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Rural Latinx Students' Spatial Imaginations of Their College Choices: Toward a Student Understanding of "Rural-Serving Institutions" in California's San Joaquin Valley

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Abstract: Rural students face multiple issues pursuing higher education, including financial hardships, inadequate college preparation, and geographic isolation from postsecondary institutions. These issues are further complicated for rural Latinx students, especially those from immigrant farm working backgrounds, who are positioned at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. Yet, rural Latinx students' college choice and transition experiences are rarely centered in the higher education literature. This article examined the college choices of nine rural Latinx high school seniors from California's San Joaquin Valley who chose to attend a public higher education institution in this agricultural region. This article drew on three indicators from the culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model and employed a Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas methodology to analyze the campus elements that motivated rural Latinx students to enroll in public institutions in the San Joaquin Valley. Findings demonstrate that rural Latinx students purposely chose these institutions because they imagined that such institutions would (a) be racially and spatially familiar, (b) allow them to give back to their rural communities through relevant majors, and (c) offer tight-knit collegiate environments. Recommendations for higher education researchers and practitioners interested in increasing college success for rural Latinx students and expanding traditional definitions of rural-serving institutions (RSIs) are provided.

Keywords: rural Latinx students; race/ethnicity; rurality; intersectionality; geography; college choice; college success; culturally engaging campus environments; rural-serving institutions; pláticas



Citation: Puente, M.; Nuñez Martinez, M.; Rios Arroyo, D.; Torres, S. Rural Latinx Students' Spatial Imaginations of Their College Choices: Toward a Student Understanding of "Rural-Serving Institutions" in California's San Joaquin Valley. *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 660. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13070660>

Academic Editor: Sam Museum

Received: 1 June 2023

Revised: 22 June 2023

Accepted: 25 June 2023

Published: 28 June 2023



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1. Introduction

Postsecondary access and enrollment have increased over the years, yet rural students continue to face various barriers to higher education. Rural students attend high schools that are often under-resourced and do not receive adequate college preparation, negatively impacting their college access [1–3]. Rural students also face geographic barriers when accessing higher education [2,4] as they are more likely to reside in "education deserts," which are communities that lack higher education institutions nearby [5]. Limited access to nearby and quality higher education institutions has been found to negatively impact rural student college access and enrollment, as proximity to colleges significantly affects the likelihood of college application, especially at four-year colleges [6]. While these studies highlight some challenges rural students face when accessing higher education, research has also found that they have high college aspirations [7] and cultural wealth [8–10] that higher education institutions can nurture to ensure their collegiate success.

Additionally, the scholarship that has examined the college access experiences of rural students has ignored the unique experiences of Latinx students living in rural areas. Stone

et al. [11] argued that Latinx students from rural communities “exist at the intersection of multiple identities that are often oppressed by the systems of power at play within higher education” (p. 3). Given their multiple marginalized identities and backgrounds, rural Latinx students may face additional barriers in accessing and transitioning to higher education. For example, Puente [12] examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural Latinx students’ college decisions and found that these students lacked access to reliable internet and college guidance from their high school teachers and counselors during this time. Addressing the gap in the research on rural student college choice and transition is essential, given the historical settlement and presence of Latinx communities in rural areas, especially in California’s agricultural regions, which have historically depended on Mexican immigrants for farm labor [13]. Furthermore, the Latinx population accounted for more than half of the population growth in the United States’ rural areas in recent decades [14], highlighting the significance of attending to this student population’s college access and transition experiences.

Given the multiple higher education barriers rural Latinx students endure and their growing presence throughout the U.S., rural-serving institutions (RSIs) have the potential to serve as places that nurture rural Latinx students’ existing assets and resilience and collegiate success. Koricich et al. [15] developed a metric to define and identify “rural-serving institutions.” Their definition includes multiple quantitative measures of geography and population (e.g., percent of the population in a county living in rural-classified areas, the population size of the county where the institution is located, etc.) as well as the percentage of degrees and certificates in majors/fields important for rural communities awarded at each institution, such as agricultural, natural resources, and parks and recreation [15,16]. While this metric seeks to define RSIs, it primarily relies on quantitative measures and traditional ways of defining “rural.” The reliance on these measures has resulted in an exclusion of higher education institutions in rural regions, such as California’s San Joaquin Valley, where a significant portion of its population resides in rural communities [17] and identifies as “rural.” There is a need to complicate and move beyond quantitative measures when defining rurality and RSIs, which continue to exclude rural Latinx identities and collegiate experiences.

This article aims to understand the campus elements influencing rural Latinx high school seniors to enroll in public higher education institutions in California’s San Joaquin Valley. While these institutions are not currently identified as “rural-serving,” according to the metric developed by Koricich et al. [15], higher education institutions in this agricultural region often have “rural initiatives” [18] and are clear about serving students from migrant and seasonal farm working backgrounds. An additional purpose of this article is thus to complicate current understandings of rural-serving postsecondary institutions by drawing on the voices of rural Latinx research collaborators. To theorize “rural-serving” from the perspectives of students, this article draws on three indicators from Museus’ [19] culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model, including (a) cultural familiarity, (b) cultural community service, and (c) humanized educational environments. These indicators were consistent with why rural Latinx students in the study chose their respective institutions, providing insight into how rural Latinx students spatially imagined their colleges and universities to be before arriving on their respective campuses. This article offers recommendations for higher education researchers interested in theorizing about rural “servingness” from a qualitative approach and rural Latinx student perspective. Additionally, understanding the campus elements that rural Latinx students consider when deciding which institutions to attend has important implications for how institutions can create and cultivate campus environments that respond to the unique needs of rural Latinx students and communities.

