural and urban first year university students. Perhaps more instructive however, is the finding that within each of these groups (i.e., rural and urban students), there are differences between subgroups. For example, rural students with older siblings who had attended

university before them experience a slightly different transition from rural first-generation students. Any attempt to identify common sources of difficulty for rural students should be tempered by the realization that the transition is uniquely experienced by every rural student, according to his or her previous life experiences.

The lists that follow summarize the information obtained through questionnaires and interviews concerning factors that facilitated the transition from high school to university, as well as those factors that hindered the transition process.

Factors that assisted with the transition from secondary school to university...

Students identified the following as factors that helped them to make a smoother transition from secondary school to university:

- Having friends from secondary school at the same university;
- Having siblings, relatives or friends who were currently attending or had attended university previously;
- Having access to e-mail and telephone so as to keep in touch with friends and family at home;
- Having the opportunity to make a few trips home, especially during the first term, to visit family and friends;
- Having one's own transportation so as to facilitate trips home;

-Having attended one or more of the summer academic orientation sessions;

-Involvement in orientation week activities;

-Becoming actively involved in activities offered by the university – recognizing that there is a wide variety of things to do;

-The location of the university campus – separate from the downtown core;

-Seeing people of various cultures and backgrounds at university – all of whom are accepted (including rural students);

-Living in residence and/or attending one of the affiliated colleges. This was credited with providing a more personal experience. It was interesting to note that while many students commented on the fact that the people they lived with in residence were just like family to them, many also said that they kept in very close contact with their friends from home too.

Factors that hindered the transition from secondary school to university ...

-The large size of the university and surrounding campus was a problem. Many students commented on the fact that their own residence housed more people than their entire home town had. Other students commented that large class sizes made for a far less personal experience.

-People who are not as friendly as those at home. Encountering so many complete strangers during the first week, when they were accustomed to knowing, or knowing of and being recognized by virtually everyone in their home community, was a novel and difficult experience for many of the students questioned.

-Residence life. It was frequently noted that one's first impressions of the university and of one's residence set the tone for the rest of the school year. One student commented that she felt as though she was caged in, and noted a definite lack of privacy living in residence. Another student commented on the fact that he had been accustomed to spending a considerable amount of time alone when he had lived at home, and said that he wished he had asked for a single room in residence as opposed to sharing a room with a stranger.

-Distance from home, and the fact that there are many friends at home. Some students found it difficult to relinquish the security of their home community, especially during the first month or so. Some students also noted that the possibility of immediate job opportunities in their home community made it very tempting to throw in the towel when university became too demanding, and offered no immediate rewards.

-Personal time management. The majority of students commented on the fact that there are many distractions at university, especially in residence.

Financial Considerations and Concerns

What are the financial parameters, limitations, and/or constraints that affect rural students aspiring to a university education? As Looker and Dwyer (1996) note, "it is clear that for rural youth the choice of an educational pathway beyond high school has an impact on family relationships and can carry extra financial and personal burdens that impact in turn on their studies" (p.9). Contrary to my expectations, a relatively small number of the students surveyed indicated that they had serious concerns regarding the financing of their education, despite ongoing tuition hikes and a relative paucity of government assistance. One student made an interesting observation to the effect that he felt that rural students were more dependent on their parents for financial support, and/or assistance, than their urban counterparts. This statement was based on his observation that many rural students do not receive a set wage for work they do on the family farm. Instead, their parents simply pay the tuition bills when they are due, and cover the cost of textbook and accommodation fees. He went on

to say that rural students are also limited by sheer numbers in terms of the part time jobs available to them, due to the fact that there are simply fewer job opportunities in rural communities.

Indeed, many of the rural students questioned indicated that their parents were providing considerable financial support, and a few also described part-time employment through which they were raising a bit of extra money. Of the students who were working part-time while attending school, none indicated that work was detracting from their educational experiences – either academic or extracurricular. Of course this sample of students gives no indication of the number of students who were prevented from attending university altogether due to financial barriers.

