

The Rural Lifeworld as a Pathway to Career Identity: Lessons From a Non-School Internship Study

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Abstract

This case examines two Appalachian Ohio organizations outside the boundaries of formal schooling that address issues of youth outmigration and sustainable community development through non-school internships. Twenty-five participants who completed internships from 2016–2020 were interviewed on topics related to their career pathways, social capital acquisition, and community connections. This case relates to the 3rd wave of economic development which has elevated social capital and cross-sector collaboration, but also the emerging 4th wave of economic development that finds communities prioritizing people and “place-making”. The key finding — participants’ career narratives — indicates place plays an emotional and material role in fostering entrepreneurship education and similar forms of workforce development in rural areas.

Keywords

enterprise education, entrepreneurial ecosystem, secondary school, experiential learning, rural education

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Introduction

At the close of July 2022, Bryce Oates wrote to *Keep It Rural* subscribers: “And when it comes to ‘what the federal government should do for rural America,’ there is no term more popular these days than ‘rural prosperity.’” Oates, a *Daily Yonder* contributor, frequently devotes his newsletter to considering how law and policy that begins in the hallways of Washington, D.C. might impact the realities of life in rural communities. In this edition, Oates (2022) deftly points out the nation’s leading political parties have dichotomous views of rural prosperity. He concludes the Republican party narrows the focus to agriculture and energy while the Democrats have a broader, more diffuse approach.

We draw attention to Oates’ analysis because rural intermediary organizations — the focus of this article — work at the intersection of these political tensions. Intermediary organizations facilitate cross-sector collaborations across government, education, businesses, healthcare, social services, nonprofits, and community organizations. In rural communities, intermediary organizations contribute to the entrepreneurial social infrastructure that supports community level social capital (Flora & Flora, 2003). This infrastructure is built through the services most intermediaries are designed to provide including the mobilization of resources, facilitation of inclusive and diverse networks, and depersonalization of political tensions in favor of supporting progress (Flora & Flora, 1993).

Deller (2021) believes the United States is entering a 4th wave of economic development that prioritizes people and “place making”. In 4th wave economic development, community assets contribute to people’s desire to live in a geographic locale, and this motivates forms of entrepreneurship. In turn, intermediary organizations that place importance on mitigating the outmigration of rural youth by focusing on entrepreneurship education and similar forms of workforce development will play an essential role in 4th wave as it crosses rural America (Ricket et al., 2022).

Crucially, intermediary organizations work outside the boundaries of formal schooling and therefore see the tensions Oates references as a doorway to conversations that might move cross-sector stakeholders to take actions that build community level social capital (Beaulieu et al., 2003; Giovannitti, 2021). Our study of non-school internships hosted by two intermediary organizations in Appalachian Ohio further corroborates this assumption. Participants-- high school students placed in local businesses for immersive, experiential learning--crafted narratives of personal career identities couched in larger community identities. This impacted participants’ career pathways and social capital acquisition, but also positioned some participants to reconsider their role within the community.

We begin with discussion of *Community and Career Connected Learning (CCCL)* — the learning theory that drives the design of the non-school internships we studied. To put the internships in context for readers we describe the place and process as a “case”. Following the case we outline our research methods, present the career narrative finding and its relationship to engagement with community ecosystem assets, and relate

these findings to a discussion of how results might inform the design and evaluation of similar forms of entrepreneurship education in disparate rural places.

Community and Career Connected Learning: The Theory to Practice Continuum

CCCL is a learning system integrating community partnerships and career awareness into experiential, place-based learning (Yahn et al., 2023; Ricket, 2022). CCCL is an approach to learning where local community, business, and industry are active participants in the schooling process. In both formal and informal spaces, along a continuum of applied practice, students learn from community members in experiential, place-based learning opportunities that break down the isolation of the school to include the whole community as learning ecosystem (Hecht & Crowley, 2019; Theobald, 1997). Critical facets of CCCL are:

1. Learning extends to audiences and experiences beyond the classroom and the teacher (Allen, 2000; Almeida & Steinberg, 2001; Christensen, 2015; Cartun et al., 2017; Freire, 2000/1970; Mather, 2000; Vaclavik et al., 2017).
2. Students participate in an active learning process that involves a community member(s) (i.e., businessperson, staff from community organization, government official) also as an active participant (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2014; Ito et al., 2020; Scales et al., 2011; Vaclavik et al., 2017).
3. Learning incorporates assets from the local community, including its land and culture (Bauch, 2001; Holtkamp & Weaver, 2018; Howley, 2006; Kretzmann et al., 2005; McLennen, 2017; Montessori, 2007/1948; Theobald, 1997).
4. Learning, in both formal and informal school spaces, includes a continuum of experiences from exploration to extended immersion, connected to careers and occupations (Cartun et al., 2017; Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2019; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Russell et al., 2013).