2. Literature Review

Given this article’s focus on the campus elements that motivated rural Latinx high school students to choose their respective colleges due to perceptions of future success at

these institutions, a selective review of both the college choice literature and college transition literature on rural students was conducted to better understand what motivates rural students' choices and how they experience those choices after entering higher education.

2.1. Rural Student College Choice

Prior scholarship has examined the role of (a) geographic context, (b) socioeconomic status, and (c) familial influence on rural students' college choice decision-making processes.

2.1.1. Geographic Context

Recent scholarship has considered the role that geography plays in the college choice processes of rural students. For example, Hillman [5] expressed that rural students' geographical location places them at a disadvantage in their college choice process, claiming that rural regions are "education deserts" with minimal access to higher education. Other scholars have found that geographic proximity to college campuses influences students' college choice decisions, and for most rural students, this means attending a college near their homes [20,21]. More importantly, studies have found that rural students' geographical location influences their college choice decisions to attend less selective colleges and enroll in local two-year institutions [22,23]. Notably, O'Connor [24] found that Latinx students who resided in rural areas had a significant disadvantage in access to four-year institutions compared to their rural white peers.

2.1.2. Socioeconomic Status

Rural students often come from low-income families with parents with low educational attainment [25]. Many rural students face the financial burden of paying for college tuition without receiving sufficient monetary assistance from their families [25,26]. Additionally, Robbins [27] examined rural students' college aspirations and choices and found that rural students are less likely to utilize student loans as financial assistance to afford college tuition than urban students. Furthermore, studies have found that rural students' financial concerns during the college choice process influenced many to enroll in two-year colleges near their homes [28].

The financial burden that rural students encounter in their college choice process and the reality of generational poverty in rural regions [25,29,30] can lead many rural students to leave their rural communities for better social, economic, and academic opportunities. Scholars have referred to this process as "brain drain," where rural students recognize the limited academic and economic return investments if they stay in their rural communities after high school graduation [31]. Petrin et al. [32] noted that college-educated students from rural backgrounds were less likely to return to their rural origins if they could not foresee economic mobility within their rural communities.

2.1.3. Familial Influence

Familial influence has been depicted as another central factor that impacts rural students' college choice processes. The rural family has often been described as having rural norms and values that overlook the importance of education [33,34]. Some studies have documented rural families as not prioritizing the development of higher educational aspirations of attending four-year universities for their children [35]. Cabrera et al. [36] disputed the deficit perspective on the rural family by examining the role of the rural Latinx family and its impact on rural Latinx students' college aspirations and their college choice processes. Cabrera et al. [36] found that rural Latinx families instilled their children with parental *ganas*, which the authors defined as encouraging their children to aspire to have better economic and academic outcomes.

2.2. Rural Student College Transition

The literature on rural college students' transition experiences primarily focused on students' (a) continued support systems, (b) feeling out of place, and (c) community ties.

2.2.1. Continued Support Systems

Family and community continued to serve as motivating factors for rural students' persistence in higher education. Freeman [37] found that an ideology of familismo or familism provided rural Latinx students who attended a local community college with benefits, namely maintaining a social support system when undergoing periods of stress and mobility associated with pursuing higher education. Parental support was also crucial to rural Latinx students' college persistence [8]. Some examples of parental support given to students from families were text messages, phone calls, and more [38]. Further, a study by Stone et al. [11] on rural Latina students argued that a robust matriarchal family unity positively impacted rural Latinas' education journeys. Rural Latinas were encouraged to "dream big" and take "knowledge from home" to support their academic success [11]. Other support systems included community members such as counselors who tracked students post-high school and advised them on general college transitioning [38].

2.2.2. Feeling Out of Place

When navigating higher education, rural college students felt out of place and unprepared to transition from high school. For instance, coursework was more complicated than rural students had anticipated, and they faced difficulty making new friends because they were accustomed to knowing people since kindergarten [39]. Rural students attending universities in urban settings were also overwhelmed with the different career occupations and academic majors available to them [40]. High school students in rural environments were not exposed to career-preparation tracks, resulting in "living in a bubble" [41]. The narrative of "living in a bubble" referred to the isolation rural students experienced from recognizing the resource disparities in their community. While they lacked access to opportunities, news, and events beyond their rural communities, rural students knew everyone in their hometowns. They frequently gathered to support their community members, which differed from their isolating experiences on college campuses [41].

2.2.3. Community Ties

Guiffrida [40] argued that successful rural college students maintained strong connections with their home communities. Rural college students sought to do this in several ways, such as by "giving back" to their community. An example of giving back was serving as a role model to younger community members [11]. Rural students also sought mentorship within their community because they wanted "naturally occurring mentors", meaning community members from similar backgrounds [42,43]. Their search for naturally occurring mentors was also prompted by the lack of social connections rural students had on their college campuses in comparison to students from urban areas [42]. Rural students' close ties and commitment to their communities often drive their persistence in higher education, even if they attend an institution far away from their rural communities [44].

3. Theoretical Framework

This article applied and extended Museus' [19] culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model to rural Latinx students' college choices. The CECE model was developed to address the lack of attention given to the racial and cultural realities faced by college Students of Color in traditional frameworks of college success. The most salient contribution of the CECE model is its nine indicators, which were derived from the voices of diverse student populations. These indicators include (a) cultural familiarity, (b) culturally relevant knowledge, (c) cultural community service, (d) opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement, (e) collectivist cultural orientations, (f) culturally validating environments, (g) humanized educational environments, (h) proactive philosophies, and (i) availability of holistic support. Institutions that practice these indicators should theoretically maximize success among racially diverse college student populations and minimize the negative societal consequences associated with low bachelor's degree completion among these students.