Extracurricular Involvement

What role, if any, does extracurricular involvement play in assisting with the transition? While, on the whole, the students polled in this study indicated that they were not as involved in extracurricular activities as they had anticipated they would be, the majority stated that they were participating in some sort of extracurricular activity. Some were members of intramural sports teams, while several were members of one or more on-campus clubs. Others indicated that they were involved in activities and on committees that were organized through the student residences. A few students said that they had elected not to become involved in any organized extracurricular activities during their first year, as they were finding it difficult enough keeping up with their academic responsibilities, while living in residence. They noted, however, that they were actively involved in many of the social and athletic activities which were organized through their residence, and which did not require a regular time commitment. They also indicated that they hoped to become involved in

extracurricular activities to a greater extent in their second year at university.

The fact that most of the students polled were actively involved in extracurricular activities, and that those who were not intended to become involved in the future, would appear to indicate that these students value extracurricular activities as an important enhancement of university life.

Influence of Family

What is the influence of family support (or lack of support) and attitudes with respect to one's commitment to higher education? As noted in Chapter 2, McGrath (1993) found that the extent to which family variables influenced students' participation in post-secondary education was contingent on the value held for education in the home. Although the students polled in this study were living away from their families, their ongoing support and advice were no doubt important during this first year. The majority of the students questioned, 81%, indicated that their parents valued a university education, while 55% of their female caregivers and 60% of the male caregivers had either a university or college education themselves. This finding is important as it suggests that parents' attitudes about the value of a university education may be directly related to their own experiences with higher education. These findings also indicate that the students polled derived support and encouragement from their parents, while making the transition during their first year. These findings would appear to support those of McGrath.

Influence of Siblings

Is the experience significantly different for students who have siblings who attended university before them, in comparison to students who are the first from their immediate family to attend? My expectation was that students with older siblings who had attended university before them, should make the transition from high school to university more easily than would students who are the first in their immediate family (i.e., first generation) to attend university. While 23 of the students polled for this study satisfied the definition of a first-generation student, being the first child in their immediate family to attend university, 13 of the students interviewed had older siblings who were either currently, or had at some time in the past, attended university. Unfortunately only two of the students who provided follow-up interviews had older siblings who had attended university. Their comments indicated that their siblings had played an important role in both the student's decision to attend university and in assisting with the transition process.

While an examination of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the students polled proved to be instructive, very few generalizations could be made based on these variables. There appear to be no hard and fast rules that will effectively predict the facility of a student's transition to university from secondary school. Rather, it appears that there are a variety of factors which, combined, determine the nature of a student's first year experience.

Ease of Transition

Overall, it appears that most of the rural students in this study made the transition from secondary school to university quite easily. There are a number of possible explanations for this, each of which I would like to examine more closely. To this end, the role of the

student residence, along with other organizations and activities during the first year, and family support has already been discussed.

It is also possible, as O'Neill (1981) has suggested, that the students surveyed were from families that formerly resided in urban regions, maintaining a more or less urban lifestyle, commuting to the city to work on a daily basis. If this were the case, the transition from secondary school to university would not be nearly as novel for students. This seems somewhat unlikely, however, as the average length of time students indicated that they had lived in their home communities, prior to leaving for university, was 16.42 years. This statistic suggests that the majority of students questioned were not recently arrived urbanites. It is very possible, however, that the parents of the students surveyed grew up in an urban community, and perhaps maintained the urban lifestyle within their rural community. Regardless, this scenario (i.e., former urbanite, living in a rural community) has some interesting implications from a transitional point of view, and is worthy of future consideration.

Another possibility, by way of accounting for the relatively easy transition made by most rural students as they go from secondary school to university, is that rural and urban cultures are growing more and more similar. Modern day technology and communication patterns, including the internet, fax machines, and cellular telephones are prevalent in both environments, and though they may serve somewhat different purposes in each, are familiar to rural and urban students alike. Because of this, encountering such technology in the university environment is no longer a novel experience for many students. In so much as familiarity encourages involvement and exploration, this is a positive factor in facilitating student transitions.