Theoretical Origins

CCCL is a praxis of an ecological theory of learning and development with a deep history in holistic education and democratic education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Epstein, 2011; 2019; Hecht & Crowley, 2019; Miller, 1992; Sharp et al., 2020). Although Piaget (1926; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), Dewey (1997), Freire (1970/2000), and Kolb (1984) are widely cited in tracing histories of traditional experiential learning pedagogical approaches, CCCL draws more directly from Maria Montessori's theory, method, and practice of education and child development predicated on student agency, creativity, choice, and mixed-age learning communities (Standing, 1957; Montessori, 2007/1948). Even before Dewey's (1997) *Experience in Education*, Montessori (1913) was writing and lecturing on the developmental need for the children, especially adolescents, to shape an entrepreneurial identity within the larger life of the community

by immediately applying newly formed abstract knowledge in authentic contexts (Montessori, 2007/1948).

Further, CCCL, as enacted as a learning ecosystem, can best be conceptualized as a regenerative practice for community sustainability (Flora et al., 2016; Zuckerman, 2019). Unlike the positioning of urban scholars, who make use of community-school partnerships primarily to aid in human capital development and economic utility (Corbett, 2020; Howley & Howley, 2021; Theobald, 2009), CCCL draws to center theories from rural scholars such as Theobald (1997; 2009), Bauch (2001), and bell hooks (2019a/2003, 2019b/2009) that emphasizes community viability within a community capitals framework that includes but does not overemphasize economic indicators as measures of community health (Flora et al., 2016).

Distinct Ties to Individual and Community Social Capital

CCCL spans a wide range of programs and approaches that have been previously segmented and siloed, causing confusion amongst stakeholders and funders as well as educators searching for best practices. Career connected learning focused on structured and formalized work-integrated learning for older students in an industry-based context (either local or non-local) and may include career exploration (McRae & Johnston, 2016; Mourshed et al., 2012). These programs seek to grow individual social capital. For example, California's "linked learning" (About the linked learning approach, 2022; Stam, 2011) and traditional school-to-work initiatives (Imel, 1999) envision building students' occupational identity as a way to funnel them into a career pathway or pipeline that results in a clear economic, employee role upon graduation. In contrast, community connected learning leverages aspects of community social capital. This form of learning bring adults from the community into the classroom as mentors and experts, for purposes of facilitating competency building such as problem solving, as in the Buck Institute's model (PBL Works, 2022) and nurturing student development, interests, and academic achievement with the presences of (non-local or local) supportive adults (Cartun et al., 2017; Ito et al., 2013; 2020; Maul et al., 2016; Vaclavik et al., 2017) as demonstrated in University of California Irvine as The Connected Learning Alliance.

CCCL explicitly draws together both concepts, positioning *community* ahead of *career* to underscore that for many rural people, careers and their economic utility are secondary to the importance of community, a means to residing in a place amongst relationships with kin, friends, and land. Scholarship in rural education (Crosnoe, 2004; Sherman & Sage, 2011) and memoirs of growing up in the rural lifeworld (Rebanks, 2015; Snyder, 2018) have identified a deficit view of students' individual social capital wherein ties to family, extended family, cultural norms, and teacher influence represent negative forces informing "low" (non-college) student aspirations (Beaulieu et al., 2003; Byun et al., 2012; Sharp et al., 2020). However, CCCL honors the importance of place and place-attachment to rural youth development and social capital building (Howley, 2006; Holtkamp & Weaver, 2018). Community level social capital, built

through interacting with other community capitals in CCCL strengthens the social infrastructure of the community, thus creating the supports necessary for community thriving and overall community wealth (Flora et al., 2016, p. 171).

Inroad to “Rural Prosperity”

Scholars identify community viability and economics as a durable issues in rural education that is often exacerbated by educational policy and curricular trends oriented within urban-centric values (Johnson, 2014). CCCL is learning system that is designed to intentionally disrupt such threats to rural school and community viability (Yahn et al., 2023). Facilitators of CCCL accomplish this by drawing from Flora and Flora’s (1996) perspective that community level social capital is built when stakeholders leverage tensions to drive the process that leads to reaching goals or realizing successes.

High schools are consequential sites for the creation of social capital (Busette et al., 2020), but, again, policy that drives secondary curriculum and organizational structures privileges social mobility at the expense of community viability (Cobb, 1996; Theobald & Campbell, 2014; Tyack, 1974; Tye, 2000). In contrast, the flexible, yet structured experiences of CCCL seeks to transform educational spaces by drawing in intermediary organizations and opening access to opportunities to create social capital for *all* students, not just one targeted demographic (i.e., affluent students whose parents can facilitate opportunities, or CTE students) (Barron, 2006; Putnam, 2015; Russell et al., 2013). The relational process of CCCL takes a unique view of how social capital can foster rural prosperity by challenging urban centric notions of social capital as a commodity whose acquisition serves the primary purpose of social mobility. CCCL, through purposeful local community engagement in education, takes a broader, particularly rural, perspective of social capital as embedded in a community capitals framework wherein social capital building between students, community members, and organizational structures supports the viability of the entire community ecosystem (Flora et al., 2016).