A few scholars have applied the CECE model to examine Latinx students' perceptions of the campus environment and how these campus environments either promote or hinder their academic success. For example, Gebremicael et al. [45] examined Latinx students' engagement with their university's career services and expectations of their university's career development office. Latinx students shared the need for their career center to increase outreach, staff, and resources representing their identity and culture, aligning with the cultural familiarity indicator from the CECE model. Further, Gonzalez et al. [46] explored Latinx students' perceptions of what being a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) meant to them and how the institution could better embody an HSI identity and support the success of Latinx students attending an HSI. Our study extends this research by examining how rural Latinx students perceived institutions to embody a rural HSI-serving identity. Understanding rural servingness from Latinx students' perspectives complicates Koricich et al.'s [15] RSI metric, which largely relies on quantitative measures rather than students' voices and experiences in RSIs.

Other studies have underscored the need for campus environments to reflect Latinx students' intersectional identities. Francis et al. [47] used various indicators of the CECE model to examine how Afro-Latinx students perceived their identities and intersectional experiences represented in their institution's African-American and African Diaspora Studies and Latino Studies curriculum. Participants emphasized the importance of curricula across departments incorporating an intersectional lens to include Black and Latinx identities into their syllabi, which would support cross-cultural understandings and reduce the erasure of the experiences of Afro-Latinx students [47]. Furthermore, Shelton [48] examined undocumented Latinx students' perceptions of their campus climate at a historically white institution. They utilized the CECE model to inform ways that promote students' sense of belonging on college campuses. While these studies highlight the intersectional identities and experiences of Latinx college students by considering race/ethnicity and immigration status, it is also significant for higher education researchers and institutions to attend to the rural identities and backgrounds of Latinx college students.

This article expands on three indicators of the CECE model, namely (a) cultural familiarity, (b) cultural community service, and (c) humanized educational environments, with attention to both race/ethnicity and rurality. To our knowledge, this article is one of the first to apply the CECE model and these three specific indicators to the college choice decision-making processes of rural Latinx high school seniors. Engaging the CECE model in this article is also congruent with our methodological stance regarding the importance of incorporating student voice in theorizations about campus environments that are culturally engaging and rural-serving.

4. Materials and Methods

The qualitative data for this article were derived from a larger mixed methods research study on rural Latinx students' spatiality and college (in)opportunity [49]. The larger study examined the college access and choice processes of 16 rural Latinx high school seniors from immigrant farm working backgrounds living in Tulare County, a county in California's San Joaquin Valley. Data collection for this study occurred about one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented event and time that significantly reduced students' access to their counselors and other college-related resources during their college choice processes [12]. When the students agreed to collaborate on the research study with Mayra P., many were awaiting college admissions decisions. Overall, the 16 rural Latinx students chose a variety of higher education systems to attend, mainly California Community Colleges (CCCs), the California State University (CSU), and the University of California (UC), and one student chose to attend an out-of-state public research university.

4.1. Research Collaborators

This article draws on the voices and college choices of nine rural Latinx high school seniors who participated in the larger study and enrolled in a public higher education

institution in California's San Joaquin Valley. The San Joaquin Valley comprises eight counties and is known as one of the world's most productive agricultural regions [50]. It is predominantly settled by Mexican immigrant families because of the demand for labor in the agricultural fields [51]. The nine students identified as Mexican or Mexican-American, and one identified as Mexican-Salvadorian-American. The students were all bicultural-bilingual, first-generation college students, and the child of at least one farm working parent. Five students identified as young women, four as young men, and two students, a young man and a young woman, also identified as LGBTQ+. Five students enrolled at Porterville College with the desire to transfer to a four-year university, two at the California State University, Fresno, and two at the University of California, Merced.

4.2. Data Collection

Mayra P. conducted two Chicana/Latina feminist pláticas [52] with the nine rural Latinx students who participated in the larger study. Pláticas are “a familiar cultural practice within Latina/o/x families” [53] (p. 2) but also a “methodological disruption” in the field of educational research (p. 3). Pláticas are both a methodology and method in that they provide a praxis for conducting research and collecting data that promotes healing and resistance [52]. This way of conducting research is situated within the ontologies and epistemologies of Chicana/Latina scholars, and it intends to challenge traditional approaches to qualitative research that are “rooted in whiteness, colonial logics, and white supremacy” [52] (p. 3). Pláticas are particularly attuned to the power relations between “researcher” and “participant” and necessitate that scholars are accountable to communities rather than institutions. Employing pláticas requires serious and thoughtful engagement with its five principles as outlined by Fierros and Delgado Bernal [52]:

1. The research draws upon Chicana/Latina feminist theory;
2. The research honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge;
3. The research makes connections to everyday lived experiences;
4. The research provides a potential space for healing;
5. The research relies on relations of reciprocity, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity.

This article focuses on the second plática conducted with students via Zoom, each lasting 60 to 120 min. These pláticas were purposely scheduled in late May and early June when the students had already decided where to enroll. In this second plática, Mayra P. and the students discussed their college choices, majors, anticipated college obstacles and cultural collisions, and future career plans, including returning to their rural communities post-undergrad. The literature on Latinx college choice and rural college choice guided this plática. Additionally, as articulated by a pláticas methodology [52], the interests of the researcher and each research collaborator shaped the topics discussed in the plática. All pláticas were audio and video recorded and transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature.

4.3. Data Analysis

The plática transcripts were analyzed by Mayra P. following Merriam and Tisdell's [54] step-by-step qualitative analysis process. Mayra P. began by reading each plática transcript, inserting notes in the margins of the transcripts using the comment feature in Google Docs. In this first round of open coding, the constructed comments reflected the exact words the rural Latinx students used during the pláticas. Examples include attending institutions where other college students “look like me,” institutions that allowed them to “give back,” and institutions where they could “ask for help.” This process of in vivo coding is consistent with a pláticas methodology, which honors the voices and lived experiences of research collaborators.

