Country Roads Take Me...?: An Ethnographic Case Study of College Pathways Among Rural, First-Generation Students

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COUNTRY ROADS TAKE ME…?: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE
STUDY OF COLLEGE PATHWAYS AMONG RURAL, FIRST-
GENERATION STUDENTS

Dissertation
by
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Country Roads Take Me…?: An Ethnographic Case Study of College Pathways among Rural, First-Generation Students

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine college pathways or college access and success of rural, first-generation students. Most research on college pathways for low- and moderate-income students focuses on those students as a whole or on urban low-socioeconomic status (SES) students. (Caution is in order when generalizing the experiences of low-SES urban students to those of low-SES rural students.) The literature reveals that rural students attend college at lower rates than their urban and suburban counterparts and are likely to have lower college aspirations. Why such differences exist remains highly speculative in the literature. Especially absent is knowledge about how rural culture interacts with rural student behavior.

Current research on pathways primarily examines factors used to predict college aspirations, participation, and completion of rural students. This ethnographic case study examined why and how such factors influenced students in a rural, high poverty county in southern West Virginia. The study explored rural cultural values and how rural culture
influenced college pathways. All students in the sample had attended high school in the selected county and were enrolled in West Virginia two- and four-year public institutions.

This study found that attachment to family significantly influenced students’ college-going decisions and behaviors. Students’ parents, siblings, and extended family provided support and encouragement necessary for high educational aspirations, college-going, and persistence. Attachment to family made it difficult for students to leave the area. The decision to leave, return or stay was difficult for rural students given the strong attachment to family, place, and community; yet, the lack of economic opportunity in the area affected the decision as well. Cultural legacies, traditions, and norms influenced rural students’ college-going and persistence. In addition to family’s vital role in the success of rural students their high schools, communities, and peers were also relevant. Given the importance of family in the lives of rural students, local, institutional, state, and federal policies and practices must keep families involved and replicate family support models.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is mainly a story of Mingo County students who willingly shared a portion of their lives with me. I am deeply appreciative for each of them. Additionally, many community members throughout the county shared their perceptions of the local culture, identified students for my sample, invited me into their homes, “broke bread” with me, encouraged me to attend local cultural and social events, and provided continued friendship and encouragement. For them I am grateful. In particular, I thank former Mingo County Schools Superintendent Dwight Dials and counselor Karen Canterbury; Southern Community and Technical College President Joanne Tomblin and faculty and staff, Merle Dempsey, Darrell Taylor, Pauline Sturgill, Ted Williams, Gail Hall, and Vinnie Kudva; the congregants of the Justice United Methodist Church; and Williamson Red Cross Director, Paul McAlister.

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Lastly, I would like to dedicate this work to the memory of Mr. Bob Maguire—educator, Mingo County and “Yahpank” native, tour guide, supporter, and, most importantly, friend. He embodied all that is good about the people of southern West Virginia.
# Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 1
  Introduction..................................................................................................................... 1
  Focus of the Study and Theoretical Rationale.......................................................... 4
  Research Questions...................................................................................................... 6
  Significance of Study................................................................................................... 8
  Definition of Terms...................................................................................................... 10
  Case Selection: Why Mingo County?.......................................................................... 11
  Limitations .................................................................................................................. 11
  Chapter Outline .......................................................................................................... 12

CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF MINGO COUNTY.......... 14
  Introduction................................................................................................................... 14
  Historical and Social Context .................................................................................... 17
    Hatfield/McCoy Feud and a Legacy of Familism and Localism............................... 18
    “King Coal,” Absentee Land Ownership, and Lack of Economic Opportunity...... 20
  Political Environment ............................................................................................... 24
  K-12 Education ........................................................................................................... 26
  Higher Education ....................................................................................................... 29
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 31

CHAPTER 3: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ........................................................... 34
  Overview .................................................................................................................... 34
  Achievement Gap between Rural and Urban Students?.............................................. 36
  Aspirations & Expectations of Rural Youth .............................................................. 37
    Factors That Influence Aspirations and Expectations ............................................ 38
    Differences in Aspiration and Expectation Levels ................................................. 46
  Attainment & Persistence ......................................................................................... 51
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 57

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY .................................................................................... 63
  Introduction .................................................................................................................. 63
  Research Questions .................................................................................................... 67
  Research Design and Methodology .......................................................................... 68
  Case Selection ............................................................................................................. 71
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the college access and success of rural, first-generation, low-income students. College access among low- and moderate-income students has become a widely researched topic in recent years. As tuition rates skyrocket and as institutional, state, and federal policies and practices have moved away from need-based financial aid, the door to higher education is shut to many low- and moderate-income students. In fact, in 2002 a report by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA) maintains that over 400,000 or almost one-half of qualified low- and moderate-income students would be unable to attend a four-year college because of financial barriers (2002). Furthermore, low-income students attend college at half the rate of their comparably qualified high-income peers (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001).

