

Article

College for All and the Postsecondary Experiences of Rural First-Generation College Students: Patterns of Alignment with a Predominant Master Narrative

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of rural, first-generation college (RFGC) students in relation to dominant culturally normative expectations about postsecondary educational and workforce trajectories. The study adopted patterns of engagement with a master narrative as both a conceptual framework and unit of analysis, examining both biography and cultural ecologies as well as highlighting agency in the lives and choices of study participants. Evidence is drawn from 4 in-depth narrative interviews with each of 14 RFGC students, conducted both at school and students' homes, from rural and small-town communities. Results show that a master narrative of *College for All* (CFA) is a widespread and dominant life course ideology that shapes the postsecondary experience of RFGC students. The study found three distinct patterns of engagement with this master narrative: *faithful*, *hybrid*, and *utilitarian alignment*. Moreover, these types of engagement seemed related to distinct patterns of agency-driven psychological wellbeing. The study contributes an anti-deficit understanding of RFGC students' experiences and identity by focusing on the ways individuals negotiate and selectively align with dominant cultural narratives as well as the ways rural youth work to imagine new stories and possibilities.

Keywords: rural; first-generation; college; college for all; master narrative; identity; agency; narrative analysis; emerging adulthood; multi-sited



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1. Introduction

Rural communities across the country have experienced dramatic economic and social transformations, leaving young people facing uncertain futures as community-defining jobs in timber, manufacturing, and mining have become scarce (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). In rural US Northeastern communities specifically, jobs associated with these industries have only partially been replaced by alternatives in the tourism, healthcare, and prison industries (Dillon, 2011). These transformations have fundamentally altered people's relationships to work, family, and place (Sherman, 2009). Although researchers and policymakers have focused on the public health crises associated with rural economic declines (Macy, 2018), less attention has been given to the developmental consequences of rapid socioeconomic transformation on youth and young adults.

For many rural youth, educational advancement and economic security often involve a “mobility imperative” (Farrugia, 2016) driven not only by material realities but also by the message that aspiring toward a better future requires moving away (Byun et al., 2012; M. Corbett, 2007; Tieken, 2016; Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). For example, in our focal state of New Hampshire, a 2009 state task force found a widespread impression, including among educators, “that students must leave NH in order to succeed”—a message that implicitly stigmatizes local options (The Governor’s Task Force, 2009, p. 14; see also Sherman & Sage, 2011). Possible tensions exist between demands to stay in rural communities, where human capital needs are often acute and where young people often have strong relational ties (Petrin et al., 2011) or leaving to pursue career and educational opportunities elsewhere. These tensions may leave young people wrestling with identity-related issues of guilt, belonging, and cultural displacement (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Looker & Naylor, 2009; San Antonio, 2016). The conflation of *demographic* outmigration with *psychological* and *developmental* aspiration or achievement (see Carr & Kefalas, 2009)—both in rural youths’ imagination and in the theories of educational, youth development, and rural researchers—risks expanding deficit-model thinking that can undermine local educational pathways and compromise well-being (Immordino-Yang et al., 2018). Crockett et al. (2000) describe this tension as a critical identity dilemma for many rural youth (see also Tieken, 2016).

In the postsecondary decision space, the 4-year residential college pathway looms large. With roots in Civil Rights-era equity concerns, a focus on universal access to higher education meant that most students were encouraged to pursue 4 years of college over other viable and potentially beneficial postsecondary alternatives (Boesel & Fredland, 1999). Over time, the ideal of *College for All* (CFA) evolved into a contemporary educational policy ideology that reflects the individualisms of American culture: “we welcome an increasing reliance on college as the arbiter of individual career opportunity since, in theory at least, using education to mediate opportunity allows us to expand merit-based success without surrendering individual responsibility” (Carnevale, 2008, p. 23). At the nexus of cultural, developmental, and identity demands (Arnett, 2007), CFA explicitly and tacitly messages strong norms for youth postsecondary aspirations and planning at the individual and collective levels.

Youth from rural communities are often the first in their families to attend college. These rural, first-generation college (RFGC) students are often differently equipped to “imagine and prepare for the challenges of college life” and feel a greater disconnect from family and peers while on campus (San Antonio, 2016, p. 257). Many rural youth may experience tension and contradiction among cultural values and models of success as they position themselves in relation to new institutions and social groups. Identity researchers have theorized these broad cultural models as “master narratives”: normative life scripts that are instrumental in resolving developmental and identity dilemmas (Hammack & Toolis, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015).

Conflict among competing master narratives can trigger not only personal identity dilemmas but also a sense of community displacement and resistance to educational expectations (McLean et al., 2018; Willis, 1977). For instance, M. J. Corbett (2020) identified tension among rural youth between staying in rural communities—many of which may have limited career and educational opportunities—and leaving to pursue opportunities elsewhere, leaving young people wrestling with issues of identity and belonging (see also Crockett et al., 2000; Tieken, 2016). This under-researched and poorly understood psychosocial process of having to choose between two mutually exclusive experiences may follow different patterns, even among groups of youth appearing to make similar postsecondary choices (see Valle & Covarrubias, 2024). We expand on and reframe these issues below from a strengths-based, non-deficit perspective.

We examined how rural youth negotiate and engage agentially with resources for imagining future options in the form of master narratives related to postsecondary education and workforce attainment. This requires a developmental and contextually situated view of agency that permits appreciation of, for example, concessions or trade-offs of alignment with master narrative prescriptions (see [Seaman et al., 2017](#)). We view agency as both the ability to select a personally satisfying life course model (i.e., the contextually dependent trajectory and sequence of key experiences that shape development) and to *modify, reject, or hybridize* available narrative options, thereby claiming roles, identities, and moral possibilities not otherwise available.

1.1. College Enrollment and Attainment Among Rural and First-Generation Youth and Adults

Although rural youth graduate high school at rates equal to or higher than urban and suburban peers, their rates of college enrollment and attainment have historically been lower. In 2023, 21.4% of rural adults age 25 or older had completed at least a bachelor's degree, up from 17.7% in 2017 but still lower than the 36.4% completion rate for non-rural adults. In the 2023 high school graduating class, fewer rural youth enrolled in college immediately (54.8%) versus their suburban (63.9%) and urban peers (59.3%). In the 2017 high school graduating class, 38.6% of rural students had completed a college degree within six years compared to 47.0% of their suburban peers (for all percentages above, see [Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2025b](#)).

These enrollment and attainment disparities are likely compounded among rural youth who are the first in their families to complete a four-year degree. More than 30% of first-year college students are the first in their families to attend college ([Kirp, 2019](#)). In general, first-generation college students differ from legacy peers in several important ways; for example, they are more likely to be from minority backgrounds, to come from low-income families, and to be children of immigrants or immigrants themselves ([Terenzini et al., 1996](#); [Thayer, 2000](#)). Nationally, only 19% of first-generation college students graduate in six years compared to 46.6% of legacy students ([Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2025a](#)). First-generation college students often arrive at college feeling academically underprepared and tend to under-engage both socially and academically ([Engle & Tinto, 2008](#); [Soria & Stebleton, 2013](#)). This may leave them less satisfied with their college experience ([Pike & Kuh, 2005](#)) and, ultimately, place them at greater risk of struggling in college or of not graduating.

Despite comparatively low college enrollment and attainment among RFGC students and increasing re-training demands placed on rural populations due to shifting local economies, research is sparse on the psychosocial experiences of rural youth in higher education who continue navigating associated identity dilemmas ([Heinisch, 2016](#); [Provasnik et al., 2007](#); [San Antonio, 2016](#)).