Following this open coding procedure, analytical coding was pursued by grouping comments that went together. For instance, codes such as “look like me,” “wouldn't be alone,” and “knowing” others who attended the institution were similar in that these codes captured rural Latinx students' desires to enroll in higher education institutions that reflected their racial/ethnic identities and farm working backgrounds. Categories

were then developed by grouping similar codes to reveal patterns that cut across the nine plática transcripts.

The final step, as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell [54], was to become more theoretical. As a research team, we compared the constructed categories that cut across the data with the nine indicators outlined in Museus' [19] culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model. The three indicators of (a) cultural familiarity, (b) cultural community service, and (c) humanized educational environments were reminiscent of rural Latinx students' college choices. These indicators helped us rename our categories to be more consistent with leading higher education literature and research on college success. They also assisted us in thinking about our data through a more abstract lens, leading to the development of the three central findings discussed in this article.

4.4. Positionality

An additional source of knowledge that we relied on in analyzing the data, constructing codes and categories, and writing up the findings, were our identities and backgrounds as children of Mexican immigrant farm worker(s) and members of rural and agricultural communities in California. Qualitative scholars have long understood the researcher as the primary instrument of research [54], meaning that the researcher's positionality, social location, and epistemological and theoretical perspectives shape the research process. This methodological principle is consistent with a Chicana/Latina feminist perspective [55] and a pláticas methodology that values embodied knowledges and rejects traditional notions of distancing oneself from the work [53]. We reveal ourselves to readers following a tradition of Chicana/Latina feminist scholars to make our positionalities and relationship to the work known and to forefront our accountability to rural Latinx communities like the ones we call home and whose stories we share in this article.

Mayra P. is from East Porterville, CA, and a proud daughter of Mexican immigrant farm workers. She attended UCLA as a first-time, first-year, first-generation college student. Mayra P. chose to enroll in this institution because it felt familiar. She had spent a month on this campus the summer before her senior year of high school as a participant in the Migrant Scholars Leadership Institute (MSLI) at UCLA. Mayra P. wishes she had also considered the institution's demographics, especially its significant distance from her family and community, when deciding where to attend college.

Mayra N. M. immigrated from a rural town in Sinaloa, Mexico, at the age of six and grew up in California's South San Joaquin Valley. While staying close to home was important for her and her family, she decided to attend the University of Pennsylvania, given that this was the most affordable option as a first-generation, low-income undocumented Mexicana. Mayra N. M. wishes she had considered the types of resources and support available for first-generation and undocumented students at this institution and the campus climate when making her decision.

Daniel immigrated from a rural region in Guanajuato, Mexico, to a rural town in California's San Joaquin Valley. He is a first-generation high school and doctoral student who began his higher education journey at UCLA, which he attended given its proximity to a large Latinx population in Los Angeles and his belief that UCLA would offer Latinx students various resources to succeed academically. Daniel wishes he had known that Latinxs were underrepresented in UCLA's student and faculty demographics and its lack of intentionality in creating a sustainable, positive, and culturally engaging campus for Latinx students.

Sarahy is from Oxnard, CA, a proud daughter of Mexican immigrant farm workers and a proud granddaughter of a Bracero. She enrolled at UCLA because of its Department of Chicana/o and Central American Studies and the Chicano Studies Research Center. She applied as a Chicana/o and Central American Studies major and felt welcomed. Sarahy wishes she had considered the institution's demographics, especially its lack of Latinx faculty throughout campus, particularly in STEM fields.

5. Results

Findings from the pláticas conducted with nine rural Latinx high school seniors revealed the real and imagined campus elements that shaped students' decisions to enroll in public higher education institutions in California's San Joaquin Valley that serve rural Latinx students and communities. The findings draw on and extend three indicators of the culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model [19], including (a) cultural familiarity, (b) cultural community service, and (c) humanized educational environments.

5.1. Choosing Racial and Spatial Familiarity

One of the primary reasons rural Latinx students chose to attend public higher education institutions in the San Joaquin Valley was their familiarity with these institutions. In a plática, Jennifer explained that the familiarity of her local community college motivated her enrollment at this institution and suggested that this familiarity would contribute to her college success:

Jennifer: I got a scholarship from [Porterville College], and we did a whole slide show of the other people that got the scholarship, so while I was watching it, I saw these people that are enrolling in PC, and it's basically the same [as my high school], mostly Latinos and a few others who just want to get prepared, but I see mostly Latinos, and I feel like that's possibly going to be the demographic there, but some older people as well.

Mayra P.: How do you feel about going to a college with demographics like your high school?

Jennifer: I feel more comfortable because it's like I know these people, so I don't really have to start over again in getting to know so many people, but of course, it's gonna happen. But as long as there's someone there that I've known since high school, then it possibly is a bit more comfortable to go around campus, and now that I'm not the only one.

As a college located in a predominantly Latinx community, Jennifer noted that the institution's demographics were similar to those of her high school. Not only did she share common identities with PC students, but she "[knew] these people". The Latinx students enrolling at this local community college were from her community, and she had "known [them] since high school". These previously established relationships with students who were enrolling in PC at the same time as Jennifer made her "feel more comfortable" about her college choice because she knew, even before beginning at the college, that she would not be "the only" Latina student from a farm working background attending PC. She further commented that not having "to start over again" in terms of building relationships with new and unfamiliar college peers would help her navigate the community college campus because she would be doing so in community with peers she knew and who shared her racial/ethnic identity and farm working background.

Finn also chose a university because of the institution's familiarity. She described her observation of the University of California, Merced's student demographics and how they resonated with her identity:

I joined one of [UC Merced's] webinars that they had because they always email me about student life and stuff like that, and a lot of the students that go there are Hispanic or Latino/Latina, so I guess that's a little comforting knowing that they come from similar backgrounds as I do so that I won't be the odd man out.