Most research on college access and success for low- and moderate-income students focuses on those students as a whole or on urban low-socioeconomic status (SES) students. Given the problems faced by many urban schools and their students, this attention is merited and needed, but it has created an “urban bias” to educational research (DeYoung, 1987, p.128). Caution is in order when generalizing the experiences of low-SES urban students to those of low-SES rural students. As Oakerson (1998) writes, “Rural America is not simply urban America with fewer people per square mile,” suggesting other unique cultural and contextual factors are at play (p. not provided). In fact, the rural literature reveals that rural students attend college at lower rates than their
urban and suburban counterparts. Additionally, rural students are likely to have lower college aspirations. Why such differences exist remains highly speculative in the literature.

Much of the literature on rural students and college access and success focuses on cause-effect relationships and attempts to identify predictors of college going. This type of research can be helpful in identifying various factors impacting rural student college-going behavior. Given this linear, static approach, the research fails to embrace the rich, contextual past, present, and future of rural culture and fails to illuminate the interdependency among rural culture, rural student behavior, and rural student attitudes/beliefs.

Indeed, scant research exists on rural students, especially low-income ones (Beeson & Strange, 2003; DeYoung, 1991; 1987; McCardle, 2008). In 2004-05 approximately 22 percent of all American public school children attended school in communities with populations less than 2,500, while 29 percent attended schools in communities with populations less than 25,000 (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Johnson & Strange (2007) reveal that in 2004-05 there were close to ten million rural students in communities of fewer than 2,500 people. This number appears to be growing (Beeson & Strange, 2003; Johnson & Strange, 2007). In 2003, approximately one third of the country’s schools were in rural communities (defined as populations with less than 2,500 people) where over 21 percent of all American public school children attend. Furthermore, over 13 percent of rural children live in poverty while 38.5 percent are eligible for free or reduced school lunches (Johnson & Strange, 2007). In fact, “it is still
true that most chronically poor counties in the nation are located in rural areas, particularly in Appalachia and in the South. In 1986 the nonmetropolitan poverty rate was 50% higher than the metropolitan rate” (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995, p. 2). In West Virginia, these rural percentages are even greater. Rural students make up 43.5 percent of the student population in the state, and close to 20 percent of rural families live in poverty (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Despite a substantial number of rural students and rural poverty, rural research is lacking. (Please see Appendix A for maps that show rural and non-rural poverty and low-education areas.)

There is a body of research that focuses on the unique economic and social conditions in rural areas. This research clearly indicates that some of the challenges faced by impoverished rural areas differ from those in urban areas. For example, McGranahan (1994) emphasizes the critical role of rural schools in the future success of rural communities as those communities make the necessary shift from low-skill jobs to higher-skill jobs. Presently, rural job opportunities are much more likely to require lower educational requirements than jobs found in urban areas (McGranahan & Ghelfi, 1998). This can impact educational aspirations of rural youth. Thus, a clearer understanding of the differences among urban, suburban, and rural education is necessary. Factors unique to rural areas and rural education can impact rural students and their educational aspirations, college attainment levels, and college graduation rates. Most rural researchers agree “the demographic, economic, administrative, vocational, and community differences and needs existing in many rural regions of the country…demand more particular attention from educational researchers and policymakers” (DeYoung,
1987, p. 140). It is noteworthy that in January 2008, the College and University Rural Education (CURE) Act, an amendment to the Higher Education Act, was introduced in Congress. One of its goals is to increase college enrollment and graduation rates of rural students by awarding grants to partnerships between rural higher education institutions and rural educational agencies, rural non-profits, or regional employers. However, to increase college access, enrollment, and success of these students, it is necessary to have a better understanding of what factors impact their access and why.

Focus of the Study and Theoretical Rationale

Given the lack of research on rural, low-SES students and their college access and success, the large numbers of such students in the United States, and the lower college enrollments rates and completion rates of rural students, it is clear that research on the topic is needed.