1.2. Beyond Deficit Narratives: Future Aspiration Among Rural Youth

This study takes an anti-deficit stance on RFGC students' experiences by focusing not only on challenges and barriers but also on how individuals choose to identify and engage with dominant cultural narratives. Although many different "rural Americas" exist, perceptions of rural life are often either romanticized ([Shucksmith, 2018](#)) or negative ([Lichter & Brown, 2011](#)), with either pole homogenizing the rural experience and reflecting marginalizing cultural, social, and economic biases ([Theobald & Wood, 2010](#)).

Adolescence is a critical time when individuals concentrate thinking on their futures, partly as a consequence of formulating a more coherent and enduring autobiographical sense of self ([Fivush et al., 2011](#)) and partly in response to the timing-specific developmental demands of newly relevant narrative messages ([Fivush et al., 2017](#); [Seaman et al., 2017](#)). This process of establishing a "future orientation" can greatly influence outcomes later

in life (Nurmi, 1991). Much of the literature on youth future aspirations suggests that young people from rural and low-income families have low aspirations and expectations for their futures (Antonoplis & Chen, 2020; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Hu, 2003; Khattab, 2015; Rojewski, 1999). The identities, perceptions of self-worth, and aspirations among rural youth are certainly shaped by culturally normative messages that communicate, often tacitly, different models of a “good life” (McLean, 2024; Syed & McLean, 2022). However, understanding rural youth future orientation requires accounting for future aspirations without the presumption that strong future aspirations are only present when they resemble normatively endorsed outcomes such as educational credentialing, career ascendancy, or geographic mobility.

When dominant narratives of success are misaligned with one’s values, goals, and available resources, youth who oppose such narratives may, consequently, be assessed as possessing lower educational and occupational aspirations. For instance, in their influential study on the migration patterns of rural youth, Carr and Kefalas (2009) labeled rural youth with high career and educational aspirations as well as outmigration plans as “achievers” and, by contrast, labeled rural youth choosing not to outmigrate from their communities as “stayers” with lower aspirations. Although their study helpfully documented how career and education goals can inform migratory intentions, this binary taxonomy obscures more nuanced motivations and life course patterns. For example, the stay/leave binary risks glossing over the possibility that those who “stay” do so with aspirations to contribute locally or to maintain strong social commitments. By contrast, Wang et al. (2021) examined the “aspirational profiles” of rural youth in Pennsylvania and found evidence that a large percentage of rural young people had high career and educational aspirations but sought to realize their goals near home. These studies illustrate how “aspiration” can be conflated with migration. Thus, the present study approaches sociocultural patterns of youth future orientation and aspiration as contextually embedded in ecologies of social class, geographical opportunity, and place attachments (see also Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019).

1.3. Familial, Historical, and Cultural Patterns of Youth Identity

We draw on Holland et al. (1998) and Erikson (1968) to view identity as a social, cultural, political, and historical phenomenon arising as a function of engagement across both local and global contexts. We also draw on *master narrative* identity frameworks, which permit understanding of the mutually constituting relations between normative cultural messages and personal biographies (McLean & Syed, 2015). The master narrative framework is a promising approach for understanding how individuals’ life trajectories develop in relation to prescriptive cultural stories (Arnett, 2015; Hammack, 2006; Hammack & Toolis, 2015; McLean et al., 2017).

Master narratives provide both psychological resources and normative pressure guiding “how to be a ‘good’ member of a culture” (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 320), in varied domains (e.g., motherhood [Kerrick & Henry, 2017] and retirement [Smith & Dougherty, 2012]). McLean and Syed (2015) describe several properties of master narratives that distinguish them from personal stories and that give texture to how they operate culturally. Master narratives: circulate widely and often cross numerous institutional boundaries (ubiquity); provide information about how people should behave and think in relation to society (utility); are often experienced implicitly (invisibility); and, impose and endorse specific prescriptive psychological and life course commitments (rigidity, compulsory). Together, these properties can be leveraged empirically to determine whether a cultural message such as CFA is a master narrative generally (see Seaman et al., 2023) and whether it functions as such in the experiences of rural youth.

Individuals position themselves in identity work relative to these existing cultural narratives in ways that both reflect and evolve their personal stories (McLean et al., 2007), with qualities and consequences that can vary widely. Nonetheless, master narratives maintain their salience and developmental force only by repeatedly being engaged with across time and place and in negotiation with the need to situate personal experiences into a cohesive plot line and value system (McLean & Syed, 2015). The concept of master narratives can thus be used to trace individual processes of self-formation and to clarify how society and culture are reproduced and transformed through psychological mechanisms.

1.4. The Present Study

This study explores the experience of alignment with a prominent potential master narrative—*College for All*—examining both its content and the process of engagement with that content among RFGC students, for whom uncertainties or tensions in this alignment experience may reveal important empirical and conceptual patterns. Using *engagement with master narratives* as a core unit of analysis, this study integrates biographical and cultural analysis to understand challenges faced by RFGC students and their communities (M. Corbett & Forsey, 2017). Compelling evidence exists regarding how individuals and social groups reject master narratives in favor of alternative or oppositional narratives (McLean & Syed, 2015); however, much less is understood about variations of experience of alignment with master narratives themselves including processes of hybridization. The present study asks: What are the different modes of aligned engagement with dominant life course expectations, in the form of master narratives, that RFGC students are experiencing? What is the psychological experience of aligned negotiation with a master narrative among RFGC students?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Recruitment

Participants included in this study were 4-year college students in their final two years of study whose permanent (i.e., family) residences were in rural communities or small towns, and for whom neither parent had completed a 4-year college degree (i.e., first generation). The sample included 14 junior (6) and senior (8) first-generation college students at a research-intensive public university in New England. Participants were 10 women and 4 men and averaged 20.3 years in age (range = 19–23). The larger study that the present report draws from also included interviews with students' family members. Parents' highest levels of educational attainment included *middle school* (1 father), *high school* (5 mothers, 6 fathers), *technical school* (2 mothers, 1 father), or *some college* (7 mothers, 6 fathers). Nearly all living parents were employed in a variety of industries such as education, retail, healthcare, construction and related trades, and small business. Annual household incomes ranged from less than US\$25k (1 family), US\$25–50k (5 families), US\$50–75k (2 families), US\$75–100k (4 families), and US\$100–150k (1 family) (income information for 1 family was not provided). Table 1 details demographic information about youth and families (all names are pseudonyms).

During recruitment, we advertised the study via an email sent only to first-generation junior- and senior-year students identified with institutional permission through an on-campus student resource center. Email recipients included only students with home address zip codes that matched either rural or small-town US Housing Assistance Council (HAC) census tracts (see description below). Interested participants took part in a study overview and orientation online meeting, where eligibility was also confirmed. Interviews were scheduled if participants remained interested. Because retention was critical to the study's success, incentives were provided in the form of a \$100 gift card for each interview for a

total of \$400 per participant, an IRB-approved amount deemed commensurate with the total time and multiple-interview commitment asked of all participants (approx. 8–9 h). Given the range of family household incomes in the final sample, this incentive amount did not appear to bias recruitment toward economically disadvantaged participants or families. All participants completed all interviews.

Table 1. Participants and Select Demographic Information.