Like Jennifer, Finn chose UC Merced because the students at this institution "[came] from similar backgrounds" as her. The possibility of attending a predominantly Latinx university and not being "the odd man out" brought Finn comfort regarding her college choice. In addition to issues of race and ethnicity, Finn explained that she chose to attend UC Merced because of its spatial familiarity:

... everyone [at UC Merced] was really nice. It was really quiet, and considering that it was very isolated, I kind of felt like, “Oh, that’s just like my high school”. My high school is kind of by itself, too, so I guess that’s another thing that kind of drew me in because it reminded me of my high school.

Like her high school, UC Merced was “quiet” and “isolated”. For Finn, enrolling in a university that reflected a similar environment to her high school and rural community was equally important to her as having opportunities to physically connect with peers who shared her background. Having thrived academically and socially during high school, Finn searched for universities whose campus elements mirrored environmental conditions she was accustomed to and favored.

Further, some rural Latinx students compared their college choices to other institutions they had visited outside of the San Joaquin Valley. Alyssa, for example, compared her choice of California State University, Fresno, to her campus visit to California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo:

I went to Fresno [State] through an AVID [Advancement Via Individual Determination] trip, and I just remember I didn’t really click with other campuses like; of course, the other campuses we went to were beautiful, but I liked Fresno a lot more because I saw a lot of people like me than when I went to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. There was like no—no one like me. I didn’t feel comfortable there, but at Fresno, it felt almost like a little family.

For Alyssa, “clicking” with an institution meant seeing herself represented in the campus’s student demographics. At Cal Poly SLO, she did not see anyone like her and explained how this lack of representation made her uncomfortable. Compared to this negative experience, Fresno felt like a “family” to Alyssa because students at this institution looked like her. Her visit to Cal Poly SLO was so impactful that it continued to be a recurring topic of conversation during the *plática*:

Alyssa: I had culture shock when I went to the Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo ‘cause when I went there, I was like, “What is this?” They had a bunch of salads, but it was some weird names like ‘quinoa’, and I was like, “What is this?” I had never heard of this, and they’re all white there.

Mayra P.: Do you think you’ll experience that at Fresno [State]?

Alyssa: Well, of course, there’s going to be white people, and like other kinds of cultures around, but I feel like not as bad as Cal Poly SLO, you know?

In addition to the previous racial and spatial familiarity issues raised by rural Latinx students in this study, Alyssa attributed her discomfort at Cal Poly SLO to new foods available to SLO undergraduate students that she was unfamiliar with, potentially because of her Mexican immigrant farm working background. The “weird” foods and the overwhelming presence of white students on this campus contributed to her “culture shock”. When prompted to speculate whether she would experience culture shock at Fresno State, Alyssa clarified that while she may engage with white people and other cultures on this campus, it would not be “as bad” as her Cal Poly SLO experience, which had made her feel uncomfortable and underrepresented.

5.2. Pursuing Majors in Place to Give Back

Rural Latinx students also chose to attend public higher education institutions in the San Joaquin Valley because they believed these institutions would offer majors that would provide them with the necessary knowledge and skills to give back to their farm working communities. Students often discussed the issues that permeated their communities and how a college degree from a local or regional institution would enable them to transform specific structural and spatial injustices rural Latinx communities and members face.

Miguel, for instance, chose Fresno State because he hoped to major in human nutrition sciences. He noticed that his community had “all fast food options”. He also referenced

the lack of jobs available to his community members and job types outside of laboring in “the [agricultural] fields”. Miguel described how he intended to use his degree in nutrition sciences from Fresno State by giving back to his rural community:

... when I do go back to my hometown ... me having like the confidence and the education and the degree, I could build something and like that something will have a bigger purpose on someone that lives [here]. Let’s say I start a restaurant, like my own independent restaurant; I could hire people that are struggling to find a job. I could help someone.

Students such as Miguel chose to attend regional public four-year universities because of their proximity to their hometowns and their situatedness within issues students wanted to address through their college degrees. Evident from the plática with Miguel, his college choice was not motivated by a random major but by a major at a nearby institution that would allow him to return to his community, open a restaurant, offer healthier food options, and employ his community members.

Like Miguel, Patty claimed she primarily chose UC Merced for its “academic programs”, specifically its psychology program. She believed attending an R1 institution in the San Joaquin Valley would provide her with the necessary rigorous academic and professional training that would allow her to give back to her rural community. She explained the following about her intended psychology major at UC Merced in relation to her community’s mental health needs:

[I hope to] help more people in the world because I know a lot of people go through things, but they don’t really necessarily talk about it. I plan to come back to my community, probably try to work here because, from what I have observed, I know there’s no psychologist near Terra Bella or around Terra Bella, and I think it would make a big change if there were someone here to support them, hear them out, and give them advice.

Patty perceived psychology as a major and future career that would allow her to “help more people”, specifically her community members who do not have access to a psychologist nearby. She hoped to create change by serving as one of the first psychologists in her community and surrounding rural communities, which she described as some of “the smallest towns you can think of” in the San Joaquin Valley that are neglected by healthcare industries and professionals.

Alyssa also noticed the lack of healthcare services and infrastructure available to farm workers in her community. She attended Fresno State to pursue the pre-health major and transform these issues. In describing her institutional choice, Alyssa clarified her main reasons for choosing an institution that was located in the San Joaquin Valley:

... well, [Fresno State is] here in the Central Valley, you know, it’s my home, and like I said, I want to be able to come back and give my community like a better place, you know, make it better.