General Conclusions

While this research effort suggests that rural students can make successful transitions to and enjoy the first year at an urban university, it has also illuminated some key areas of possible concern for rural secondary school teachers and guidance counsellors, parents, and students themselves to examine. Certainly not all rural students experience a smooth transition from secondary school to university. Throughout the course of both the questionnaire and interview efforts I had the feeling that many of the students felt the need to “prove” that they, as rural students, could make the adjustment to university as easily as their urban counterparts. While I don’t doubt that many first year rural students are tremendously competent – and more than ready to leave the confines of their rural communities to experience life on a larger scale – I do feel that my questionnaire may have failed to reach some key students for a number of reasons. For one thing, I did not contact any first year students who were commuters, traveling to school each day from outside of the city. Their experience of university life must surely be different from that of their peers who live on-campus. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that by the time I was distributing my questionnaires in the student residences (from November 1997 to February 1998), those students whom I was most interested to hear from (i.e., those who would drop out of residence as the result of a poor transition) would have already moved elsewhere. Finally, due to the difficulty I had finding people, I ended up with a much broader definition of “rural” than I had originally intended. I ended up defining as rural any students who came from communities of fewer than 8 000 people. I am well aware however, of the fact that communities at the upper limit of this definition are distinctly different from single farm residences, or remote or isolated dwellings, and that I might, in fact, have been grouping “apples” and “oranges” together in the same group, so to speak. Growing up in a small town and growing

up on a farm, while similar in some respects, are two distinctly different experiences. Nonetheless, I elected to broaden my own definition of “rural” for the purposes of this study, in order to enlarge my sample size, and be afforded input from a broader range of first year students.

It is important to note that the majority of the questions asked of the students who participated in this study were quite general in nature, and could just as easily have been asked of urban students. Nonetheless, they provided considerable insight into some of the more subtle challenges encountered by rural students making the transition from secondary school to university, and highlight key areas for future research efforts.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should include an urban sample for comparison purposes. While the current study examined only rural students (with a small subset of three urban students who had defined themselves as rural but were really urbanites according to my definition), an urban comparison sample would serve to clarify causal inferences. To this end a longitudinal study design, which allowed the researcher to follow subjects over an extended number of years, would prove invaluable. I would also differentiate between rural students who came from active farming communities, and those who lived in a rural region but were not actively engaged in farming in any way.

Future studies on this topic should also question rural commuters and other rural students living off-campus, so as to gain insight from a non-residential perspective. Exploring the rural first generation experience would shed further insight into the unique experiences and

perceptions of those rural students who are the first in their family to attend university.

As far as the interview format itself is concerned, I might consider using discussion groups rather than, or in addition to, individual interviews. While it appeared that the one-on-one interviews were well received by the students I corresponded with, a group environment might prove to be less intimidating, while also fostering further discussion about issues of particular interest to the students involved.

Ideally, a follow-up research effort might involve in-depth, face to face, taped interviews with a small number of students who satisfied the criterion of having lived all their lives on a farm, and were currently attending university. It might also include a couple of students who lived in one of the student residences, as well as a couple who did not.

Other areas which should be explored in future research efforts include the role of higher education for rural students. Where does it fit in? What practical and or functional purpose does it serve? Eliciting student descriptions of a 'rural lifestyle', and tapping into their feelings about their own rural lifestyles. Pursuing the concept of a rural identity, and further exploring how this differs for students who come from widely ranging rural backgrounds, and how an urban university experience affects it. The answers to these questions might prove to be further instructive in terms of defining the concept of rurality in practical terms.

Identity Issues

It was interesting to note that three of the subjects who identified themselves as rural and completed the questionnaire for my study, were actually classified as urban, based on my definitions of these

terms. This brings up some interesting questions about rural identity. For example, what makes someone rural? How does the rural student's identity evolve as they negotiate the divide between the rural community of their upbringing and the urban reality in which they are immersed during their university existence? Is one's rural identity reserved for visits back home, and an urban identity maintained while at school, or does a new and distinct identity develop, which combines the best of both worlds? What impact does this have on the student's rural home community? family and friends at home? at university? What is the end result? Do the majority of capable "rural" students opt for an urban existence following an urban university educational experience? What is the fate of those who elect to return to their original rural communities upon graduation from university?

Post-University Plans

If I had it to do over again, I would definitely incorporate a question into my questionnaires and interviews which asked students – Are you planning to return to your rural home community after graduation? This would, no doubt, lead to some interesting discussion about career aspirations of rural students, and their identity confidence or confusion.