Name	Gender	Year	Age	Mother's Level of Schooling	Mother's Occupation	Father's Level of Schooling	Father's Occupation	Household Income *
Hailey	F	Sr.	20	Some college	Education, labor	Some college	Carpenter	25–50 k
Martin	M	Jr.	20	Some college	Labor, retail	Some college	Butcher, caterer	25–50 k
Antonio	M	Sr.	21	Technical school	Healthcare	High school	Construction	50–75 k
Greg	M	Sr.	20	Some college	Nurse	Some college	Unknown	25–50 k
Amber	F	Jr.	20	Some college	Sales	High school	Construction	25–50 k
Alice	F	Jr.	19	Some college	Teacher	Some college	Adv. Manufacturer	100 k
Marcy	F	Sr.	20	High school	Retail	High school	Business owner	75–100 k
Julia	F	Sr.	21	Some college	Healthcare admin.	Technical school	Mechanic	75–100 k
Kelly	F	Sr.	19	Some college	Homesteader	High school	HVAC	25–50 k
Amanda	F	Jr.	20	High school	Healthcare admin.	High school	Postal worker	Unknown
Linda	F	Jr.	23	High school	Deceased	Middle school	Disabled veteran	<25 k
Jessica	F	Jr.	20	High school	Travel agent	High school	Sales	50–75 k
Shannon	F	Sr.	20	High school	Deceased	Some college	Accountant	100–150 k
Hunter	M	Sr.	21	Technical school	Educator	Some college	Labor	75–100 k

* Reported by youth participants.

Defining First-Generation College Students and Rural

This study defined “first-generation” according to TRIO, a US federally funded student service program supporting low income, first-generation, and disabled students in graduating college. In their definition, the student: (a) does not have a natural or adoptive parent that received a baccalaureate degree; (b) prior to age 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent who did not receive a baccalaureate degree; or (c) prior to age 18, did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or adoptive parent.

Rural America is vast, encompassing up to 97% of the landmass of the United States (United States Census, 2017). Because rural definitions vary, we used the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) classification of “rural” and “small town” tracts across one New England state. The HAC’s definition of rural uses a six-tiered classification system that organizes areas or “tracts” based on several different measures including population density, housing density, and commuting distance (United States Housing Assistance Council, 2011). To identify eligible participants, we identified state zip codes that were contained within the “rural” and “small town” HAC census tracks and contacted potential participants whose home-residence zip code was a match.

2.2. Study Design and Interviews

Given the multiple “figured worlds” rural youth traverse as they relocate geographically and institutionally (Holland et al., 1998), a multi-sited design logic was used to examine contrasts and synergies among settings (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014). Multi-sited research is particularly appropriate for phenomena that are difficult to “see” observationally in single settings, as is the case with identity negotiation. Conducting interviews both at participants’ homes and on campus permitted a design epistemology that placed “push/pull” experiences in relief.

Based in the study's conceptual frame, we adopted a narrative approach to interviews and analysis (Josselson & Hammack, 2021; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Four in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted by the second author with each participant over approximately six months, designed to elicit data on participants' experiences across different places and among different people with varying histories, connections, and experiences. Prior to the interviews, an online survey collected basic demographic information from participants. Interviews #1 and #2 were conducted in and focused on participants' home community, family, and school experiences. Questions from Interview #1 were, for example: "What kinds of things do you most value about this place or being here?" and "Can you remember a recent time when you were talking about this community to someone at college? What was the conversation like?" Interview #2 involved both the student and one or more family members invited by the participant, given the centrality of intergenerational narratives to individual identity and acknowledging the importance of the stories, experiences, and values passed down through families (Merrill & Fivush, 2016). Questions from Interview #2 were, for example: "Can you tell me the story of how [student] decided what to do after high school? Are there any moments that stand out about how you and [student] worked through the decision?" and "How do people from this area think about what the future holds for youth from here generally? Is there excitement? Concern? Both?"

Interviews #3 and #4 were held on campus and inquired about participants' lives at college, reflections on their decisions to and experiences while attending, and their ideas about the future. Questions from Interview #3 were, for example: "There are many differences between life at home and life when you're at school. Are there specific times or experiences when these differences are most apparent or obvious?" Sample questions from Interview #4 were, for example: "How would you describe the 'energies' in play in your life right now? By energies I mean, are there things *propelling* you forward? Are there things *pulling* you in one direction or another? Is there *friction* among different interests or values of yours? Do you feel things *opening up* or *closing in* at all, and why?" Interview #4 also encouraged reflection on all prior interviews. Full interview protocols for Interviews #1–#4 are included as Supplementary Materials.

2.3. Analysis

A strength of narrative approaches to data analysis in this study is their *methodological integrity* or the logical consistency among theory/conceptual frameworks, research questions, data collection procedures, and analytic approaches (see Levitt et al., 2017, 2021). As an analytic tool, master narratives allow researchers to make sense of individual experiences because they "function as cultural standards against which community members feel compelled to position their personal experience" (Thorne & McLean, 2003, p. 171). As such, a master narrative framework is useful for examining the relationship between culturally normative models of the life course and individual life stories that both support and provide justification for life choices.

We followed both the thematic guidance and criteria for identifying master narratives suggested by McLean and Syed (2015) as well as guidance on person-centered narrative analysis as suggested by Josselson and Hammack (2021; see also Hammack & Josselson, 2025) where considerable analytic process detail is elaborated. Josselson and Hammack (2021) identify five distinct "readings" of the interview text in a process that builds from person-centered to cross-case analysis, all supported with memoing by the researcher: Reading 1 focuses on gleaning "initial thematic content and gestalt"; Reading 2 focuses on "voices and dialogue" often returning to audio recordings; Reading 3 focuses on narrative "patterns and unity" (which is when this study's patterns of alignment with CFA began to

codify); Reading 4 returns to “engagement with theory,” informed by deep familiarity with the interviews, and; Reading 5 focuses on “cross-case analyses.”

Analysis primarily developed between the first two authors, with high-level check-ins among the entire team. Analysis was first grounded in the collaborative development of analytic memos which aimed to capture the “biographical gist” of each participants’ perspectives across each of their four interviews. Next (see “Reading 2” above), analysis identified engagement with master narratives as identity resources for individual participants and explored the various ways they were adopted, resisted, or hybridized by RFGC students. Kerrick and Henry (2017) suggest several ways to identify engagement with master narratives. For example, when individuals engage in a “terse telling” of an experience (e.g., sharing few details, sometimes substituted with terms such as “oh, you know”), this can indicate engagement with a master narrative about which understanding and shared agreement is presumed. These memos, guided by Josselson and Hammack’s (2021) process of successive “readings,” permitted fidelity to individual cases as analysis proceeded into examination of inductively derived, cross-case alignment themes (i.e., faithful, hybrid, and utilitarian alignment).

Rather than a variable-based calculation of inter-rater reliability, we opted for frequent team discussions centered on the reflexive insights being developed in the memos and a consensus goal for narrative analysis. Initial disagreements about analytic decisions were resolved through refining definitions of alignment patterns (these are included with the findings).

3. Results

Main finding #1 is related to the *content* of master narratives as present in participant reports, specifically a CFA master narrative—i.e., what constitutes the master narrative of *College for All*. Main finding #2 details participants’ views and experienced *processes* of engagement with this master narrative—i.e., how and where they encountered it and how they negotiated with it in their own identity processes. Main finding #3 leverages the study’s in-depth idiographic approach to understand master narrative engagement in a larger biographical arc and related to broader psychological experiences.

3.1. Main Finding #1: Evidence of a CFA Master Narrative Among RFGC Students

The way that nearly all participants talked about the decision to attend college indicated engagement with a normative cultural expectation—a master narrative—about what they ought to be doing at this stage in their lives. In fact, 13 of 14 participants explained the decision to attend college in a way that suggests they are engaged with a CFA master narrative.