For Alyssa, selecting Fresno State as her college choice was relatively easy because of its location in the San Joaquin Valley agricultural region, which she identified as her “home”. As evident from the quote, Alyssa frequently discussed her desire to return and give back to her community during the plática as a central motivator for her Fresno State enrollment and pursuit of the pre-health major. Later in the plática, Alyssa elaborated on how she intended to use this pre-health major in service of her farm working community:

Alyssa: I really want to work here in the county area, but I also want to do my own thing, so kind of like hold events and stuff, but on my own time. But also, if I don’t work in the county, I also want to work for organizations that teach farm workers how not to injure themselves.

Mayra P.: What kind of events are you interested in putting on?

Alyssa: Maybe, like, providing doctors to check farm workers' health, so maybe like on a Saturday or Sunday, and we'll pay the workers to go get checked ... some of them don't have health care.

From Alyssa's perspective, Fresno State and its pre-health major would train her to serve as a healthcare professional in the agricultural region. Additionally, maintaining and establishing new connections in Fresno and surrounding communities would allow her to partner with community organizations that explicitly work with farm workers to improve their health and safety in the agricultural fields. In this way, Alyssa's degree and permanence in the San Joaquin Valley would facilitate her knowledge of health and safety issues that are imperative to address, such as farm workers' need for mobile doctors, free health checkups, compensation for taking time off to get medical care and facilitating free healthcare events on days that farm workers are most likely to have availability to be seen and cared for.

5.3. Favoring Tight-Knit Collegiate Environments

A final campus element that rural Latinx students considered in their college choices that they felt would facilitate their college success was the extent to which college campuses cultivated tight-knit environments. Such environments were essential for the students in this study, given their upbringing in Latinx families and rural communities where feelings of closeness and community were valued.

Ximena explained how her local community college's commitment to students who shared her identity and background influenced her decision to enroll:

[I chose Porterville College] because they're a strong community, and we all work together, and because when I was in my freshman year of high school, they came in and they talked about all the opportunities that they offered and how the community is like, what their environment is like, and I think that was really, really helpful and I think it was really nice that they had a strong community and that they all helped each other out, that they were there for you. I think that was one of the main reasons that [PC] was a college that I wanted to go to because I want to have a community that is helpful and that helps me when I need any help, whether it's homework or a class or something, and I think that that's important too.

Ximena had the opportunity to interact firsthand with institutional agents from her local community college early on and throughout her high school trajectory. The impression they left on her as a young high school freshman was profound, as she repeatedly referenced the "strong community" of PC and how PC students and institutional agents "all work together" and "[help] each other out". She even used the pronoun "we" during the plática to signal her belongingness to this college and identification with the institution's desire to help and be there for students. As Ximena explained, the tight-knit element of PC was one of the primary reasons she chose to enroll in this institution because she believed that when she needed help in college, she would receive it and be able to navigate academics and other obstacles as a college student more easily.

Xavier also enrolled in Porterville College because of the direct guidance he received from a college counselor regarding his educational plan. He shared the following about his choice of attending the local community college:

... I chose to go to PC because I talked to a counselor, and I found out that if I take two summer classes this summer and if I'm a full-time student this coming year, I'll graduate by the end of my first year.

As a high school senior, Xavier described having a "contact" at his local community college who had outlined his educational plan for him, including the time and credits he needed to graduate and transfer to a four-year university. The care and commitment this counselor showed to Xavier motivated him to enroll in PC, as captured in the following plática:

Mayra P.: You mentioned earlier that a counselor at PC had talked to you about your coursework and planning. Did that conversation motivate you to select PC?

Xavier: It was certainly that moment. After I gave that moment some thought, I reflected on that event because before I had done that, I was kind of looking more to Fresno or Sacramento, or even Northridge. I was like, “Should I go?” Because I got accepted, I was like, “I can go. What’s holding me back?” But then after I met with [the PC counselors], they’re like, “Oh, if you come here, you know, there’s a lot of opportunities, the government will help you a lot . . . ” When that counselor . . . told me that, that I’d graduate quickly and that I could transfer quickly . . . I chose PC.

Xavier considered multiple institutions during his college choice process, including public four-year universities in other parts of California, where he had applied and been admitted. Yet, he did not have close contacts at these institutions, nor had they made an effort to reach out to Xavier to discuss his undergraduate degree and assist in the educational planning process as the counselor at PC, whom he regularly identified by name during the *plática*. The counselor’s sincere guidance and explanation of additional institutional and financial opportunities that Xavier could take advantage of as a PC student reassured him that PC was a better fit for his particular academic and financial needs as well as for his desire to establish close and caring relationships with institutional agents who could support him throughout his college trajectory.

Finn, who decided to attend UC Merced, also chose this institution because it was a university where she felt she could develop meaningful relationships with institutional agents. She shared the following during the *plática*:

I’ve talked to some students who actually do go to UC Merced, and they said that the counselors and professors actually know your name because it’s so small compared to the other UCs that they don’t really know your name. But because [UC Merced] is so small, they actually are able to build these types of student-advisor relationships with you, and I really rely heavily on that . . . so, I’m hoping if I’m able to do in person, I can be more confident enough to ask for help and things like that, when the time comes.

While Xavier and Ximena had immediate access to institutional agents at PC because of the college’s location in their community, Finn relied on peers more advanced in their educational trajectory to learn more about UC Merced and its institutional culture. From these trusted peers, she discovered that the small and tight-knit environment of UC Merced facilitated relationships between undergraduate students and faculty members who “actually [knew] your name”. Finn compared this information she received about the ease of cultivating humanized and meaningful relationships with UC Merced faculty members and counselors to the cultures of larger UC institutions, where she suspected that nurturing these authentic relationships would be more difficult. The tight-knit collegiate environment of UC Merced was one of the primary reasons she chose to enroll in this institution. She further emphasized that she depends on this humanizing environment for academic success.