Practical Applications Related to Entrepreneurship Education

CCCL draws from research in positive youth development, social capital building and mobilization, and pedagogical research to conclude that all students need a range of experiences beginning with exploration of the community and later in development, careers, that slowly builds connection and sustained engagement, culminating in more formalized and immersive work-based learning experiences (See Figure 1). In practice, the entire community ecosystem is leveraged for learning. Adults from the community facilitate learning in the classroom as mentors and experts and learners travel beyond classroom walls for immersive, interactive experiences with community assets. In turn, rural students experience the benefits of bridging social capital because CCCL immerses students in boundary spanning work (see examples below). In this way CCCL to supports students *and* their communities by strengthening “entrepreneurial social

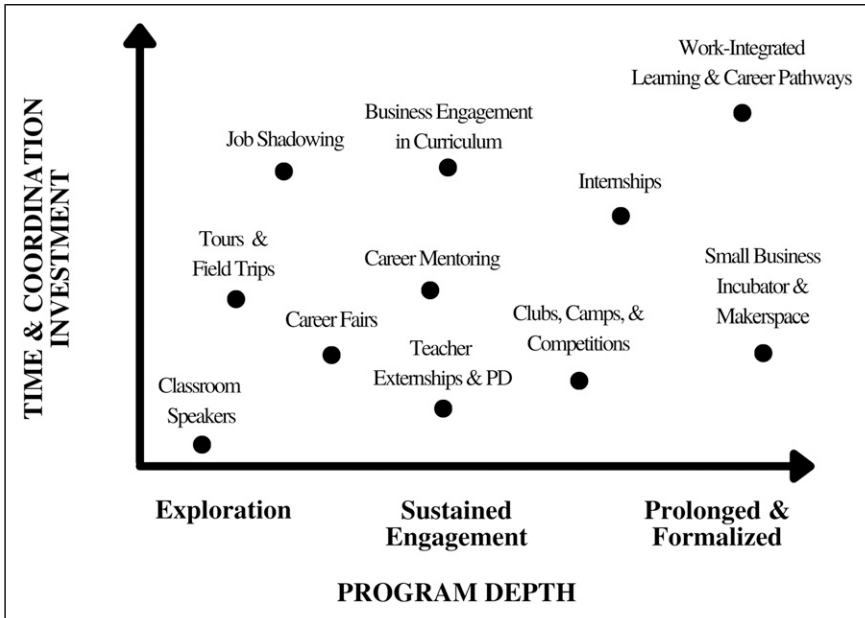


Figure 1. Activities Included in the CCCL Continuum.

infrastructure” (Flora et al., 2016). CCCL is primed to play an essential role in 4th wave economic development because it can support what Pender et al. (2012) describe as non-traditional rural wealth creation strategies. These strategies, which include small business entrepreneurship, cluster-based development, rural innovation, and investing in the creative class, require the support of educational services and resources, cross-sector collaboration, and regional networking.

Examples of CCCL at the program level include, but are not limited to, job shadowing, internships, mentoring, tours of local businesses, teacher externships, design challenges, career pathways, career fairs and panels, entrepreneurship clubs, and makerspace opportunities. In the classroom CCCL includes inviting community experts to participate in classroom instruction and curriculum design, engaging business and community organizations in problem-based or project-based learning, providing students the opportunity to showcase learning to audiences of community members via presentations or participation at local meetings, outdoor education, and targeted field trips.

The Case: Non-School Internships In Appalachian Ohio

Building Bridges to Careers (BB2C) and Rural Action are two rural intermediary organizations committed to reversing youth outmigration. We contextualize their non-

school internships as a “case” to illustrate how these internships relate to entrepreneurial social infrastructure. We include a summary of the tensions influencing grass roots initiatives and top-down policy and funding, keeping in the periphery the growing influence of 4th wave economic development initiatives. Drawing from Flora and Flora (1996, 2003) we suggest conflicts the intermediaries experience can lead to communal good when stakeholders morph tensions into action steps that build horizontal social capital.

Appalachian Ohio

Appalachian Ohio spans 32 counties beginning in far northeast Ashtabula county and spanning southward passing the borders of Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky before reaching southern Clermont county. Much of the region’s topography reflects the stopping point of the glaciers and notably includes the Southeast Ohio hills and Ohio River. Broadly, [Ohio’s Department of Development \(2022\)](#) describes Appalachian Ohio as a rural region of the state (over half of which is forested) with an economic history of boom to bust cycles driven by natural resource extraction. Other prominent employers in the region are agriculture, steel, and manufacturing. Population across the region declined by more than 50,000 residents in the last decade and is projected to almost double this by 2030.