The intricacies of this issue would be further illuminated by a research project examining the percentage of rural university graduates who find and actively pursue employment in their area of expertise. While the number of rural students pursuing and achieving a university education has increased over the years, not all graduates find immediate work in their chosen field. This reality can be especially demoralizing for rural students, who face limited employment opportunities in their relatively small home communities

upon completion of university, and often lack the financial liberty to explore, to any great extent, urban employment opportunities.

Undoubtedly, one's rural and urban identities do not remain polar opposites, but instead overlap in a rather complex interaction. Questions such as these would do much to further illuminate the identity confusion experienced by rural students as they make the transition to an urban university.

Delimitations, Assumptions, and Limitations

The present research effort has the potential to make a contribution to the extant body of literature on student transitions. Its primary value is the insight it provides, from a rural perspective, into many aspects of the transition process which have previously been examined from a general perspective, and have not distinguished between rural and urban experiences. It describes the situation at one Canadian university. As such it has the potential to positively influence the daily routines of professors and administrators, and to shape future policy decisions at the institution examined. The study is especially valuable in that it reflects feedback from a variety of students, representing various faculties, rather than focusing on the specific needs and problems of one particular academic subgroup. The current research effort should also help to shape future studies, by providing suggestions in terms of research design and subject sample composition, in addition to identifying additional research questions.

Afterword

I am currently working as a rotary physical and health education teacher at a small, rural independent school. The student population (Kindergarten-OAC) is 360. The majority of these students have an

urban background. Those who live in the country tend to be non-farmers, whose parents work in the nearby cities of Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge, Guelph or Toronto. In accordance with O'Neill's (1981) findings, the majority of these students have university aspirations.

While I see some issues at this school which are common to all small, rural schools, there are also some important differences, due mainly to the relatively high socioeconomic status of the majority of the students at the school. Definitely things like one-on-one attention, and the opportunity for all students to participate in extracurricular activities, are aspects of this learning environment which distinguish it from the urban experience, and which tend to be common to the majority of small schools – rural or not. While this is, undeniably, an ideal situation in the immediate sense, from a long-term point of view it has the potential to distort student expectations of university. Students who receive constant input and feedback in secondary school are often ill-prepared to deal with the large class sizes and relative lack of personal attention they will get during their first year at university. Not having had to compete for the attention of their teachers in secondary school, many such students are not prepared to do so – or simply don't recognize the need to do so, once they arrive at university. From the point of view of an educator, one has a certain responsibility to prepare these students for what lies ahead, while at the same time continuing to offer them the benefits of attending a small, rural school. This doesn't necessarily mean distancing the teacher from the students, nor making the students compete for the teacher's attention. Rather, by encouraging them to first attempt to work through their problems on their own, and then to actively solicit assistance when it is truly required, these students can be better prepared to deal with the first year university experience.

The students at this school do not suffer from a lack of resources. As members of a self-funded institution they do not fall victim to the government based funding disparities that often limit students at rural schools. Consequently, these students are not disadvantaged to the same extent as most students who attend rural schools are, in terms of being unfamiliar with the global environment. The financial status of the students at this school permits them to travel extensively with family and friends, and to be exposed to a wide variety of people, cultures and experiences. As a result, by the time they reach university they are comfortable interacting with a wide variety of people, from all different cultural backgrounds, and they have the social graces to do so.

Clearly the academic experience of these students differs greatly from my own. I am finding it very interesting to compare the two as the year progresses, noting the pros and cons of each. I am also finding it quite interesting to compare the rural identities that these students have formed, to my own rural identity. The two are drastically different. While these students are attending a school that is located in a rural community, they clearly see themselves as urbanites. The extracurricular and social activities in which they engage are quite different from those in which I participated with my friends during my high school years. Perhaps most interesting of all will be to keep track of the graduating students over the next few years, noting those who successfully progress to university and those who do not, having some knowledge of their backgrounds.

Final Conclusion

Rural students are members of an invisible minority on university campuses. This reality has both positive and negative implications. Because students from rural and remote regions look no different from urbanites, they tend not to be overtly relegated to minority status, but are instead quite easily integrated into the university environment.

