

This qualitative study examines how rural preservice teachers studying at a flagship university develop a sense of belonging. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model (1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), we evaluated background influences on the development of a sense of belonging to narrow the rural/nonrural educational achievement gap. Our research was guided by the following questions: (1) How do rural students develop a sense of belonging at large universities? (2) How do strategies to make friends affect rural preservice teachers' sense of belongingness at a large university? (3) How do rural preservice teachers perceive that their ruralness affects their ability to develop a sense of belonging at a large university? We recruited nine preservice teachers, originating from rural (6) and urban (3) locales, for constant comparison. In order to build an understanding of what it is like to be a rural preservice teacher at a large university, we largely relied on each participant's view of the situation by using Data-Prompted Interviews (DPI)s to look for patterns to derive meaning of their experiences at a flagship university. A Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach was taken to develop a substantive theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998; Charmaz, 2014) to add to generalized models of student development. Constant comparison of the data revealed factors in each subsystem of the ecological model that may exert an important impact on rural students' belongingness. We generated a theory grounded in empirical data that had been systematically collected and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Geographical background has an influence on a university students' development of belongingness. Expectations of school spirit and a lack of friend-making strategies negatively impacted rural students' needs' satisfaction. The findings can provide a valuable lens for administrators and faculty to better understand the challenges faced and supports needed by rural students.