Economic indicators such as increases to countywide poverty, lagging broadband access, and infrastructure instability reveal tensions that influence community development strategies ([Ohio Department of Development, 2022](#)). Yet the region is recognized for boasting the majority of Ohio’s natural capital and for its established intermediary organizations (e.g. BB2C and the Collins Career Center) that build social capital across their networks ([Ohio Department of Development, 2022](#)). Targeted aid comes from a collaboration between the Appalachian Regional Commission the state of the Ohio and is sent to the region’s four Local Development Districts ([Ohio Department of Development](#)). In turn the Local Development Districts are charged with fostering financial and political capital in the region-- forms of community capital that are considered essential to rural community viability ([Flora et al., 2016](#); [Urban Institute, 2021](#)).

Building Bridges to Careers and Rural Action

BB2C and Rural Action are intermediary organizations located in Appalachian Ohio that partner to offer CCCL opportunities to high school students via non-school internships. Rural Action is a nonprofit with headquarters in Athens county working to overcome the legacy of negative externalities created by the extraction industry through diversifying local economies. As an organization focused on sustainable development, it hosts internships specifically tied to businesses and community partners who support environmental and economic sustainability. Examples of partners include small businesses arising to meet the region’s shift to the preservation of natural capital and an

economy based on ecotourism, local farms specializing in permaculture or forest agriculture, and visitor's centers focused on aiding downtown revitalization efforts.

BB2C is a nonprofit in Marietta, Ohio that fosters student, business, and civic relationships to inspire career choice through experience, entrepreneurship, and education. Most of the BB2C internships take place in small or medium-sized businesses in the local area, and BB2C also runs a small business incubator which requires all incubatees to facilitate a high school intern or job shadow as part of incubator membership. Both intermediaries strive to avoid the idealization of individual social capital at the expense of the community level social capital needed to sustain rural prosperity. Instead, they work to orient cross-sector stakeholders to commit to the communal good.

BB2C and Rural Action's work is often described as "boundary-spanning" because their programs seek to create change by reinforcing the connectivity between those people, places, and social groups via experiences within a learning ecosystem that includes the entire community. Leadership across the two organizations recognize they are working within generational rural Appalachian communities where a sense of place closely matches [Cartel et al.'s \(2022\)](#) definition of "subjective and emotional attachment people develop in relation to a place" (p. 354). BB2C and Rural Action understand that rural Appalachians' sense of place is a continuum ranging from positive to negative correlations with a place. This nuanced sense of place is also illustrated in the career narratives of participants' in this study. For example some participants indicated reorienting their sense of place towards the positive, while others were inspired to imagine how they might contribute to improving upon the more negative aspects of their "place" (local community). Collectively, the career narratives presented in the findings are indicative of how the internship program reaches far beyond economic security and developmental skills, touching on the wellbeing, purpose, and community integration essential to maintaining rural community viability.

2016–2020 Interns Profile. Participants ($n = 25$) in this study completed their internships between 2016–2020 and are high school graduates. At the time of their internship 21 participants attended high schools across a cluster of Appalachian Ohio's southeastern counties. Four participants were from neighboring Wood County, West Virginia and sought participation in BB2C's internship program through family and school networks. As of spring 2021 15 participants continued to live in the region — five had fulltime employment and 10 were enrolled in college or technical training. Ten participants were pursuing college or technical training outside of Appalachian Ohio or the neighboring West Virginia counties. All participants recommended the internship experience be offered to students at their high school. The most important changes participants attributed to the internship were acquisition of professional skills/dispositions (52%), career path selection (20%), recognizing and contributing to community capitals (20%), and networking with supportive adults (8%).

2016–2020 Host Site Profile. The host sites facilitating the internship experience were comprised of mainly small and medium-sized businesses with a local founder, president, or owner (48%). Examples of these host sites include an outdoor recreation outfitter, a hair salon and spa, and a native plant sanctuary. Other host sites (44%) included local community foundations, nonprofits, and public works organizations. Large employers (8%) including a healthcare provider, one of the largest employers in the region, and one manufacturer made up only two of the total internship placements.

Internship Design. The internship experience facilitated by both Rural Action and BB2C draws from theories foundational to CCCL, especially youth thriving, and are designed and implemented outside the walls of formal P-12 public education. To that end, the internship is designed as an exploratory process engaging students directly with multiple community assets to draw out (*educare*) and students’ “sparks” and connect them to career paths in the local community (Benson & Scales, 2009; Scales et al., 2011). The internship experience pairs one student with a local business or community organization for 40–80 hours of work. The programs are designed to be as flexible, emphasizing shadowing and adult connections prior to beginning projects or “work” associated with the internship.