Thus, this qualitative study is an ethnographic case study of a rural, high poverty county, Mingo County, in southern West Virginia and first-year college students and students in their final year of college from the county. I examine the county’s culture and its students’ college access and success using a socio-cultural theoretical lens. Utilizing such a lens allows for an examination of the rural culture, e.g., the values and beliefs; yet it recognizes the interrelatedness between culture and social structure, the behaviors and actions. While economic capital certainly plays a major role in determining college access and success for rural, low-SES students, other factors beyond financial ones may impact college access and success. Therefore, this study also uses the concepts of social and cultural capital to examine rural culture and its impact on the college going behavior.
of students and their college success, i.e., anticipated college completion. In brief, social
capital is an individual’s social networks and ties, and cultural capital is the competences,
skills, and knowledge that lead to opportunities for “exclusive advantages” (Bourdieu,
1977) or in this case educational achievement or college participation (A more detailed
discussion of these concepts, social and cultural capital, is found in Chapter Four.)
Some of the rural literature reveals tensions within many rural communities. For
instance, an underlying tension exists between rural schools and rural communities, given
the rural schools’ emphasis on individualism over community and its role in preparing
students to leave the community, given a lack of job opportunities (Corbett, 2007;
Hektner, 1995; Rojewski, 1999). In fact, rural students who attend college are more
likely to hold individualistic goals over community-oriented ones than are their rural
counterparts who choose not to attend college (Binney & Martin, 1997), and college-
bound rural students are less likely to be attached to living in their home community
(Johnson, Elder, & Stern, 2005). Therefore, the concept of individualism and its impact
on students’ college access and success is also explored.

A qualitative study that more fully examines successful rural college students, i.e.,
those who have gained access to college and those who are graduating from college, can
reveal whether or not such tensions impact attitudes toward college going and the
decision to enroll in and complete higher education. Moreover, such a study may
illuminate if and how rural students make such “negotiations” between their rural culture
and higher education and can help to reframe the “either/or” choice that rural students
seem to perceive (choice between the individual student and higher education or
their rural community). This qualitative case study explores rural students’ perceptions of the relationship between rural culture and college access and provides insight into how rural students make the decision to enroll in college and how rural cultural values impact/influence rural students’ college-going behaviors/decisions/attitudes. A socio-cultural analysis enables me to examine the intersection or relationship between rural culture and the rural student’s college-going behavior and attitudes toward higher education. To understand rural students one must first understand rural culture and social structure. Instead of generalizing “rural” results to the greater rural population, as much of the literature does, an in-depth socio-cultural case study of a rural area, which generalizes results to theory seems a logical next step.

Research Questions

As noted above, my interest is twofold: (1) examining rural, low-SES students’ college access and success and (2) exploring the cultural values that may impact college going behavior, e.g., how family background, ties to rural culture, and other individual differences may affect college access and success. Accordingly, my primary research question is this:

- How does rural culture affect the college access and success of rural, low-SES students?

To answer this question I wanted to gain a greater understanding of the rural culture and values. Thus, this preliminary ethnographic question was important: What are the cultural values in Mingo County? And, more specifically, what are the cultural values surrounding education? Document analysis and informal, open-ended cultural interviews
of county residents were used to explore my primary research question. I also
investigated the following sub-questions:

- How are college access and success affected by individual differences
  such as family background, ties to rural culture, social and cultural
  capital, gender, and type of institution attending?

- What tensions exist among cultural values? How do they affect college
  access and success?

These sub-questions arose from the existing rural literature. For instance, Elder
and Conger’s (2000) research on Iowan youth indicated that students whose families have
ties to the land (farming families) are more likely to have access to social resources that
lead to certain competences, including academic success in high school. How do family
background and ties to rural culture impact rural students’ college access and success and
the availability of social and cultural capital? Studies also reveal that gender may
influence which factors have more influence on rural students’ educational aspirations
and attainment (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Nelson &
Beltyukova, 1996). Thus, gender differences were worth exploring. The final sub-
question arose from some of the existing rural literature that suggests cultural tensions
exist in many rural communities. As mentioned above, an underlying tension exists
between rural schools and rural communities, given the rural school’s emphasis on
individualism over community and its role in preparing students to leave the community
(Corbett, 2007; Hektner, 1995; Rojewski, 1999). Additionally, the literature reveals that
for many rural students higher education is viewed as a private good, a view held by low-SES students in general. While it is important that the current literature has uncovered these tensions and views, my research takes the next step to examine whether they impact rural students’ college-going behavior and, if so, how.