Yeah, I’m doing what I’m supposed to, I’m at college. I’m doing the college thing. What’s expected of a 20-year-old is to be at college... outside of that, I don’t think there’s really much expectation between the time that you’re like 18 and 21. I don’t think there’s much expectation, anything other than the fact that you go to college. Whenever I say I don’t want to be in college, to anybody outside of like, my family, my friends, like it’s almost looked down upon. (Amber, junior)

McLean and Syed (2015) argue that master narratives have five characteristics: utility, ubiquity, compulsory, invisibility, and rigidity. Amber’s quote indicates at least three of these: Engagement with master narratives is *compulsory*; their normative quality compels you to do something you’re “expected” to do. Her quote is also connected to the *utility* of master narratives; they help people make the “right” decisions that are culturally endorsed at particular times in the life course. Amber reports that when she says she doesn’t want to be in college, that idea is “looked down upon.” This quote is also related to the

rigidity of master narratives in which alternatives, even when personally desirable, are viewed negatively.

As mentioned above, master narratives can also be identified by the way people narrate their experiences. For example, when someone's views, decisions, and life course trajectories are aligned with a master narrative, it is common to offer little rationale or detail (Kerrick & Henry, 2017). This "terse telling" may indicate they are engaged with the more tacit, "common sense" features—ubiquity, invisibility—of a master narrative. For example, Annie, a junior, stated: "I graduated from high school; I went to college. I'm just following like, that line." Similarly, Amanda, also a junior, stated: "I always like had A's and stuff. So, it just made sense for me to go to college."

Many participants and their family members did not pinpoint exactly where the idea of going to college came from but spoke about how they implicitly knew that would be part of their plan. "Go to college" was described as a message that doesn't come from any specific person or place—it's just "in the air." These suggestions of invisibility and ubiquity also support the claim that CFA may be a dominant master narrative (McLean & Syed, 2015). Consider the following conversation between Hailey and her mother,

Hailey: I don't think we really even talked about it. I'm not really sure what led me personally to just kind of assume that I was going to college. I don't remember any conversations or anything.

Mom: I always assumed you were going to college; there was never any discussion about you not going to get a bachelor's degree.

Hailey: Which I just never even- I don't know if I just assumed that that was the option- that was the only option or anything. I just think that that's just kind of the path that happened for me.

Mom: I just assumed that I knew that- that was the right thing for her to get a bachelor's degree to be financially independent, which is a big thing for me, for all of my family, most of my family have always been, you know, the wives would, you know, didn't- didn't go to college didn't have high paying jobs, always relied on their husbands for financial support. And I wanted to make sure that that didn't happen to her, that she was financially independent her entire life.

Hailey and her mother are explicitly reflective about how automatic the process was, using the word "assume" several times and talking about how the decision to go to college just "happened." There may never have been a conversation about it, but everyone seemed to get the message. Also present in this conversation is the gendered and intergenerational aspect of a mother wanting her daughter to be financially independent. This shows how master narratives are socially and culturally distributed—both Hailey and her mother take part in CFA, though occupying different positions. If master narratives are about articulating norms around a "good life" then CFA may also entail prescriptions for what it means to be a "good parent," just as it does for what it means to be a "good, ambitious young person" (see also Seaman et al., 2023).

3.2. Main Finding #2: Differing Types of Engagement with a CFA Master Narrative

In this study, we did not assume that simply attending college (which all participants did) was evidence that RFGC students experienced the same kinds of personal alignment with the normative expectations of a CFA master narrative. Alignment here refers to consistency between how individuals story the lived past, present, and future of their own lives (i.e., personal narratives) and the narrative and normatively endorsed cultural archetypes of, in this case, postsecondary and developmental success or achievement. We

found evidence of three types of alignment patterns across RFGC students' reports: *faithful*, *hybrid*, and *utilitarian alignment*.

3.2.1. Faithful Alignment

For many individuals in this study, their strongest reasons for going to college reflected a faithful alignment with a CFA master narrative. *Faithful alignment* is aligning a personal narrative with a master narrative primarily because of faith in the "good life" that the master narrative promises. "Faithful" in this study is used in a sense similar to an "article of faith" or a sense of trust in something bigger, unknowable, and not questioned. In this study, faith is used to describe a strong belief in the promise and rewards of the CFA pathway or a belief that and the rewards that college is "foundational" and the "bare minimum" needed to be successful in life.

Marcy. Marcy *faithfully* aligned with a CFA master narrative and its implied pathway, informed by her and her older sister's school experiences. Marcy remembered:

In fifth grade, a man came into my class, and he was like, "Hey, guys, college is a thing if you want to start thinking about it," and I was like- fifth grade me was like, "Okay, I'll go to college." ... I'm like, that's a little soon. But he was like, "do things for college." I was like "okay, whatever you say."

Marcy reported never considering another option after that. She went to college because she believed it would work out because her school presented and encouraged it. In fact, they didn't present her with any other options at all, "My guidance counselor told me to go to [university name] and that was the only option she gave me."

Marcy's socialization into CFA started early, at least fifth grade. Marcy's comment "that's a little soon" followed by "whatever you say" indicates the kind of gap between personal and master narratives that *faith* intervenes to fill (a "utility" quality common to master narratives) as well as suggesting a potential risk of foreclosing early exploration of a range of life course options. Although master narrative cultural expectations are often messaged tacitly (a common "invisibility" quality), in Marcy's case this messaging was direct, explicit, and authoritative.

Hunter and Shannon. Hunter and Shannon represent two similar variations on the faithful alignment pattern. Hunter did not report concern with what he would major in nor specific goals for after college. He described the postsecondary decision-making process as being easy and without conflict or question. Hunter wanted to "prove" he could be successful despite his background as the child of teenage parents, and he saw college as a way to accomplish that. Hunter had a generalized vision of the kind of life he wanted and viewed college as the first step toward that good life. He made the decision to attend college with faith that this decision would lead to positive long-term career and financial outcomes.

I think, just like coming from I don't want to say like, low income cuz we weren't low income necessarily, but just like yeah, like, my family had to, like, be cautious about certain things, like, you know, like I mentioned, like, financials or just like maybe like not being college educated. ... because my parents, you know, were teenage parents and whatnot. Like, I can still be really successful, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could be, because statistics say otherwise.

Shannon also went to college with no specific major or career in mind, but because she saw college as a pathway to positive outcomes. She talked about how she always liked school and always knew that college was her goal, even as far back as elementary school. She described college planning as a "profession" with admission and attendance as the goal. "Even in like high school, I did, like, all the extra activities and like, worked extra hard, like, honor society, because college was the goal." Like Hunter, Shannon went to

college with faith in an unspecified but positive reward, which made the college decision easy for both her and her family, not requiring much discussion or debate.

Hunter, Marcy, and Shannon all went to college with no specific major or career in mind, but with a sense of faith in the unspecified but positive reward that college promises. For these and other participants, college itself was often the goal. Their interviews reflected strong trust in the idea that college, despite the expense and the difficulty, is a necessary step to achieve success in life. This internalized message was reinforced by family, school, and community, a “rational optimism” of college (Ovink, 2017) revealing the power of master narratives over people’s lives.

3.2.2. Hybrid Alignment

We also identified *hybrid alignment* among some study participants, defined as constructing a narrative which includes aspects of personal, alternative, and master narratives in a way that coordinates differing individual goals, interests, and circumstances. This definition is similar to syncretism (Gutiérrez, 2014) or “the combination of different forms of belief or practice” (p. 49). Hybrid narratives cross or even exploit boundaries and tensions among categories, blending to create unique commitments or postsecondary pathways.

Alice. Alice knew that she wanted to go to college for as long as she could remember. She was extremely driven and started taking courses toward an associate’s degree before enrolling in the 4-year university because she wanted to get a head start on requirements. She has a younger brother who she is close to and wanted to be a role model for, regularly returning home from college to attend his sporting events. Staying close to home was a major factor in Alice’s postsecondary decision, which simplified the choice to attend a nearby in-state college. In both near- and long-term timescales, Alice was committed to family and her community which amounted to commitment to place in both geographic- and identity-salient ways.