Based on the findings revealed in this study, it seems that most rural students in their first year of university make a fairly easy transition from secondary school. This raises some troublesome issues however. An aspect of university life, and indeed of educational environments in general, that seems to be overlooked by many rural students, is the fact that they reflect an urban bias. It seems that most rural students (and students in general) assume and accept that the university experience is essentially urban in nature. This is reflected in course content, through references and examples used in texts and during lectures, in social opportunities on campus, in extra-curricular clubs and organizations, and in the general atmosphere that pervades most university campuses. Urban and rural students alike assume that a university education entails the dissemination of information from an urban perspective. Without familiar points of reference, it seems inevitable that rural students will eventually assume an urban affiliation, losing their ties to their rural communities in the process. The inevitable question that arises asks, "What is worthwhile knowledge?" At the present time there would appear to be a decidedly urban emphasis.

My chief concern in this respect is with the fact that this transition is almost too easy for many rural students, who don't even realize the gradual transformative effect it has on their identity. While I certainly

didn't recognize it myself until well after my first year, I think that it is important to encourage rural students to demand that the university education being offered to them does not require that they completely and totally sacrifice their rural identity for the sake of achieving success by urban standards. To function effectively within the predominantly urban-based university environment, students must compromise aspects of their rural identities. Succumbing to such intellectual urbanization has potentially counterproductive implications for the rural community as a whole, due to the fact that many rural students with a university education end up leaving their home communities for good upon graduation. Very few ultimately return to the rural community with their new experiences and insights, with the end result being that the rural identity and heritage is neither consciously preserved nor permitted to evolve.

Another key concern, voiced by several of the students questioned, identified the tension which exists between the benefit and comfort of knowing people from one's home community very well, and the excitement and risk of knowing next to no one in the foreign environment of an urban university. Involvement in extracurricular clubs and activities is of paramount value in terms of reducing this tension and facilitating the transition process, by exposing the student to a subgroup of individuals with similar interests and experiences. As Perron (1996) found, the more students explored their own cultural group, affirmed their beliefs about it, and showed openness towards members of other cultural groups, the more they aspired to pursue post-secondary education. Providing extracurricular activities targeting rural student interests might considerably facilitate the transition for this subgroup of first year university students.

Rural students need to be fully cognizant of their unique position within the university environment, and aware of the consequences of the decisions they make. They need to ensure that what they are learning is relevant to them, and that they speak up, as appropriate, in the name of progress within the rural sectors of society – and society as a balanced whole. It is only in this way that the sense of accomplishment, empowerment, confidence and freedom which is the domain of higher education can be fully recognized by all student citizens.

REFERENCES

- Akyeampong, E. B. (1968). Labour laws and the development of the labour movement in Newfoundland, 1900-1960. Dissertation Abstracts International. 15 (44), 603. (University Microfilms No. 29403-46983)
- Anisef, P. (1973). The critical juncture: Education and vocational intentions of grade 12 students in Ontario: Summary of follow-up survey. Ontario: Ministry of Colleges and Universities.
- Astin, A. W. (1975). Preventing students from dropping out. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W. (1984, July). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. Journal of College Student Personnel, 297-307.
- Baker, R. W. & Siryk, B. (1984). Measuring adjustment to college. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 31 (2), 179-189.
- Baker, R. W. & Nisenbaum, S. (1979). Lessons from an attempt to facilitate freshman transition into college. Journal of the American College Health Association. 28 (2), 79-81.
- Beaulieu, L.J. & Mulkey, D. (1995). Human capital in rural America: a review of theoretical perspectives. In L. Beaulieu and D. Mulkey (eds.), Investing in people: The human capital needs of rural America (pp.3-21). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Becker, C.S. (1962). Human capital. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Benjamin, M. (1990). Freshman daily experience: Implications for policy, research and theory. Guelph: University of Guelph Student-Environment Group.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1992). Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods. (2nd ed.). Needham Heights: Allyn And Bacon.