6. Discussion

This article examined the college choices of nine rural Latinx high school seniors who enrolled in public higher education institutions in California’s San Joaquin Valley. By conducting *pláticas* with the students about the institutional elements that motivated their decisions, this article expanded on three indicators of the culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model [19] (i.e., cultural familiarity, cultural community service, and humanized educational environments). These findings also extend the existing rural-serving institution (RSI) definition [15] by considering the campus elements rural Latinx students identified as necessary to their college choices that engaged their racial/ethnic and farm working backgrounds. Overall, findings from this study underscore the importance of

drawing on students' voices and experiences when defining RSIs and identifying additional campus elements that should be considered when recruiting, retaining, and graduating rural Latinx college students.

The findings from this study serve to counter deficit ideologies that describe rural students as lacking college aspirations [20,33] and as “undermatching” in less selective institutions [37]. The research collaborators in this study had high aspirations for postsecondary education. They made conscious college choices [12] that aligned not only with their racial/ethnic backgrounds but also their rural and farm working identities. Choosing a public higher education institution in the San Joaquin Valley was vital for them. They felt those institutions had a greater representation of Latinx college students who were also intimately familiar with their spatial realities as children of farm workers and members of rural working-class communities. This familiarity also facilitated the intimacy rural Latinx students required from their institutions and institutional agents for collegiate success. Some research collaborators chose to attend the local community college because of counselors who served as influential mentors in their educational journeys and planning. Others chose institutions that were further away from their homes and larger than their local community college, like UC Merced, because they perceived that this institution would offer a tight-knit environment leading to close relationships with professors and counselors. Our findings show that rural Latinx students want to be in environments where they will be known personally and where such intimate relationships with institutional agents will nurture their college success.

Additionally, prior research on rural students' college choices has described geography as a barrier due to the limitations associated with living in an “education desert” [5]. However, the research collaborators in this study did not perceive rurality and geography as barriers but as a source of spatial familiarity that enacted early notions of belongingness to their respective institutions in the San Joaquin Valley. Listening to the decision-making processes of rural Latinx students opens a conceptual and methodological discussion for how researchers should (de)problematize the role of geography and how proximity to colleges has been narrowly used and defined to analyze college access and choice. The research collaborators in our study complicated and expanded what “college proximity” meant beyond the traditional measure of distance to the nearest college from their home. The research collaborators embraced the vast eight-county San Joaquin Valley agricultural region as their “home” rather than just considering their immediate rural community as their home and the institutions within them, or lack thereof, as proximal and attainable.

Lastly, the research collaborators' college decisions to enroll in a higher education institution within the San Joaquin Valley challenges dominant ideologies of why many rural students enroll in college near their homes. For example, scholarship has described that many rural students enroll in local institutions because of financial concerns [28]. However, by examining the decision-making processes of the research collaborators in this study, the leading factor that led them to choose an institution in the San Joaquin Valley agricultural region was their belief that these institutions would offer them a selection of majors and other leadership and professional opportunities that would allow them to accumulate the necessary knowledge and skills to return to their rural communities to transform the inequities and injustices that their family and community members face.

These findings from the study also counter dominant understandings of “rural brain drain” in the literature, where there is a disproportionate outmigration of rural high school graduates that leave their communities for better economic opportunities and who are not likely to return after completing a college education [31]. The research collaborators in our study repeatedly referenced their aspiration to use their college education not for individual economic benefits but rather to return to their rural communities and combat the structural and spatial injustices that their rural Latinx community members face. Pérez Huber et al. [56] argued that there is a need to rethink traditional forms of conceptualizing college success. They argued that, for Students of Color, college success is conceptualized as their ability to give back to their communities. More research is needed to explore rural

Latinx students' aspirations to obtain a college degree that does not prioritize seeking greater economic return and permanently leaving their rural community but instead embraces their college education as a source of empowerment that can lead them to become agents of change in their rural communities.

7. Recommendations

Based on the *pláticas* conducted with nine rural Latinx high school seniors who chose to enroll in a public higher education institution in California's San Joaquin Valley, we offer recommendations for higher education researchers and practitioners seeking to improve the collegiate experiences and success of rural Latinx students at their institutions and beyond.

7.1. Recommendations for Research

This article employed elements of the culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model [19] (i.e., cultural familiarity, cultural community service, and humanized educational environments) to explain the college choices of rural Latinx students who enrolled in public higher education institutions in the San Joaquin Valley agricultural region. Evident from our findings, these students' decisions were motivated by campus environments that reflected their racial and cultural realities as Latinx students and environments that mirrored their spatial identities and experiences as children of farm workers, students at small high schools, and members of rural and geographically isolated communities. Researchers must consider the central role that place plays in students' decision-making processes, especially for students who choose to attend higher education locally or regionally. Attending to the spatial familiarity of institutions, in addition to centering issues of cultural familiarity and college proximity, may better explain the decisions of rural students who choose local or regional institutions because they expect that such institutions will validate their spatial identities and rural ways of being and allow them to best address the sociospatial issues affecting their rural communities.

The finding related to the importance of institutions' spatial familiarity for rural Latinx students emerged from this article's qualitative approach. Researchers, especially those concerned with rural-serving institutions' role in the success, well-being, and vitality of rural students and communities, must acknowledge the limitations of solely relying on quantitative measures of geography and population to determine "servingness". While these measures have provided a preliminary metric that defines which institutions are "rural-serving" [4], they ignore the voices and experiences of rural community members who may have disparate understandings of which institutions truly serve them. For example, the students in this study did not reference institutions that conferred degrees in agriculture, natural resources, and parks and recreation as outlined by Koricich et al.'s [15] rural-serving institution definition. Centering the voices of rural students and community members through qualitative and mixed method research approaches may produce revised or new constructions of rural-serving institutions that are more consistent with the views and needs of rural communities, which may also vary across race/ethnicity, geography, and other factors.