Significance of Study

The need for such research is pressing. Job opportunities continue to decline in many rural areas as good paying jobs requiring an educated workforce “continue to bypass rural places for…urban areas” (Beaulieu, Barfield, & Stone, 2001, p. 28). In the South, for example, only a 1 percent increase (from 14.1 percent to 15.1 percent) occurred between 1990 and 1999 in the number of college-educated residents of non-metro areas; metro areas went from 24 percent to 28 percent during that same time period. Thus, rural educators must prepare their students for employment in non-rural areas, and do so with insufficient funding (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995). Rural schools, for example, generally lack funds for Advanced Placement classes, gifted programs, and classes for pregnant teens--programs that are particularly helpful to rural students (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995). Rural schools typically lack the advanced curricula of urban schools (Greenberg & Teixeira, 1995; 1998). Even when Advanced Placement classes exist, they are watered down in some rural schools. Moreover, rural educators are often paid less than their urban counterparts. Beaulieu, Barfield, and Stone (2001) claim, "the human capital resources of rural people--their education and work-relevant skills--remain woefully inadequate compared to those of urban residents” (p. 28). Therefore, the findings of this research should be of interest to rural policymakers seeking to increase its
human capital through higher education. Higher education institutions serving (and attempting/wanting to attract) rural students may also discover these findings to be relevant in shaping institutional policies.

Furthermore, wider national repercussions exist. In *Access Denied* (2001) the ACSFA reports that “recent estimates suggest that if the 32-percentage point gap in the college-going rates of the highest and lowest income Americans were lowered significantly, we would add nearly $250 billion to the gross domestic product and $80 billion in taxes” (p. 13). In the committee’s latest report, *Mortgaging Our Future* (2006), college access is again stressed as a key to America successfully competing globally. Thus, finding ways to increase college access of rural, low-SES students should be a national priority as well as a local one.

Not only does increased college access and success create human capital, but also, as Thomas Jefferson argued, it is necessary for developing an informed citizenry which is essential for the survival of democracy. Bowen, Kurzwell, and Tobin (2005) write:

Moreover, our republican system of government depends upon talented leaders who can represent and empathize with all members of an ever more diverse society. Higher education makes a direct contribution to the underpinnings of a well-functioning democracy by educating to a high level students from every background who will vote, govern, or legislate thoughtfully (p. 4).

If rural students’ college access and success continue to lag behind their urban and suburban counterparts, we are failing to educate a large talent pool of potential leaders.
A lack of college access and success impacts individuals in addition to the larger society. College graduates earn 75% more in a lifetime than high school graduates (ACSFA, 2002). Higher education is more important than ever in “determining access not only to the best jobs (and the accompanying economic rewards), but also to a broad set of less tangible opportunities to ‘live a life’” (Bowen, Kurzwell, & Tobin, 2005, p. 4).

In my study of rural, low-SES students’ college access and success, I uncover the inequities among educational opportunities that exist. In order to address and rectify such inequities, we first must understand them.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study the terms below are defined as follows:

Low-socioeconomic status (SES) or low-income. I use the terms low-income and low-SES interchangeably. I use parental educational attainment, given the high positive correlation between income and educational attainment, as a determination of low-SES. Students whose parents did not obtain a college degree are included in my study.

Rural. Definitions of rural vary across the rural literature and across federal agencies. The website of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) includes sets of state maps showing nine definitions of rural. These definitions are based on various population sizes and/or proximity to urban areas with various population sizes. Please see Appendix B for the nine definitions of rural from the USDA. Mingo County is considered “rural” using any of the nine definitions. However, given the diversity among rural areas, I argue that it is difficult to generalize across “rural” areas. Context matters.
College Success. College success is defined as the likely completion of either the two-year community college or the four-year college.

Case Selection: Why Mingo County?