Research Methods

Data Set Origins

BB2C and Rural Action commissioned a research team to collect data on the post-graduation impact of the internships. While the organizations had captured data immediately after the internship such as general learning outcomes and whether or not the internship led to an offer of employment, both BB2C and Rural Action wanted to understand the lingering impacts of the internship on students’ life trajectory including decisions about career and decisions to live and work in the region. The organizations requested a report structure accessible to stakeholders across sectors and indicated a growing interest from state and local lawmakers and grant funders (see Ricket et al., 2021). The research team accessed a list of 46 participants that included basic demographic data, who completed internships between 2016–2020 and had graduated high school. BB2C and Rural Action prioritized the following: 1) A representative sample indicative of variations in participants’ internship experiences; 2) Participant reflections on the internship that related to career paths, social capital, and community connections; 3) Expedited data collection and analysis. Twenty-five participants from this list agreed to be interviewed for the study. The third priority is also reflective of the pressures rural intermediaries face as they work with the tensions surrounding rural prosperity. In this case, the intermediaries’ truncated timeline was driven by a need to secure data in time to fit into grant funding cycles and legislative timelines.

The above priorities informed the decision to use qualitative interviews to collect data via phone, which also allowed participants the convenience of time and place

(Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Weiss, 1995). BB2C and Rural Action worked with the research team to devise three broad research questions that guided the design of the interview questionnaire:

1. How did participants relate the internship experience to their current career choice and life path/experience?
2. In what ways does an asset-based approach to the internship contribute to the students building and employing social capital?
3. What ways does the internship experience impact the interns' experience of themselves and the community/region?

Data Collection and Analysis

Team members conducted phone interviews with 25 participants lasting approximately 30–60 minutes. Interview consistency was achieved through the use of a two-part semi-structured interview guide. Part I questions focused on demographic information (e.g. home county, internship site, year of high school graduation) and chronicled the participant's trajectory from the time of their internship to spring 2021 (e.g. current job/occupation and/or degree field, and current county of residence). Part II was framed by the tenets of CCCL with questions focused about career pathways, social capital, and sense of community. The team convened weekly to troubleshoot concerns, memo initial perceptions, and to debate preliminary codes. Data saturation was reached through maximum variation — collecting a sample that adequately represented the variety of internship types and experiences each organization provides (Patton, 2002; Weiss, 1995).

Three team members led the data analysis beginning with a horizontal (each interview) and vertical (responses to each question) reading of the data. A subsequent deliberation informed the decision to conduct what Weiss (1995) refers to as a generalized issue focuses analysis. Using this technique the team had the latitude to evaluate interview transcripts for what could be learned from all participants while also capturing important themes in the data that represent variations in the impact of the internship. This was accomplished through coding (line by line review of data) that moved to local integration (summaries of codes and mini-theories supported by coding clusters and the theoretical framework) and then inclusive integration (reporting what can be learned from all participants about the experience). The use of coding families, or categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006), guided local integration where codes were organized into three categories that draw from CCCL and align with the research questions: career pathways, social capital, community connections. Local integration can be compared to what Glesne (2014) describes as a “theme searching process”. During local integration the team worked within coding families to verify for BB2C and Rural Action what they could report to external stakeholders in regards to if the internship experience meaningful contributes to participant's accessing a career pathway,

building social capital, and/or imagining their potential role within the local community (see Ricket et al., 2021).

The final phase of analysis--inclusive integration — generated the career narrative finding presented in this case. During this phase the team did a second vertical and horizontal reading of the data — this time within coding families and across coding families — in order to consider what (if anything) could be learned from *all* participants about the impact of the internship experience. Through this inclusive integration the team identified the emergence of career narratives: Participants indicated they used the internship to explore, leading to discoveries of sparks not yet discovered, confidence building in expectations that future aspirations could be achieved, and the cultivation of skills and network assets that could be used to take tangible next steps on a career and life trajectory. The team describe this as participant's career narrative because participants reflected on how the internship gave shape to their post high school professional dispositions and career choices, but also continues to serve as a set of guideposts.

To check for the validity and strength of these career narratives the team created an interviews spreadsheet organized by participant, Part II interview questions, and subsequent responses. The team evaluated: 1) Evidence all participants developed a career narrative to some degree; 2) Variations in the strength of individual career narrative; 3) Patterns across the career narratives; 4) Conceptually important responses that might challenge or disprove the existence of career narratives. The remainder of this article focuses on the career narratives, arguing they provide an important empirical soundbite to cross-sector stakeholders navigating the political maelstrom of how to create and sustain rural prosperity.

Career Narratives

Through the embodied experience of the host site, participants developed career narratives as they matched their ideas about their own interests and imagined potentials to the lived experience of the work.¹ These narratives manifested from the experiential piece of the internship that immersed participants in the daily world of the career field, to have a full sensory experience of the daily workflow, tasks, and “vibe” of careers within their host site. Table 1 describes the different strength levels of the career narratives. All participants made reflective comments relating the internship experience to their current occupational identities. However, the strength continuum indicates the extent to which the reflections included evidence participants activated these narratives to drive their present career trajectory or if participants recognized of how the narrative informed their decision making.