Many people in her community get married and start families young. She spoke about navigating these potentially competing narrative tensions.

You have the like- you’re going to college, and you’re getting out of [town]. And now it’s like, not to like talk about like, getting married. But now it’s like, you’re getting married, and you’re like staying in [town]. And there’s like, a big pressure, [town]’s, like, a little bit- it’s, like, less traditional than its surroundings. But it’s definitely, I get like, settle down, and have kids and like, I’m fine with that. I’m, like, happy with that. But there’s a very strong pressure to and I’ve seen friends like leave, because they didn’t like that pressure of, find the husband, settle down, have babies. They aren’t as into that. . . they kind of fled the complex.

Although others have “fled the complex” and rejected the pressure to “settle down,” Alice still wanted to remain part of her community and, in many ways, she aligned with cultural norms in her community. She is engaged to be married and building a home with her fiancé. However, she hybridized these competing interests and personal commitments with a CFA master narrative so that to her, they were not competing—it’s *one road*. Alice is both staying and leaving, seemingly transcending an identity dilemma that for others requires a “this or that” choice.

Hybridizing seems to require specific kinds of psychological work. In some ways, going to college makes Alice an outsider in her community. She talks about being teased lightheartedly by her peers but also plays into the joke herself, lightening it further.

I got like one text from one of my friends Amanda. She got married and she said, like, “how’s the nerd stuff going at college?” And I was like, and I like sent her like a Shakespeare quote. And she just said like, a confused like, but like it was all in jest. . . I was always like, but like the little weird, nerdy one. And so they’re always like, “how are you doing?

Like how's Shakespeare?" Like that's the joke because I'm the English major... There's this [other] running joke that when you leave [the high school Alice attended], you don't actually leave because you're going to come back and teach... I chose to be an English teaching major because I want to teach in [town].

The cultural meaning of teasing and joking varies considerably across and within communities. Alice's peers are likely quite aware that being college educated is an accomplishment in education as well as a marker of class status—the tease or rib may function as an instructional reminder of the limits of that status (for a related instructional use of teasing in parenting, see [Silva & Rogoff, 2020](#)). Alice seemed to navigate this nuance skillfully and without issue. Alice's reporting of the joke in the interview was self-deprecating, likely in parallel with how she takes part in the joking among friends. By positioning herself as part of the joke rather than the object of it, she also deepens her affiliation with the group doing the joking.

This social, cultural, and identity position dexterity shows how Alice put different parts of different narratives to her own use to suit her personal goals. In a sense broader than the peer joking, Alice as a case shows how binary representations of life choices in the form of rigid master narratives may be both ontologically and descriptively limiting. Said differently, Alice as a case shows that the binary “body problem” of residential college attendance for many rural youth may be far simpler and far more brittle than the psychological question of who one becomes as a function of college attendance.

Linda: Embedded in the CFA narrative is a normative way to “do college”: attending immediately after high school, graduating “on time” in four years, living on campus, etc. However, Linda took an alternate route, going to community college first due to finances, serious individual and family health issues, and because she did not get accepted into the university on her first or second application attempt: “I didn't get into [university] on the first try. And or the second one, for that matter. It took three tries to get there. So I chose a community college that I could afford.” Linda continues,

So I had known from... like a really young age that I wanted to go to college. And I didn't know how to do it. Nobody in my immediate family had ever really gone... I watched my cousin go through college and become, I don't want to say successful, but more, more better off than we were. And I always thought that college was going to guarantee me kind of financial security, essentially.

Linda experienced this tension differently than Alice, who felt a similar pull toward an alternative pathway to college that values marriage and family over education but whose personal narrative aligned with alternative narratives as well as CFA. Linda struggled for access to college while feeling pushed by her family toward a life that she did not want.

So like, pretty much every, like my siblings, and my parents were already married by now. So there's like a really big emphasis on, you know, why aren't you married? Why haven't you started a family yet? Why is your education so important?

Evidence from Alice and Linda shows different ways that narrative hybridity can be developed. In cases like Alice's, *hybrid* alignment entails synergistic mixing of potentially competing narratives—a win-win. By contrast, Linda did not see a clear pathway in front of her and the dominant CFA narrative was difficult to access. Hers is a story of hybridizing to make the best of compounding negative life circumstances that worked against her desire to go to college. Linda's case shows that hybridity is not only relevant as a characterization of alignment when things are going well but also a response to imposed demands.

3.2.3. Utilitarian Alignment

Last, we identified *utilitarian alignment* patterns among some participants, aligning personal goals, plans, and stories with a master narrative for a specifically articulated and relatively concrete purpose. This could be a career goal but does not need to be limited to a job. If those who align with a CFA narrative *faithfully* attend college with a general goal in mind, those who align with a *utilitarian* purpose go to college with a very specific goal in mind. Utilitarian alignment builds from the idea that college is a tool or is useful for a specific purpose. For some, college could be a way to leave home and become more independent. For others, college could be a means to a specific career or a way to continue playing a sport at a higher level. Utilitarian aligners in this study often knew what they wanted to study before they began college. Many chose their college for well-articulated reasons which largely corresponded to academics—a major, certain classes, or a college's industry reputation.

Greg. Greg explained that he never felt pressure to go to college because people in his family were largely successful without it. He reported detail about an uncle who was a truck driver, others who entered the military or did well working in the trades. His mother is a nurse. In part because of this family background, the CFA master narrative did not exert the same kind of pressure on him as it did many others.

I thought about [college] as an abstract concept, but not really, as a “Oh, hey, here’s a plan that I could go and do.” And that’s not saying like, I thought I couldn’t go to college, it was just something I really hadn’t put thought in.

In fact, college was one of the only options that he *didn’t* consider after high school because he didn’t see people in his family follow that pathway. College wasn’t “shoved down his throat” according to his mother. Greg agrees, “I never saw like the college stuff. So I think that that was just kind of the only option that I wasn’t normally exposed to.”

In high school, several teachers recognized that Greg had a strong aptitude for science, physics in particular. They curated this interest and skill and encouraged him that higher education was something he should consider. He loved physics and wanted to pursue this as his career. He chose to attend university after considerable deliberation and research into physics as an area of academic study and career trajectory that required a college degree: *utilitarian alignment* (cf. “rational optimism” in [Ovink, 2017](#)), perhaps how many people imagine that young people decide to attend college attendance whether or not this alignment pattern is common.

Julia. Julia, another utilitarian aligner, had a long-term goal which college was a means to attaining. She reported no difficult conversations, tensions, or conflicts about the decision to go to college or where to go, “I mean, luckily for me, I figured out [as a] junior in high school that I wanted to do nursing.” For Julia, the decision to go to college was not made primarily because of a faith in a general outcome but with one specific goal in mind: becoming a nurse. Her mother worked in healthcare, so it was a familiar professional field and occupation. Her father worked in advanced auto mechanics. Both parents had 2-year degrees and successful careers. Like Greg, Julia did not believe college was foundational for success in life especially because of the experiences of her family and what she had been exposed to. She said, “It’s cool that you can still see you don’t necessarily need a four or five- or six-year degree to be successful.”

3.3. Main Finding #3: Ambivalence and Autonomy: The College Experience and Future Outlook of Faithful, Hybrid and Utilitarian Aligners

Main finding #3 is presented in relation to participants’ reports about their futures *after* college. Overall, regarding their lives after college, students with *hybrid* or *utilitarian* alignment patterns reported feeling optimistic and expressed a sense of autonomy and

agency while *faithful* aligners reported feeling ambivalent or even anxious. Table 2 is a summary.

Table 2. Finding #3: Ambivalence and Autonomy.