- Chapman, J., Gilbert, S., Dietsche, P., Gardner, J., & Grayson, P. (1997). Institutional Profiles. From best intentions to best practices: The first-year experience in Canadian post-secondary education. (Monograph Series No. 22). South Carolina: University of South Carolina, National Resource Centre for the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Chapman, J., Gilbert, S., Dietsche, P., & Grayson, P. (1997). Programs and services for first-year students in Canadian universities. From best intentions to best practices: The first-year experience in Canadian post-secondary education. (Monograph Series. No. 22). South Carolina: University of South Carolina, National Resource Centre for the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Donaldson, E. L. (1995). In transition from high school to university: First-year perceptions of the process. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
- Galaway, B., & Hudson, J. (1995). Youth in transition. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.
- Gilbert, S. N., & Gomme, L. M. (1986). Future directions in research on voluntary attrition from colleges and universities. College and University, 61, 227-238.
- Halfacree, K. H. (1993). Locality and Social Representation: Space, Discourse and Alternative Definitions of the Rural. Journal of Rural Studies, 9 (1), 23-37.
- Hanson, T. D. & McIntyre, W. G. (1989). Family structure variables as predictors of educational and vocational aspirations of high school seniors. Research in Rural Education, 6 (2), 39-49.
- Hossler, D. & Gallagher, K. S. (1987). Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and the implications for policy makers. College and University, 62 (3), 207-221.
- Huneycutt, A. W., Lewis, P. B. & Wibker, E. A. (1990). Marketing the university: A role for marketing faculty. College and University, 66, 29-34.
- Kuh, G. D. (1991). The role of admissions and orientation in creating appropriate expectations for college life. College and University, 66 (2), 75-82.

- Leckie, G. (1991). Female farm operators, gender relations and the restructuring Canadian agricultural system. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada..
- Lichter, D.T., Cornwell, G.T., & Eggebeen, D.J. (1995). Harvesting human capital: Family structure and education among rural youth. Rural Sociology, 58 (1), 55-75.
- Looker, D., & Dwyer, P. (1996). Education and negotiated reality: Complexities facing rural youth in the 1990s. Looking back, looking ahead: A vision for the future of rural education. Second National Congress on Rural Education, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.
- Marshall, R. & Briggs, V. M., Jr. (1989). Labor economics: Theory, institutions, and public policy. Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin.
- McGrath, S. J. (1993). Post-secondary participation in Newfoundland. Youth in transition: Perspectives on research and policy. Toronto, ON. : Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.
- Moscovici, S. (1984). The phenomenon of social representations. In Social Representations, 3-69. Farr, R. and Moscovici, S. (eds.) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Myles, J., Picot, G., & Wannell, T. (1988). Wages and jobs in the 1980's: Changing youth wages and the declining middle. Ottawa, Ontario: Social and Economic Studies Division, Statistics Canada.
- Ontario Municipal Act. (1995). Part I: Formation, Erection, Alteration of Boundaries, and Dissolution of Municipalities, et seq. Section II, 1-3, 1-4.
- O'Neill, G. P. (1981). Post-secondary aspirations of high-school seniors from different social-demographic contexts. Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 11 (2), 51-66.
- Pascarella, E.T., & Terenzini, P.T. (1979). Interaction effects of Spady's and Tinto's conceptual models of college dropout. Sociology of Education, 52, 197-210.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1980). Predicting freshman persistence and voluntary dropout decisions from a theoretical model. Journal of Higher Education, 51, 60-75.

- Perron, J. (1996). Ethnicity and educational aspirations of high school students. Youth in transition: Perspectives on research and policy. Toronto, ON. : Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.
- Pike, R. (1970). Who doesn't get to university and why? Association of universities and colleges of Canada. Ottawa: The Runge Press Ltd.
- Redfield, R. (1941). The fold culture of Yucatan. Chicago University Press, Chicago.
- Rendon, L. I. (1996, Nov-Dec.). Life on the border. About Campus, 14-20.
- Schultz, T. W. (1962). Investment in human capital: The role of education and research. New York: Free Press.
- Sharpe, D. B. (1995). Perceptions of work and education transition problems encountered after high school. Youth in transition: Perspectives on research and policy. Toronto, ON. : Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.
- Sharpe, D. B., & White, G. (1993). Educational pathways and experiences of Newfoundland youth. , St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada: Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's Centre for Educational Research and Development,
- Smith, M. H., Beaulieu, L. J., & Seraphine, A. (1995). Social capital, place of residence, and college attendance. Rural Sociology, 60 (3), 363-380.
- Statistics Canada. 1996. Population and Dwelling Counts. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- Statistics Canada. 1991. Provincial Post-Secondary Participation Rates. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- Swaim, P. & Teixeira, R. (1991). Education and training policy: skill upgrading options for the rural workforce. In Education and Rural Economic Development: Strategies for the Future. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agriculture and Rural Economic Research Service Staff Report No. AGES 9153, 122-162.
- Tinto, V. (1987). Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition. Chicago, IL. : The University of Chicago Press.