Stake (2003) says the reason for choosing a particular case is the opportunity to learn from it. I chose Mingo County to examine for several reasons:

1. West Virginia is one of five states that are considered primarily rural.
2. The county is rural¹ and has a high percentage of low-income students.
3. The county’s college going rate is higher than predicted (based on an initial regression analysis I ran using median family income and college going rates in all WV counties). (However, the college completion rate is much lower.)
4. There is a public community college in the county seat, which impacts the college going rate. (Approximately 80 percent of the county’s college going population attends the community college.) However, there is no four-year higher education institution in the county.
5. Having grown up in southern West Virginia, though not this county, I am familiar with the region and have access to information and people that can help enrich my study.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study were evident at the outset: the inability to generalize results to a larger rural population, researcher and response bias, the failure to study the students longitudinally, and missing pieces of the context (both

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¹ USDA website’s nine definitions of rural
wider aspects or additional features at the same level of detail, in this case at the county level). As discussed above, this study generalizes findings to theoretical propositions. Although researcher bias is a concern in all types of research, I especially was aware of how my background and beliefs might influence the research. For example, I grew up in southern West Virginia (although not Mingo County) and have intimate knowledge of the culture I am studying. Therefore, to the best of my ability I avoided making cultural assumptions based on personal experiences of having lived in the region. Response bias was also a concern. Appalachians are often characterized by their non-confrontational, agreeable demeanors. Are interviewees providing answers that they think the researcher wants to hear? By including observations and document analysis, I was able to triangulate my data, thereby, diminishing effects of response bias. Finally, although I was not conducting a longitudinal case study, I did have access to longitudinal data, including college-going rates, demographic changes over time, student achievement in county schools, college aspirations and attendance patterns, and Census data. Therefore, I discuss how the particular students interviewed for this study might be representative or not of other rural, low-SES Mingo County college students over time.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One provides an introductory overview of the study, including a brief description of the purpose of the study, the theoretical rationale, and the significance of the research. Given the importance of context in cultural research, Chapter Two provides
a social ecological overview of Mingo County. Chapter Three is a review of the relevant rural literature. After briefly examining the research on rural and non-rural achievement gaps, I focus on studies that explore rural students and their college aspirations, attendance rates, and success rates. Chapter Four provides a detailed account of the research design. Chapter Five presents my research findings and analysis related to the influence of family. Chapter Six continues with a discussion of community, high school, and peer influence. In Chapter Seven I examine students’ desire to leave, return to, or stay in their rural communities. In Chapter Eight, I look at other college success factors and barriers to success. Finally, in Chapter Nine I summarize my findings and their implications for policy and practice, generalize my findings to theoretical propositions, and recommend the direction of future research on the topic.
CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF MINGO COUNTY

Introduction

Often romanticized or vilified and almost always stereotyped, southern West Virginia is characterized by its narrow valleys and even narrower hollows, steep mountainsides, and the coal upon which the region’s economy is dependent. Its residents, sometimes unfairly stereotyped as poor hillbillies or even rednecks,² are also praised at times for their fierce independence and community, “small-town values.”
Famed writer William Least Heat-Moon’s description of the landscape is not so flattering:

The state seal of West Virginia is not a used tire hanging on a fencepost any more than the state flag is a tattered cloth used as an automobile gas tank cap. But well it could be. Heaped in yards, sliding down hills, hanging from trees and signs were old tires. It seemed as if West Virginia sat at the bottom of a mountain where Americans came annually to throw away their two million used tires (1982, p. 407).

Driving into Mingo County along the dangerously winding country roads, made famous by folk singer John Denver, I did occasionally spot garbage dumped over a hillside, but I also noticed the lush greenery and mountain streams. A visitor to Mingo County should not be surprised to pass gargantuan 120-ton coal trucks either coming or

² Interestingly, some contend the term “Red Neck” originated in southern West Virginia during the Coal Mine Wars in the 1920s in which the miners wore red bandanas around their neck “to distinguish friend from foe” (Lee, 1969, p. 99). Nowadays the term “redneck” has a negative connotation.
going from the coal plants on the two lane roads into and out of the county. Crowded into the narrow valleys are single rows of identical small houses that were once coal company camps. However, much larger, recently built “McMansions” reveal some prosperity to be found in the county. Small churches dot the landscape, their marquees offering spiritual wisdom to passersby. (“Give Satan an inch, and he’ll become a ruler.” “Exposure to the Son, will prevent you from burning later.” “Stop, drop, and roll does not work in hell.”)

Mingo County, located in the heart of southern West Virginia coal country, has not escaped the negative portrayal often associated with the region as a whole, even by its own former residents. A young novelist who grew up in the county writes, “He is from Mingo County, West Virginia. Everyone in West Virginia, no matter how bad off they are, gives thanks at least they don't live in Mingo County” (Leroy, 2000). Outside of West Virginia, Mingo County is usually only known for two reasons: the Hatfield and McCoy feud, a bitter battle between two mountain clans, and the Matewan massacre, a shoot out between local miners and residents and the Baldwin-Felts detectives hired by the coal companies in southern West Virginia, chronicled in the Hollywood movie, Matewan.