Ambivalent and Anxious			Autonomous and Agentic		
Name	Alignment Type	Key Quote About the Future	Name	Alignment Type	Key Quote About the Future
Hailey	Faithful	"I don't want to say like impending doom. Almost like, like, it's happening."	Alice	Hybrid	"I think 30-year-old me is going to be completely satisfied with the educational track that I went on."
Marcy	Faithful	"I feel like I'm on a train that's just going to end in about five months, and I'm gonna fall into an ocean and then I don't know what to do."	Linda	Hybrid	"It's finally kind of kicking in that I'm going to reach the goal that I've worked so hard for, which makes me super excited."
Shannon	Faithful	"I guess I was kind of expecting there to be like, all these opportunities, and then they're just like, wasn't. And that was kind of terrifying."	Greg	Utilitarian	"I guess, I guess a bit of like, nervous energy... I am hopeful for it"
Hunter	Faithful	"At the end of the day I just want what's best for me. And it's easier said than done... what is best for me. Right? But, you know, I wouldn't be able to, like, live with myself, in a way if I pass up on this opportunity."	Julia	Utilitarian	"I'm so like, excited for graduation... I feel prepared to be done with school and just move on... I've always kind of been, like, satisfied with my decision to do nursing school. So, that's been good for me."

Of course, many college students are unsure of what they will do after college and this uncertainty can lead to feelings of anxiety as they approach graduation. Yet, when it came to the next step after college, *faithful aligners* reported a stressful sense of lacking control over their lives. Marcy, who aligned *faithfully* with CFA, had a positive college experience. Her sister went to the same university before her, so Marcy had considerable insight on what to expect—about college-going generally and about this specific university—relative to many other first-gen students. Marcy loved college, made friends easily, and did well academically, but as the end of college approached, she reported beginning to panic and feeling unprepared for this next phase.

I think I just, I feel like I needed college to do what I want to do. Like, I don't know, I always knew I was gonna go to college just like, I'm like, I don't know, cuz I'm stressing about what I want to do in the future. So you're just catching me at- a very confused time... I feel like I'm on a train that's just going to end in about five months, and I'm gonna fall into an ocean and then I don't know what to do.

Marcy's experience shows how the CFA master narrative is not a roadmap, nor a complete set of instructions: college is the end of the CFA story. Marcy had aligned with expectations and had a positive experience, suggesting that her postsecondary story was a resource for identity and wellbeing. However, as she approached the end of college she was not only terrified about finding a job but she also felt that her story had no next chapter to align with, leaving her feeling like she's about to "fall into an ocean." Again, from Marcy:

I feel like you have to do a lot for yourself if that makes sense. So like if you want to do something, you have to go out and find it and then do it. It's not just kind of like "hey, you should do this" and then you do it, so I feel like that's been harder is like finding the opportunities and the things to do, you have to like go out and like look for it, as opposed to it just being like, "here you go."

College was somewhat tacitly placed in front of Marcy as the preferred option by institutions and family members that she trusts, dulling the perceived need to learn to weigh and make life course decisions along the way. It could be that *faithful alignment*, at least for some, eventually leads to a sense of being on a road to nowhere as the normative prescriptions of CFA run out. This may lead to a sense of false agency "that can occur when questioning one's life path is not required because it aligns with the master narrative" (see McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 337). Becoming aware of what might be characterized as an impoverished pattern of agency may create a crisis of identity that is deeper than being in the wrong major or unable to find a job.

Similar to Marcy, Shannon reported feeling a sense of panic and anxiety about her future and questioning whether college was "worth it."

I just feel unsettled because I'm so unsure of where I go after this. And I don't like that like uncertainty. Because my whole life has been like, "Okay, like, you go to high school next, and then you're gonna go to college and you're gonna get a degree" and then I'm like, "Okay, well," then they say you get a job, but I'm not seeing the whole job fairy.

Both Marcy and Shannon reported expecting there to be opportunities after college in the same way that success in high school led concretely to opportunities for and in college. In this sense, aligning with CFA, a narrative with a promise that it cannot keep, may leave young people feeling lost or disoriented. Unquestioningly aligning with a master narrative—and, to be sure, the "common sense" quality of master narratives all but discourages scrutiny (see Geertz, 1975)—may have left them with a false sense of control which is now becoming apparent as they face the next decision point. This is an important pattern related to the lived experience of alignment with CFA and with master narratives generally that merits considerable further research.

Even having a job and a plan for after graduation does not alleviate uncertainty about life after college. For example, Hunter already had a job offer in New York City in the fall of his senior year, more than six months before graduation. But he did not report feeling excited about his future; he seemed ambivalent. He indicated a picture of the kind of life he wants and a job in NYC as one pathway that aligns with that picture: a professional job and a stable financial life. Yet, Hunter spoke about "doing his time" in the city, an unmistakable carceral metaphor. Hunter had a desirable job in his field, but he was not optimistic that he would be there for long and was already thinking about coming home when he put a possible limit on his time in the city.

I guess I don't know, if like New York's a 12-month gig, six months, long term. You know, I think it's really up to me. But I guess I'm kind of worried about that, being away... But yeah, the thing- at the end of the day I just want what's best for me. And it's easier said than done, you know, like, I like- _what is best for me, right? But um, you know, I thought, like, I wouldn't be able to, like, live with myself, in a way if I pass up on this opportunity.

Hunter's decisions are driven by an aspirational and relatively abstract vision of a life and identity he wants, which he believes may require discomfort, concessions, and at least short-term migration away from his community. His pending move to New York and job in finance operationalizes this vision in ways that also bring these compromises and concessions into clearer view. Parts of this pattern may be unavoidable: (a) the

correspondence between distal ideations and proximal options often involves a degree of uncertainty (is *this* the path?) and (b) there may often involve a degree of anxiety at the transition point between major stages of life. It could be that Hunter, and perhaps others, was doubling down on the CFA ideology by construing feelings of ambivalence as natural features of a path that is trusted to lead to desirable outcomes.

Nonetheless, our read of these data—both Hunter’s case and other RFGC students whose reports were patterned in ways reflecting *faithful* alignment with CFA—suggest a need for further scrutiny into the affordances and constraints of CFA as a cultural story. What Hunter most directly reports wanting is “what’s best for me” and to fulfill a kind of general characterological ethic of someone who doesn’t pass up opportunities. The normative elements of the CFA story support these desires, and yet *faithful* alignment with CFA may also occlude pathways with equally compelling normative elements that involve fewer or less objectionable concessions. Without clear *narrative* alternatives, alternative occupational and life course pathways are difficult to see.

In contrast to the anxieties felt by *faithful* aligners, defining features of hybrid alignment related to making choices and positioning moves *agentially*. Alice’s demeanor was strikingly different from Marcy, Shannon, and Hunter. In constructing a hybrid narrative, Alice has been able to weave together personal, alternative, and master narratives into a life path in which she feels empowered and optimistic where others reported ambivalence, uncertainty, and anxiety.

Most young people in Alice’s home community either stay home and start families young, or “flee the complex” because of cultural pressures. She is managing to do both, to align with two competing narratives, building a home in the community with her fiancé who is also from the same town and also going to college and planning a career.

With a lot of my high school friends, we are all really close knit. . . . A lot of them have had kids too. So like, they just they got married and then they had kids which is, good for them. And then um, and so like they’re like at like, completely different stages of life. And then I’m actually the only one out of my class who went to a secular college. That’s just what like everyone at home calls it because most of the kids who went to the Christian school are supposed to go to Christian colleges.

For Alice, there are two pathways available but there doesn’t need to be a “winner,” as she has structured her life to allow for engagement in both narratives in a non-zero-sum manner. This hybrid pathway she’s created has led her to feel a sense of satisfaction with her choices and optimism about her future.