Typology of Career Narratives

Participants reported the place-based nature of the internship mattered emotionally and materially. Over time in the internship experience, participants built trust in both their

Table I. Career Narrative Continuum.

<i>Narrative Strength</i>	<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Sample Quotes</i>
Strong (n = 18)	Detailed descriptions of continued impact on current career trajectory and/or examples of action steps	“I would say that definitely learning more about my field because now I’m going into my classes knowing stuff, and it makes it a lot easier... it [the internship] was kind of like a lifeline out of the school...”
	Explicit examples of self-reflection and/or discussion of accessing professional networks	“...The summer discussion group turned into a flex credit course that Athens high school students can now take and it is a credit for that course towards their graduation. I Teach that once a week now like per semester and that has really helped me because I want, in my future, I want to be a child psychologist, so this has really helped me with interacting with adolescents at this age.”
Medium (n = 5)	Broad connections between internship and current career trajectory	“It was my first ever on-paper job and I guess that helped. Then, I had a lot of good people teaching me, and I learned a bunch of information that I still use.” “I was wanting to see if I wanted to go to college or work. It helped me make that decision easier. It helped me figure out what I wanted to do in the future.”
Weak (n = 2)	Limited descriptions of continued impact. Loose connections between internship and current career trajectory	“It made me more confident in what I want to do.”

host site mentors and understanding of the ways in which community systems integrate. Throughout the interviews, participants were able to trace connections and relationships directly to mobilization either immediately after or during the internship or showed recognition they could mobilize it in the future for tangible, material purposes. Some participants reported using information learned from connections to enhance current career path approach--affirming, redefining, or redirecting the path. Others spoke more generally about how the experience gave shape to their professional disposition and informs general career and life decisions.

Affirmed. When a participant's pre-existing interests and imagined potentials matched with the embodied experience of the work, the participant's career narrative reflected that the internship affirmed their career choice ($n = 5$). These participants provided clear descriptions feeling a proclivity toward a subject but lacking the network or resources to confirm how they might turn imagined potential into tangible steps to actualize that potential. One participant reflected:

I've always been very, very interested in the sciences, but I never knew how to get started or if it was going to be an option for me specifically. These opportunities really weren't available to me. I'm a first generation college student. My parents didn't go to a four year college, so I really wasn't sure how to reach that barrier between high school to higher-level education, specifically with pre-medicine. I was worried that I'd be too squeamish, or I wasn't going to be interested enough to go all the way. But because I was able to shadow [mentor] at the internship, he kindled a real interest in medical care. And now I've watched procedures at the hospital, I know that squeamishness isn't going to be an issue. This is an opportunity I never would have had otherwise.

For these participants, the embodied experience allowed them to crystalize an aspirational, possible self as achievable, which then fed their confidence, agency, and mobilization of social capital built from the internship in tangible steps along a career path.

Refined. For several participants ($n = 10$) the internship experience refined their career path. Participants who refined their career narratives made adjustments to choices about their post-secondary plans (e.g. college, technical training, or the workforce). Oftentimes this refinement also led to the addition of a certificate, minor, other specialization, or an added place-based interest. Specifically, participants who refined their career narratives reflected on gaining confidence in their plans, but also in their ability to navigate forks in the road when they would need to make a choice. As one participant explained:

Just getting tips on how I should approach problems in college. I think from that internship I also decided that I maybe don't want to focus in transportation engineering. I liked it but hydrology or structural engineering is what I'm leaning towards with a minor in environmental engineering. That [internship] kind of helped me a little bit figure out that I don't want to do that.

For some participants the place-based context of the internship was what helped them refine their career narrative because it had the impact of widening ideas about their field of interest which then allowed them to select an area for specialization. What they learned about their communities influenced their career paths, their ties to their hometowns, and strengthened their occupational narratives. One participant illustrated this journey in his discussion of how place factored into his internship experience. He

entered the internship with a plan to pursue plant biology in college. His internship experience with a local land conservation group deepened his field-specific knowledge of local plant life and ecological systems, which in turn, influenced his decision to focus on conservation within biology while at college. This reflection exemplifies how community understanding and “greater appreciation of the outdoors and what grows in [our region]” led him to invest professionally and personally in conservation efforts at the local community level.

Redirected. Importantly, a few of the participants ($n = 4$) constructed career narratives that involved a complete redirection of their career path as a result of the internship experience. One participant recalled that she had taken advanced STEM classes in high school because she had both an interest and aptitude for science and math classes. However, through experiencing the daily work in her internship placement at a local engineering firm, this student found her propensity for STEM coursework in school was incompatible with the reality of what she wanted for her future. Therefore, she altered her career plans, a trajectory she saw as advantageous to her in the long run:

I was definitely had a different idea of what I thought it would be like, and then being in that actual environment, definitely showed me that, hey, you shouldn't waste six plus years in college because this is definitely not what you want to do. So it saves a lot of time and ultimately, it saves you money.