It is important to understand the realities beneath these images and stereotypes. An historical, political, social, and economic contextual overview will begin to provide insight into the rural culture of Mingo County. In his history of southern Appalachia, Ronald Eller emphasizes the importance of looking beyond Appalachian stereotypes when studying the region and its social problems. Eller (1982) merits quoting at length:
Cast in the static role, mountain people have thus rarely appeared as conscious actors on the stage of American history, and almost never on center stage. They are acknowledged to exist somewhere in the background, as subjects to be acted upon, but not as people participating in the historical drama itself. As a result, our efforts to explain and deal with the social problems of the region have focused not on economic and political realities in the area as they evolved over time, but on the supposed inadequacies of a pathological culture that is seen to have equipped mountain people poorly for life in the modern industrial world. Having overlooked elements of movement and change that have tied the mountains to the rest of the American experience, we have blamed mountaineers for their own distress, rather than the forces which have caused it (p. xviii).

An awareness of the evolution of culture and social structure is essential to understanding the relationship between rural culture and college access and success. By first examining the historical and social context within which Mingo County’s culture and social structure have been and are being shaped, I intend to avoid labeling the culture as “deficient” or “pathological” in my exploration of rural culture and college going. This is not to say, however, that there is no negative side to Mingo County’s rural culture. For McQuillan (1998) argues, “[C]ulture highlights and validates; it can also obscure and undermine” (p. 57). As the reader will discover below, Mingo County has a colorful, and not always positive, history and reputation. Careful attention to historical and social context is necessary for a thorough understanding of rural Mingo culture and its students. Otherwise, “if done in an objectivist manner, these analyses may end up passing on
problematic cultural diagnoses based on uninterrogated cultural assumptions” (Saukko, 2008, p. 468).

Historical and Social Context

Mingo County’s 422 square miles are separated from eastern Kentucky by the Tug Fork River, which forms a natural border between the two states. The Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service created rural-urban Continuum Codes that distinguishes metro counties by population and “nonmetropolitan counties by degree of urbanization and proximity to metro areas” (Economic Research Services). Mingo County falls at a six on the 1-9 scale, six meaning a nonmetro county with an urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area. Meanwhile, the National Center for Statistics labels Mingo County a “Rural School District” (http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/PDF/states/WV.pdf). Like most coalfield counties of southern West Virginia, Mingo County’s population is decreasing due to a lack of economic opportunities for residents. In 1980 the population was 37,336 dropping to 33,739 in 1990 and to 28,253 in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The 2007 population estimate was 26,755. The population is relatively homogenous with over 96 percent white persons.

Mingo County’s beginnings are as colorful as its infamous feuds and massacres, which earned the county the nickname, “Bloody Mingo.” It was created in 1895 after a moonshiner arrested in neighboring Logan County contended that Logan County did not have jurisdiction over his case because he was, in fact, in Lincoln County. A land survey found that the moonshiner was correct (although he was later tried and convicted in
Lincoln County). However, the state legislature determined that Logan County was “too large for the expeditious administration of justice” (Dilger & Brodsky, 2001). Thus, they created Mingo County, named for the Mingo Indian tribe that at one time lived in the region. Mingo County became the youngest of West Virginia’s 55 counties.

*Hatfield/McCoy Feud and a Legacy of Familism and Localism*

Even before the county’s founding, the region gained national recognition for the feud that erupted between two families who lived in Eastern Kentucky and southwestern West Virginia—the Hatfields and McCoys. How the feud began is a point of contention among historians and locals. Some say it started when a member of the Hatfield family stole hogs from a McCoy member. Others say it began after Harmon McCoy, a former Union soldier, was killed in 1865 by “Devil Anse” Hatfield’s guerilla band of Confederate sympathizers. Whatever the cause, the feud escalated in the 1880s. By the end of the decade and the feud, both families had suffered casualties, and the feud had garnered national recognition. As one historian writes, the story of the feud reveals “the character of the people involved, the geographical and physiographical restraints upon them, the stern demands of a frontier environment, the bitterness and suspicion engendered by the Civil War, the weakness of law enforcement, the scarcity of schools and churches, and the powerful influence of the family and the clan…” (Rice, 1982, p. 126).

In Mingo County one can visit the final resting place of the infamous “Devil Anse” Hatfield, the leader of feuding family. Beside his marble statue and tombstone are those of his children; several to my surprise were medical doctors. While stories and
legends do much to portray the Hatfields as uneducated hillbillies, one story, not as well-known, reveals how the family supported the education of one of their own.