I feel like it’s completely coming together like for the first time in my life, I’m like, this is the picture and I’m really excited because I’ve never like felt anything like that but it’s also like too good to be true feeling so I’m trying to not like be wicked optimistic about it.

We continue exploration of the possible affordances of both *hybrid* and *utilitarian* alignment patterns in the discussion, aiming to elevate the theoretical importance of these alignment patterns in ways that invite further research.

4. Discussion

This study examined the multi-sited and narratively organized experiences of engagement with master narratives among rural, first-generation college (RFGC) students. First, findings indicated the strong, active presence of *College for All* (CFA) as a master narrative felt both by individuals and their families. The roots of this message varied, coming from school, community, and family (i.e., ubiquity) and its other characteristics such as utility, invisibility, and rigidity were replete across the interviews (McLean & Syed, 2015). This finding corroborates and extends Seaman et al. (2023) which found CFA messaging to

be predominant in the postsecondary policy and youth-serving ecosystem of the same geographic region.

While finding #1 related to the *content* of master narratives, identifying a strong CFA narrative through nearly all participants discussions about what to do after high school, findings #2 and #3 reveal information about the *process* by which people relate to master narratives. Together, content and process are foundational aspects of the master narrative framework proposed by Syed and McLean (2023). Combining elements of both master narrative content and process, we identified three different modes of engagement with the CFA master narrative or three types of alignment: *faithful*, *hybrid*, and *utilitarian*.

The first mode of engagement, *faithful* alignment, entailed aligning a personal with a master narrative because of a generalized faith in the “good life” and promised outcomes. Those who aligned with a sense of faith in the promise of college believed that going to college will result in a positive future; they have high aspirations even if the details of this pathway were unclear or unspecified, especially after graduation. Faith in the promise of college was reported to have come from several different sources, such as experiences at school, family members, or from more tacit messaging that, for some, just seemed to be “in the air.”

Both *hybrid* and *utilitarian* alignment were less common in this study, but no less theoretically important (and the study’s relatively small sample merits caution in generalizing based on sample frequencies). Hybrid alignment entailed constructing a unique postsecondary pathway including aspects of personal, alternative, and master narratives in a way that coordinates differing goals, interests, and circumstances. With utilitarian alignment, or aligning a personal and master narrative toward a clearly defined career goal, participants reported looking past college toward a specific longer-term goal, positioning a college degree as a means of obtaining that very specific end. For one student, the goal was to be a quantum physics researcher; for another the goal was to become a nurse. College is a required step to achieve both outcomes. Both hybrid and utilitarian alignment patterns are to some extent departures from the full CFA alignment visible among those participants whose faith in CFA was reflected in an “all in” commitment of their personal narratives to the master narrative promise. The findings of this study suggest that these departures may open space for an empowering sense of agency and self-determination, even if they are accompanied by a degree of normative uncertainty.

We speculate that hybrid and utilitarian approaches to crafting identity through postsecondary pathways that include college-going may be especially supportive of the needs, interests, and commitments of youth from rural communities. These approaches to alignment appear to require less departure from rural community relational and value commitments that can serve as cultural strengths as well as support the development of aspirational patterns that do not amount to permanent human capital resource extraction from rural communities and economies (cf. M. J. Corbett, 2020). However, even Alice’s hybrid alignment raises questions about options available to rural youth: Alice did not hybridize across multiple *postsecondary educational* or *potential career options* but rather hybridized to balance family and a single education/work pathway. We remain curious about hybridity in the consideration of multiple viable and desirable career trajectories, and the lack of reports from RFGC students regarding multiple educational/career pathways options suggests a problematically constrained set of options for rural youth that potentially short-circuit important identity exploration processes.

Last, we found evidence to support an association between different types of alignment with CFA and differing indicators of psychological wellbeing. The RFGC students who aligned with CFA with hybrid or utilitarian purposes seemed to have a more positive and optimistic view of the path they were on and their futures after college. The reports

of these individuals suggest more perceived agency in decision making and more sense of control over both their current experiences and future plans relative to participants whose pathways can be characterized by less active types of faithful alignment. The narrative reports of hybrid and utilitarian aligners also suggested greater narrative identity coherence, which prior research has found to be associated with psychological wellbeing, purpose, and meaning (see Waters & Fivush, 2015). Conversely, those who align with CFA with a faithful belief in a promised career, financial, and/or identity outcome seem to experience college and imagine their futures with a sense of ambivalence and anxiety. This is a possible association needing more research, as the causes and correlates of both ambivalence and anxiety are manifold. Paradoxically, the decision to attend college for those aligning faithfully with CFA may have been made with less conflict or competing choices or options, but this may have removed a sense of control and agency. Possibly as a result, many students who align with a sense of faith in the promise of CFA expressed less excitement about the future.

A sense of ambivalence—or worse, anxiety—around aligning with master narratives may be especially relevant in contexts or communities that are experiencing rapid change, as is the case in many rural areas, where the normative content of a master narrative such as CFA may have roots in the values and practices of distant communities. In these moments of transformation, individuals may have more than one master narrative to navigate.

Choosing between two options often demands concession and compromise. Several participants who aligned with CFA *faithfully* seemed to believe that their own personal interests, preferences, and goals should take a backseat to the pursuit of college and its promised outcomes. Those who align with CFA with a utilitarian sense and those who hybridize master, alternative, and personal narratives may appear happier and more optimistic but still may be making concessions. For example, Alice used the expression, “stuck... but” several times throughout her interviews to talk about her life. Alice was “stuck” in her hometown but with an education she is proud of and a job she’s excited about. She was becoming the person she wants to be while maintaining community and family commitments. For others, “stuck, but...” may be a useful way to describe a sense of ambivalence or concession mixed with hope that it will work out eventually and faith that they have done the right thing. Hunter was “stuck” going to New York City where he will “do his time,” but this was in service of his personal goals of career and financial success. This balancing is understudied in the literature. There may be more agency and self-determination required in hybridizing personal and master narratives, leading to a sense of optimism and self-determination about one’s future even if not without compromise.

Having found widespread alignment with CFA among a group of college-enrolled juniors and seniors was, in part, expected—these individuals, after all, decided to go to college. For many RFGC students, aligning with CFA was an easy, even tacit choice because its pre- and postsecondary path is both normatively endorsed and institutionalized in schools. However, the prevalence of alignment in this study’s findings may also suggest that participants did not have access to adequate and positive alternative options. Both RFGC students and their families reported alternatives limited to a binary framework—college or work—and, for some, entry into the workforce may be messaged as a “failure to launch,” echoing deficit thinking around rural youth aspiration. Missing from participant reports were indications of cultural and narrative support in approaching the question, “What does a ‘good life’ look like that does not include college, at least immediately after high school?”

4.1. Extending Master Narrative Theory

The psychological process of aligning with a master narrative is poorly understood in scientific literatures. McLean and Syed (2015) observed that “what is left unexamined is the potential psychological toll of being pressed to construct a personal narrative that aligns with the master narrative” (p. 336). Those aligning with CFA because of faith in the rewards that college promises may feel they’re doing the right thing, “but their narrative path has been relatively passive,” which “suggests a sense of false agency” (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 337). For the RFGC students in this study and perhaps rural youth more generally, alignment was not as simple as doing what one should do but seemed to involve the pressure of doing what one must do—a consideration that challenges the presumption of passivity. It could be that RFGC students feel “pressed to align” because of limited alternative options to combat patterns of economic decline (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). The negotiations and constrained ideation that these demands place on RFGC students are crucial to understand. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that the continued reliance on binary frames for understanding rural youth development prevents us from seeing variability in psychosocial experiences and biographies of rural youth. The concept of hybridizing personal, master, and alternative narratives is almost absent in the literature, is a key contribution of this study, and is a promising area for future research.