Acquiring Professional Dispositions and/or Skills. For multiple participants ($n = 6$) the career narrative that manifested focused on their overall professional disposition and skills rather than a “directional” impact on their career trajectory. This narrative typology does not relate to the strength of the narrative developed (see [Table 1](#)). It does, however, indicate the importance of orienting internships towards a process of exploration as opposed to a pipeline to specific industries. The following reflection highlights this point as the participant emphasizes the acquisition of individual social capital gains [connections] that might also lead to future choices to contribute to community level social capital [Americorps].

My major is interior architecture so maybe it wasn't as helpful with my career goals for my major but [it was helpful] for ways to get internships in the future and get connections with people. They definitely helped with that. And they gave us a lot of information about Americorps which is a group I'm interested in working with again.

Engagement with Community Ecosystem Assets

Within these career narratives participants also underscored the importance of the non-school design of the internship, some going as far as describing their experience in school as isolating them or forcing them to be part of “an algorithm”. Rural schools

facing increasing pressure to standardize and centralize have necessarily siloed content and tightened focus on “academic” curriculum in order to meet state and federal mandates (Ravitch, 2010). The impact of this focus cuts schools off from the community, resulting in an acutely negative experience described by study participants.

Conversely, participants described characteristics of the internship such as flexibility, experience-based knowledge acquisition, and interaction with the larger community ecosystem as beneficial for both career and personal growth. Students pointed to the significance of overlapping ecosystem parts as an experience that revealed many potentials for their future in the career and community. In some instances, tangential ecosystem parts formed a more influential piece of the internship than the direct host site. For example, one student interned in a public service related to trades. However, he found his “spark” that later became his career pathway when exposed to cross-sector services required by a co-worker during his internship. The intermediary was able to respond to his shifting career identity by extending his internship to include a placement in his newly found interest area. This experience reflects the typical enlarging of perspective, interests, and identity experienced by participants as they interacted with the whole of the community ecosystem – host sites, businesses, community organizations, the intermediary, and members of the community as customers and beneficiaries.

Discussion: Career Narratives and the Rural Lifeworld

Collectively the career narratives indicate *the certainty lies in the comfort of knowing that they have many potential, viable futures*: it is the realization of many that leads to the certainty of choice. Within the rural prosperity debate, policymakers and funders have gravitated towards privileging programming focused on career placement or pipelines into specific sectors. A growing body of research indicates this tact disregards how “sense of place” factors into rural students’ lifeworld (Petrin, et al., 2014). Consider one participant’s rich commentary on the intense pressure she felt from school personnel and family to name her chosen career path as she approached high school graduation. Questions of “What are you going to do after graduation?” caused her severe anxiety. She said she wanted to do was pursue media arts but could not see how pursuing media would fit with her responsibilities to her family in her rural town.

I was really unsure if I wanted to go to college. I was honestly, like, I was all over the place. I was like, maybe I’ll be a carpenter, which is really random. But I just was really scared of failing and not putting myself in a situation where if I don’t do well, then I’m just like, paying all this money for nothing. It just and like I said, like the whole media world, to me, just seems so closed off and like unreachable. And the internship really helped me like, realize, like, oh, there’s all these other people that like, did the same thing that I did. You know, they’re making a living, they’re not living on the street.

Rural scholarship has disproved many of the supposed benefits linked to prioritizing individual social capital, finding it comes at the expense of the community level social capital needed to sustain rural prosperity (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2020; Sherman, 2009; Tieken, 2014; Woodrum, 2004). In this study many participants pointed to the new connections made at the host site as critical in constructing ideas of what a future would look like in a particular career field. This further validates the growing call for place sensitive research to attend to the interrelationships amongst individuals, communities, and place (Cartel et al., 2022; Erfani, 2022). Throughout the interviews, participants gave priority to the ways in which interacting with a diverse array of people and community assets led to higher levels of self-confidence and agency in navigating adult systems over outcomes tied to specific occupational planning. Many participants indicated what they learned about their communities influenced their career paths, their ties to their hometowns, and strengthened their career narratives. This study joins others concerned with social capital and focused on ties and connectedness of an individual student (especially with respect to familial ties) which influence academic performance (Israel & Beaulieu, 2004; Parcel & Dufur, 2001). The data also presents the opportunity to challenge a deficit view of these ties that can be seen in studies that seek to explain why students in rural areas have “lower” (i.e., non-college) aspirations (Byun et al., 2012; Sharp et al., 2020).