Although many of the Hatfields had very bad eyesight, one young member of the family was stricken with such bad sight, particularly night vision, that in the evening he would carry around a lantern to help him see. Because of his propensity to carry a lantern at all times, he was nicknamed “Moon Eye” Hatfield. “Moon Eye” attended a state college two counties over, a two hour car drive today, which would likely have been a much longer journey by horse back then. Students began picking on “Moon Eye” and throwing things at him while he carried his lantern. Word must have gotten back to the family, for a short time later a group of Hatfield men including “Devil Anse” rode into town with guns. “Moon Eye” was never bothered again and was able to continue his education in peace. This story could serve to symbolize the importance of family support in the educational success of students. While such extreme measures are not necessary today, the support of family continues to be essential in the lives of rural students.

To this day Hatfield and McCoy are common surnames in Mingo County. And more importantly, family remains an important feature of the rural culture. Appalachia, particularly the central and southern region, is an area characterized by “localism” and “familism” (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Localism is defined as “a commitment to the place in which they live or where they grew up,” and familism is defined as a “strong commitment and reliance upon family of origin” (p. 4). This “localism” and “familism” certainly could impact the college aspirations and choices of Mingo county students. As many rural researchers suggest, rural students are often conflicted, having to choose
between college or their rural community and family (Binney & Martin, 1997; Corbett, 2007; Hektner, 1995; Johnson, Elder, & Stern, 2005; Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996; Rojewski, 1999). In Denise Giardina’s Storming Heaven, a fictional account of the Matewan Massacre and the Coal Mine Wars, one of her characters must decide whether to go to college or to stay in the community to help organize the union. He bemoans:

For as early as I can remember he preached two things to me—medicine and the United Mineworkers. He never understood that I couldn’t have both, that I had to choose…. ‘Look here,’ I said. ‘If I go off, I’ll be gone for years. When I come back things wont be the same. I wont be the same. Folks will treat me different…But dont make me go. I’ll be lonesome. This here is my home. Dont send me away…I’m scairt if I go off, I wont never settle here again’ (1987, p. 83-85).

Many rural students feel as if they have to choose between education and community.

“King Coal,” Absentee Land Ownership, and Lack of Economic Opportunity

It was also during the late 1880s that coal speculators arrived in Mingo County. Outsiders began buying up land and mineral rights in the county and by 1900 “outside capitalists” owned 90 percent of the coal in Mingo County (Eller, 1982, p. xxii). With the discovery of coal came industrialization. “By 1930, most mountaineers…had become socially integrated within the new industrial system and economically dependent upon it as well…. [T]his dependence was not on their own terms—that is to say, it was not a product of mountain culture but of the same political and economic forces that were

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3 Denise Giardina is from an adjacent coal mining county. She is a nationally acclaimed author who has written several books on West Virginia including: Storming Heaven, The Unquiet Earth, and Saints and Villains.
shaping the rest of the nation…” (Eller, 1982, p. xxiii). Eller (1982) argues that it was the modernization from 1880 to 1930 that led to the persistent poverty of Appalachia. Today the Matewan Revitalization Task Force, a group of citizens seeking to create an action plan for their small town within Mingo County, echoes Eller’s sentiment: “The influx of outsiders and exploitation of the resources dramatically changed the physical and socioeconomic makeup of the region” (Sutherland, 1990, p. 1). While a small number, many of whom were not from the region, made money from the coal industry, a larger number of residents who worked in the coal mines lived in poverty.

Abuses by the coal companies, such as unsafe work conditions and low pay, eventually led to the Coal Mine Wars during the 1920s, a series of deadly battles between coal company employees, locals, and hired security on one side and local coal miners on the other. Federal troops were eventually sent into the region to maintain order. Famed union organizer, Mother Jones, came to the region’s coalfields to help organize the miners. Miners’ efforts to organize led to the Matewan massacre in Mingo. When Baldwin-Felts detectives, hired by the coal companies, came to Matewan to evict miners and their families from company-owned houses, angry miners and the sympathetic local sheriff and mayor met them. A gunfight broke out and seven detectives, the mayor, and two miners were killed. The local sheriff, who became a hero to miners, was later shot as he headed to his trial for the killings of the detectives. His murder spurred 10,000 miners to take up arms (Lee, 1969; Savage, 1990).