This study’s findings also underscore the importance of understanding master narratives as *developmental* in the lives of youth and families, moderating identity formation pathways both in terms of timing and context (see Seaman et al., 2017). Although it is well established that adolescence and emerging adulthood are developmental periods that condense young people’s focus on identity, research on master narratives like CFA adds important specificity and ecological sensibility to the developmentally specific demands that youth are compelled to engage with at some ages and less so at others. Much of the ambivalence, anxiety, and limited exploration reported by *faithfully aligning* RFGC students in this study arose at an acute developmental period and was reported as relatively absent at earlier ages. It is also worth noting that CFA, although the focus of the present study, is not the only master narrative potentially relevant to youth development and decision making at this age. Prior studies have identified, for example, “Spread Your Wings” as a narrative motivating youth mobility and outmigration in pursuit of new experiences (e.g., Hartman et al., 2024; Seaman et al., 2023). The intersections and interactions among these narratives is an important topic for future research.

4.2. Implications for Supporting Rural, First-Generation College Students

Policy and practice recommendations informed by this study’s findings are multiple—we offer a few that seem especially helpful in this section.

First-generation college students may experience more stress when transitioning out of college relative to continuing-generation students (Roksa & Silver, 2019), due to a sharper need for college to produce a “return on investment” related to the economic, cultural, and identity concessions that RFGC students may have made. Most colleges and universities offer career planning, resume review, and job search workshops, but first-generation and low-income students are less likely to take advantage of them (Roksa & Silver, 2019). Creative engagement strategies such as embedding career planning into the degree requirements and providing early psychologically supportive framing (see Stephens et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2014) to strengths-based personal identity work are both promising approaches. Importantly, this study’s findings regarding the post-college goals of utilitarian and hybrid aligners suggest that the framing of career planning efforts would benefit RFGC students by messaging career options centered on *purposes* that are relevant to their relational and rural community-oriented commitments (see Yeager et al., 2014).

This study also suggests that greater awareness about alternative-to-four-year-college options on the part of schools, families, and communities may benefit young people. Alignment with a CFA master narrative, especially faithful alignment patterns, may reflect a lack of options or awareness of alternatives to CFA in this population. The limitations of dichotomous messaging revealed here—of either going to college or staying and taking on more traditional family roles or simply entering the workforce—include a more constructive message that all youth are best served by being supported in developing a concrete postsecondary plan, whether that plan entails attendance at a four-year residential college/university, associate's degree options linked to apprenticeship and career-connected learning opportunities, or others. Although awareness and exposure to a variety of options is important, the findings of this study suggest that mere exposure to jobs and career options may not be enough to support youth with positively valenced, strengths- and identity-based messaging about alternatives. This varied messaging must begin early, well before the later high school years when postsecondary decisions loom large. It is critical that K12 schools recognize and counter both explicit and tacit ways that CFA is messaged or signaled as *the default expectation* for youth. In a developmental ecology replete with varied, positively messaged options even youth choosing four-year degree pathways benefit from this pathway being positioned as a conscious and agentic personal choice.

4.3. Limitations

We recognize important limitations to the current study. First, although the study examined the postsecondary experiences of RFGC students across multiple interviews and sites, the findings are still closer to a “snapshot” than what might be possible to learn from longitudinal data. A dataset including student, peer, and family/community member perspectives across various timescales and timepoints (e.g., at earlier years of college when sense-making may be different) of inquiry would improve understanding of the demands of key life course transitions such as college graduation, both thematically and biographically.

Second, although the methods permitted considerable biographical depth *within* cases, the *cross-case* sample size and inclusion criteria of this study precludes ready generalization. As with much qualitative research, generalization to whole social groups (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity), regions beyond New England (i.e., the six most northeastern states in the United States—Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont), or populations such as first-generation students should be driven by subsequent studies that test this study's findings with new samples and circumstances. Most psychologically oriented empirical studies must balance thematic breadth against idiographic or biographic depth—we optimized the latter and needed to limit the sample size in order to do so. Given the small sample size of this study, especially within each alignment pattern, focal participants are highlighted to illustrate at depth a theoretically significant case. Further research is needed to both operationalize our findings into scalable forms of measurement and to test the found alignment patterns with different samples, possibly revealing additional theoretically significant patterns. Nonetheless, the economic diversity of the present sample suggests that the findings were not driven by a single socioeconomic profile. We encourage future studies to make use of the inductively derived findings of this study to develop inquiries on this topic with greater representation across geographic regions and college types in addition to including larger samples. Examination of gender-specific patterns will be an especially important contribution of larger-scale methods.

Third, there is a risk of essentialism or reductionism in developing findings that create labels to which research participants are matched. As stated, our core unit of analysis was *master narrative engagement* rather than individual RFGC students themselves. We caution readers against conflating “type of master narrative engagement” (e.g., *faithful*,

hybrid, or utilitarian alignment) with “type of RFGC student.” Although we are confident that the individuals we matched to engagement types experienced those types of alignment as predominant, it would be a mistake to understand engagement types as a kind of personality disposition or temperament. A strength of this study is its use of an ideographic analytic lens that avoids static typologizing rural students, preserving the ability to account for agency along with structural/cultural patterns.

Last, our identification of distinct patterns of alignment with the CFA master narrative (i.e., *faithful, hybrid, utilitarian*) are offered in the hopes of also provoking subsequent empirical scrutiny. It may be the case that, for example, utilitarian “alignment” may be more productively characterized as diverging from CFA rather than aligning with it. We encourage subsequent research and new data to press on this interpretation with the benefit of refining theory.

5. Conclusions

A strong current running through the findings of this study is the notion that binaries and dichotomous ways of describing people, their communities, and life choices are limiting and rarely, if ever, accurate. Binaries such as rural/urban, stay at home/leave for college, first-generation/continuing-generation, and go to work/go to school confine what we see or imagine. Our rejection of binary frames places us in conversation with Coladarci’s (2007; see also Biddle et al., 2019) call to make the case for the phenomenon under study in research with rural populations as being “inherently rural” and not merely “observed incidentally in a rural setting” (p. 3). Although we appreciate and agree with the spirit of this suggestion, the findings of this study are neither inherently nor incidentally rural but rather occur as a function of the rapidly changing economic, political, historical, and cultural circumstances that are, *at present*, common to many rural communities. We believe this position strikes an appropriate balance between a place- and ethnographically conscious sensibility as well as a broader appreciation for social science theory building across settings, social groups, and cultural patterns. Indeed, the multi-sited design of the study permitted this flexibility, reflecting the dynamic nature of rural youth identity across multiple worlds and the historically dynamic nature of rural places.

Finally, we speculate that first-generation youth from rural communities whose motivations and decisions to attend college are based in mere “faith” in an abstract, promised outcome may be among the most likely to question the value of four-year college degrees—a trend that has been rapidly growing in the United States in the last decade (Tough, 2023). The reasons for the fracturing of the CFA master narrative are multiple; however, most concerning is the fracturing of a dominant life course cultural script without robust alternative narratives that can guide youth identity development and career planning at a critical transition. We urge a structural and institutional response that leverages insight from utilitarian and hybrid aligners in this study.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/educsci16010002/s1>. The four interview protocols used in this study are published as supplemental materials. Any published work drawing from or making use of the interview protocols should appropriately attribute and cite this article, including a statement about whether and how the protocols have been modified for future use. Supplemental Materials are: Interview #1; Interview #2; Interview #3; Interview #4.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

RFGC	Rural first-generation college
CFA	College for all
HAC	US Housing Assistance Council
CTE	Career and technical education

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