Lastly, this article captured how rural Latinx students imagined their institutions to be and how their spatial imaginations of those institutions shaped their college choices. The *pláticas* for this article were conducted at the end of students' senior year of high school when they had already made their final decisions about where to attend college. Future research should conduct longitudinal studies from college choice to college transition and, better yet, to college completion. Studies such as these would provide great insight into how students experience their college choices after transitioning. It is likely, for instance, that the campus elements that motivated rural Latinx students to choose their respective institutions may be unsatisfying or, worse, nonexistent. Following students over an extended period and examining how they experience their college choices will also bridge the college choice and transition and completion literature that often discusses these spaces of higher education as separate experiences. Yet, this study found that rural Latinx students enrolled

in institutions in which they envision they will be successful. Analyzing how students experience their choices can also lead to new recommendations for practice, particularly for rural-serving institutions that draw rural Latinx students in and are invested in retaining and graduating them.

7.2. Recommendations for Practice

This study contributes to scholarship that centers students' voices in informing how institutions can better and equitably serve all students, especially considering the intersectional identities that rural Latinx students bring with them that require proactive and intentional practices and resources to support them. While our study highlights campus elements essential for rural Latinx students attending RSIs in the San Joaquin Valley, our study also has important implications for non-RSIs. While many institutions may not be classified as an RSI or are not located in or near a rural area, it is imperative that these institutions also consider ways that their campus environments can better engage and be culturally and spatially familiar to their rural Latinx students.

Institutions must also increase their outreach to rural communities, which are often overlooked in traditional recruitment practices. Deeb-Sossa et al. [57] have argued that a "paradigm shift in traditional recruitment efforts [is needed] to intentionally connect with Latinx/a/o students and families in a manner that cultivates a sense of community and an inviting welcome to an institution" (p. 13). When considering rural Latinx students, this paradigm shift includes increasing the presence of college recruiters in rural communities and providing a personable approach to recruitment. For our research collaborators, these personable approaches included connecting with and seeing institutional personnel who validated and guided their college application and enrollment process. Our research collaborators identified only local and regional colleges engaging in these approaches, highlighting the need for other institutions to increase their presence and commitment to rural communities.

These personable approaches also include acknowledging students' cultural values and the family's vital role in rural Latinx students' college decisions and sense of belonging on college campuses [58]. Scholars have emphasized the need for institutions to provide a welcoming environment for Latinx families [59,60]. Therefore, institutions should consider including families in their outreach and recruitment strategies. While the culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model [19] has primarily been applied to examine students' experiences on college campuses, scholars have also emphasized the importance of cultivating a sense of belonging for Latinx family members on college campuses [60]. This approach to Latinx students' sense of belonging recognizes the importance of external influences (i.e., Latinx families) and cultural elements of familismo [37] in their college decisions and calls on institutions to be culturally responsive to students' cultural values [60].

As reflected in students' pláticas, several students mentioned the importance of their respective institutions reflecting their rural community. Institutions can acknowledge and validate rural Latinx students through culturally relevant campus events, cultural foods, murals, and physical spaces. These campus elements have positively contributed to Latinx students' finding a sense of community on campus and feeling at home [61]. Furthermore, our research collaborators also underscored the importance of cultural familiarity, particularly identifying their comfort when seeing other Latinx students who shared their backgrounds. While this reflects the importance of implementing practices that increase Latinx students, staff, and faculty representation at institutions, we urge institutions to consider initiatives and practices that aim to increase Latinx student representation from rural communities on their college campuses. Institutions can learn from student-led organizations, such as The Central Valley Project (CVP) at UCLA, which provides mentorship and guidance to students from farm working and rural communities to pursue higher education and increase their sense of belonging in postsecondary education.

Lastly, institutions should be more intentional about providing information about their coursework and majors. For our research collaborators, being able to give back and address significant disparities in their communities directly influenced their decision to enroll at a particular institution and choose a specific major. Institutions should aim to cater their information to specific communities in a culturally relevant way and acknowledge students' desires to be agents of change in their rural communities by developing practices that enable them to give back, such as by providing students with internship opportunities that align with their specific majors and future careers and establishing community partnerships with rural communities where students can engage in service work and leadership development.

8. Conclusions

This qualitative study utilized three indicators from Museus' [19] culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model to identify the campus elements that influenced rural Latinx students to enroll in a higher education institution in California's San Joaquin Valley. Our study amplifies the need for higher education institutions to not only strive to become Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) but also Rural-Serving Institutions (RSIs) to support rural Latinx students in college and beyond. However, for higher education institutions to embody a rural-serving institutional identity, they need to consider how rural Latinx students envision an RSI so that institutions can engage in proactive efforts that promote the successful college completion of rural Latinx students. The U.S. has seen more Latinx students enrolling in higher education nationwide [62]. As geographical demographics continue to change, with more rural communities experiencing an increase in diversity [63], higher education institutions need to provide resources for rural Latinx students to promote equity in higher education for this institutionally marginalized student group. This commitment from higher education institutions to become HSIs and RSIs involves expanding college access, offering rural initiatives that address the needs of rural students and communities, and promoting a campus environment that includes rural Latinx students' spatial imaginations of a racially and spatially inclusive campus with opportunities to build tight-knit collegiate environments and support their desires to give back and transform their rural communities.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.P.; Methodology, M.P.; Formal analysis, M.P.; Investigation, M.P.; Resources, M.P.; Data curation, M.P.; Writing—original draft, M.P., M.N.M., D.R.A. and S.T.; Writing—review & editing, M.P.; Supervision, M.P.; Project administration, M.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of University of California, San Diego (protocol code 210079SX and 2 August 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: We thank the rural Latinx research collaborators who participated in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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