Flexibility of Non-School Internships

Internships and work-based learning are commonly categorized as workforce development, leveraged by policymakers and large industry as part of “pipeline” strategies indicative of first wave economic development strategies to move human capital from secondary school to fill skilled labor positions. In contrast, BB2C and Rural Action are both nonprofits seeking to create community thriving through an intergenerational, ecosystems approach, an approach that mirrors regional thinking about 3rd and 4th wave economic development policy and action (i.e., *EntreWorks*, 2018). Where 1st wave economic development emphasized supply-side policies for relocation of large industries, called “smokestack chasing,” the resulting outcomes for many rural places in Appalachian Ohio is a legacy of complete economic dependence on large absentee employers who extract both the raw natural resources and the profit they generate, leaving communities with lower quality of life and community degeneration (Blair & Carroll, 2009; Summers & Branch, 1984; Shaffer et al., 2006; Turner, 2003; Quinones, 2015). Following the realization that small and medium enterprises play a central role in overall community stability, wealth, and resiliency, 2nd and 3rd wave economic development theory shifted toward policies bolstering the importance of market-based, entrepreneurial forces in indigenous wealth creation (Clarke & Gaile, 1992; Olberding, 2002).

Most recently, 4th wave economic development places distinct priorities on “place making” through a people-oriented view that takes an ecosystems approach to community sustainability (an alternative to previous economic growth models of

continual, unfettered growth) by combining aspects of community development and economic development (Deller, 2021; Ricket et al., 2022). In many ways these internships align with this priority. By exposing students to a diverse array of people, places, and experiences, the internship affords developing adolescents a way to try on identities and interests that might catalyze the sparks, zest, and “ah-hah moments” which lead to deep engagement and subsequent positive outcomes (Brown, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986). As internship participants interact with community professionals in diverse roles and positions, they gain exposure to different parts and interworking of the community ecosystem. This key approach in the BB2C and Rural Action internship is distinctly different from urban-centric designed internship programs that focus only on internships as a pathway to credentialing to fill labor shortages.

Recommendations

Entrepreneurship Education in the Rural Lifeworld

1. Focus on the process, not pipelines: The career narrative finding supports Redhead & Bika's (2022) assertion that a focus on outputs, “treating place as instrumental resource,” misses important processes that might catalyze entrepreneurs who choose to commit the endeavors of their enterprise to a spatial region and its people (p. 222). Such entrepreneurial “regional champions” create prosperous innovative clusters in unexpected, often rural places, because of place attachment (Feldman, 2014).
2. Use CCCL to create immersive experiences: In this study participants interactions with place-based assets often led participants to develop an alternative narrative to the story of their local, rural place as “depleted space,” lacking resources or opportunities (Johnstone & Lionais, 2004), a key barrier to retaining local entrepreneurs committed to assuming shared responsibility for prosperous local futures (Redhead & Bika, 2022).
3. Recognize rural intermediary organizations' capacity to prioritize people AND place: The entrepreneurship education research as focused on higher education and the development of specific technical skills, networks for capital access and R&D, miss the subtle, continuous process of forming social and cultural ties with the power to grow both individual and collective self-efficacy necessary for community sustainability (Jones et al., 2017). Further, beyond extant literature that focuses on the presence of a university as a driver of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Fuster et al., 2019; Tolstykh et al., 2021; Wang, 2021), the community nonprofits operating as intermediaries in this study offer an alternative modality to creating the entrepreneurial social infrastructure necessary for rural places to redevelop economies in meaningful ways extending beyond traditional first-wave mechanisms (Flora & Flora, 1993; Johnstone & Lionais, 2004).

4. Including experiential interaction with many community ecosystem parts, including natural capital and organizations focused on community development is key for realizing 4th wave economic development goals of rural sustainable development (Deller, 2021; Ricket et al., 2022; Volkman et al., 2021). Where 4th wave economic development recognizes social goals such as quality of life, place-making, and equity as key for entrepreneurial growth and sustainable economic development, entrepreneurial education that encourages experiences with overlapping ecosystem parts can encourage systems thinking and incite innovative solutions for a just and sustainable future.

Concluding Remarks

BB2C and Rural Action are intermediary organizations working with policy on rural prosperity that reflects the political tensions over who and/or what is rural America's most important resource. Arguably the persistence of programming that seeks to push rural youth into a pipeline that funnels to specific career fields is a legacy of the 1st and 2nd waves of economic development. Importantly, the 4th wave of economic development has the potential to move away from these trends altogether to instead position rural youth to recognize their possible futures. For this reason it also has greater potential to enhance rural community viability.

The career narratives highlighted in this study push policymakers to see the value in giving focus to the 4th wave and its concerns of sustainable economic development focused on quality of life and community as primary job attractors and creators supporting community viability (Deller, 2021; Roundy, 2014). Importantly the career narratives illustrate the value in rural youth connecting their futures to the place they are from, even if they later locate elsewhere. As Lester (2021) reminds us in his poem "High School Commencement Speech for West Virginia Kids", some of students will want to leave and some will want to stay — either is okay as long as they: "Don't forget...*that [they] are this state's most important resource*, as long as [they] don't fear who [they] are because of this place, then it's all okay" (p.225).

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Note

1. Participant quotations have been deidentified and edited for space.

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