- Troughton, M. (1990). Decline to development: Towards a framework for sustainable rural development. In F. W. Dykeman (Ed.), Entrepreneurial and sustainable rural communities (pp. 23-31). Sackville, New Brunswick.
- University of Manitoba Student Affairs Research Report. October, 1990; November 1990; December 1990; February 1991; March 1991; September 1991; October 1991; November 1991; March 1992.
- Varpalotai, A. (1997). Life on the farm: The education of girls in rural communities. Orbit, 28 (1), 37-39.
- Venne, R. A. (1996). Demographic and career issues relating to youth in transition to adulthood. Youth in transition: Perspectives on research and policy. Toronto, ON. : Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.
- Wong, P.T.P. (1994). Student retention/attrition at Trent: A preliminary report. Unpublished report, Trent University.

APPENDIX A

Letter of Information

Rural Students in Transition from High School to University

My name is Leanne Dietrich and I am a graduate student at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. I am currently conducting research into some of the experiences of rural students as they make the transition from high school to university, and would like to invite you to participate in this research.

Information for this research will be collected by means of a 30-item questionnaire, which should take roughly 15-20 minutes to complete. Further information will be obtained by means of interviews with self-volunteered students, as well as with counselling and orientation staff from the university, later in February.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used. You are not required to put your name on the questionnaire, and you will be identified only as a number in the reporting of results. Furthermore, I am the only person who will have access to the data you provide.

Should you consent to participate in this research, please be aware that you have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, should you wish to do so, or to decline to answer any specific questions you would prefer not to answer.

There are no known risks involved should you decide to participate in this study, nor is any discomfort or inconvenience anticipated. You should also know that your decision to participate or to decline participation in this study will in no way affect your academic standing.

If you have any questions about this research, or any comments to make now or at a later date, please contact either:

Leanne Dietrich at (519) 663-4153
OR
Aniko Varpalotai at (519) 661-2087

APPENDIX B**Rural Students in Transition from High School to University**

I have read the Letter of Information relating to the above-titled project, I understand the proposed research and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without incurring a penalty of any kind, that I may decline to answer any specific questions should I choose to do so, and that the information collected is for research purposes only.

I consent to participate in this study.

Name (please print):

Signature:

Date:

I am interested in participating in a follow-up interview

yes

no

Phone number (if interested in follow-up interview)

6. What kinds of things do you do in your free time?

7. a) *Why* did you decide to attend University?

b) *What* made you decide to come to Western (as opposed to going elsewhere)?

c) *When* did you decide that you would be attending university (as opposed to community college or entering the work force) ?

8. Before coming to Western to pursue a degree, how many times had you been on-campus, and what was the purpose of your visit(s)?

9. What is your major program of study while at Western?

10. Are you a full-time or part-time student at Western?

11. What are your career aspirations?

12. i) Please indicate the average size of your first-year classes: (circle one)

- a) ≤ 10 students
- b) 10-39
- c) 40-100
- d) >100

ii) Please rate your satisfaction with respect to the size of your first year classes: (circle one)

- a) very satisfied
- b) satisfied
- c) somewhat satisfied
- d) somewhat dissatisfied
- e) dissatisfied
- f) very dissatisfied

13. How are you subsidizing your education? (circle one)

- a) with money I have earned by working during the year
- b) OSAP/other loan
- c) my parents are paying for my university education
- d) other (please explain)

14. Describe any concerns you have with regards to financing your university education:

15. Are you employed during the academic year? (circle one)

yes

no

16. i) If you answered "yes" to number 15 above, are you working:
(circle one)

a) on campus

b) off-campus

- ii) Please estimate the amount of time you devote to work in an average week during the academic year:

- 17.a) Please indicate the highest level of education attained by each of your parents/guardian(s):

-mother/female caregiver

-father/male caregiver

b) Please indicate your parents'/guardians' occupational status:

-mother/female caregiver

-father/male caregiver

18.i) Please outline the birth order, including the sex, and age (if known) of the members of your immediate family, including yourself. (e.g. brother (33), sister (30), brother (27), brother (23), self (19))

ii) Please outline the corresponding educational attainments of each of your siblings (e.g. brother (33) - BSc., sister (30) - BA, BEd, brother (27) - college diploma, brother (23) - 3rd year Bsc.)

19. How important is a university education to your family? (circle one)

- a) very important
- b) important
- c) not very important

20. Please indicate who you would ask if you required assistance in each of the following areas: (consider friends, classmates, professors/instructors, counsellors, parents, etc...)

a) schoolwork

b) finances

c) personal life

21. a) Please briefly describe the nature of the guidance services provided by your high school, in preparing you for university:

b) Please rate your overall satisfaction with these services: (circle one)

a) very satisfied

b) satisfied

c) somewhat satisfied

d) somewhat dissatisfied

e) dissatisfied

f) very dissatisfied

22. Describe the efforts made by each of the following organizations to facilitate your transition from high school to university:

a) university residence

b) extracurricular clubs/organizations on-campus

c) academic program orientation efforts

d) University Orientation Week efforts

Please offer suggestions for improvements within each of these organizations:

23. Please estimate the amount of time you spend with friends during a typical week:
(circle one)
- a) less than 6 hours per week
 - b) 6-10 hours per week
 - c) 11-15 hours per week
 - d) more than 16 hours per week

24. Please estimate the distance from your home residence to the University of Western Ontario (1-way):

25. Why did you choose to live in residence (as opposed to living at home or living off campus)?

26. Do you feel a sense of "community" at UWO? Explain.

27. Please provide an overall assessment of your satisfaction with your first-year experience (thus far) at Western:

28. Please provide one piece of advice you would offer an OAC student from a rural community regarding university

THANK-YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions

- 1a. Describe the experience of coming from a relatively small rural community to an urban university.
- b. Do you feel you've been treated "differently" coming from a rural community?
2. Describe the experience of living in a university residence during your first year at UWO.
3. Identify some of the issues faced by rural students attending university for the first time.
4. Do you have siblings who have attended or are currently attending university? If so, what influence (if any) have they had on your own university experience?
5. Did you attend any of the academic orientation sessions offered at UWO last summer?
6. Estimate the degree to which you participated in Orientation Week activities. What events did you find the most/least helpful? What changes do you recommend to improve Orientation Week?
- 7a. Describe a typical weekday in your life during the academic year.
- b. Describe a typical weekend in your life during the academic year.
8. With whom do you socialize at UWO?
9. Outline your involvement in the university community (e.g. clubs, teams, employment, volunteer work, etc...)
10. What was/has been the most difficult aspect for you in making the transition from high school to university?
11. What do you like most/least about this university?
12. Have you ever second-guessed your decision to attend this university?
- 13a. Describe your own personality
- b. Describe some of your closest friends from home

Subjects were also asked to simply answer “yes” or “no” to each of the following questions:

- 01 Have you found your first-year university courses to offer a greater academic challenge than the classes you took in secondary school?
- 02 Have you experienced any fluctuation in terms of your self-esteem as it relates to your academic abilities?
- 03 Have you found that you needed to learn a new set of norms/operating assumptions upon arriving at and immersing yourself in the university community?
- 04 Have you adopted new norms/values since arriving at university?
- 05 Have you found it difficult to maintain contact with the friends you had prior to coming to university?
- 06 Have you made friends with /established ties to new people since arriving at university? Please estimate the number of new contacts you have made since arriving at university.
- 07 Have you experienced a change of pace in your daily life since arriving at university?
- 08 Have you ever experienced a sense of being all alone/ anonymous within the university community?
- 09 Have you perceived any threat(s) to/ adjusted your self image since arriving at university?
- 10 Have you experienced a desire to return to your home community, including your family and friends?