The West Virginia coalfields eventually unionized, and the United Mine Workers (UMW) became a powerful force in southern West Virginia. However, in the 1950s, the
coal industry declined rapidly and became mechanized, forcing many miners in the county out of work. The UMW’s inability to deal with the problems of the out-of-work miners led to a distrust of unions in Mingo County during the couple of decades that followed (Perry, 1972). Many of the displaced miners had no choice but to relocate, most to urban areas like Detroit and Columbus. In his autobiography, Growing Up in Bloody Mingo, West Virginia, Andrew Chafin, a teenager in the 1950s, laments how deeply this out migration impacted Mingo residents. “No greater conflict occurs than when a man, in order to survive economically, must uproot his family from their comfortable ancestral home to a strange, new insensitive urban environment” (2003, p. 125). The literature on rural students suggests that they are similarly conflicted when deciding whether or not to pursue higher education, often a choice between leaving their rural community to attend college or remaining in their communities.

Another cause of outward migration was disastrous floods in 1957, 1963, 1977 and 1984 that nearly wiped out several small towns in the county, forcing many families and businesses to leave the area, many never to return (McCoy, 1990). The floods “caused social havoc and stymied economic growth throughout the valley” (Sutherland, 1990, p. 1). Floodwalls have since been built along many sections of the Tug Fork River. However, in the spring of 2009, a few months before I moved to the county, floods devastated the southern half of the county. Communities were still rebuilding when I left the field in November 2009.

By the 1980s there was a resurgence of coal mining in Mingo County, and some of the displaced families returned to work in the mines (Chafin, 2003). Coal mining has
once again become central to the county’s economy. Yet, absentee land ownership persists in Mingo County. Over half of the land area in nine of West Virginia’s southernmost counties is owned by outside corporations (Eller, 1982). A *New York Times* article reported that two-thirds of Mingo County is owned by energy companies (Ayres, 2008). In December 2008, the governor of West Virginia, Joe Manchin, announced that a New York City energy company is planning to build a $3 billion coal-to-gasoline liquification plant in Mingo County (Hohmann, 2008). The long history of absentee land ownership and outsiders profiting from, and in some cases even abusing, the region’s land and people has certainly shaped the rural culture. Many writers, from the area and from outside the area, describe the region’s culture and people as being somewhat suspicious and even mistrustful of outsiders.\(^4\)

The extent of coal’s dominance of the economy is evident in a number of published sources. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, in 2004 the mining establishments and “support activities for mining” were the largest employers in the county (US Bureau of Census, 2004). The single industry economy limits economic opportunities within the county. In fact, the Matewan Revitalization Task Force acknowledges that the area’s reliance on a single industry is problematic (Sutherland, 1990). While many of the jobs within and around the coal industry are skilled, few require four-year college degrees. Therefore, students may feel conflicted because, as one rural researcher writes, “moving up, implies moving out” (Hektner, 1995).

Additionally, one can make “good money” working in the coalmines. In 2006 the

\(^4\) Getting many stares and questions because of my Massachusetts license plates after a week living in the county, I traded cars with my parents so that I had a West Virginia plate, which drew less attention.
average earnings for recent college graduates in West Virginia was $23,016 or an annualized wage of $27,190 (Hammond & Leguizamon, 2007). Coal miners can make double this salary. Therefore, the lure of a miner’s salary may impact students’ college aspirations and decisions. Moreover, only 7 percent of Mingo residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher, so there are few college-educated role models for students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Despite some coal industry jobs and the wealth associated with the coal industry, economic opportunities are scarce in Mingo County. In fact, many residents are financially impoverished. Over one-quarter of Mingo County residents lived below the poverty line in 2004 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Furthermore, the per capita income in 1999 was $12,445, more than $4,000 below the state per capita income, $16,477. By 2006 the per capita income in the county had reached $25,150 but was still nearly $3,000 below the state per capita income, $28,206. Meanwhile, the 2004 median family income, $24,555, was nearly $9,500 below the state median, $33,993. Such extreme poverty is not new to the county. In the late 1960s, half of the residents were living in poverty (Perry, 1972). Many young people have no choice but to leave the county (and state) in search of jobs. The lack of economic opportunities and resources leads to a lack of educational opportunities. (The educational environment is discussed below.) Socio-economic status is highly correlated with college access and completion. Moreover, rural students have lower aspirations and attend college at lower rates than their suburban and urban counterparts.

Political Environment
Not surprisingly, close ties exist between the county’s economic and political systems. As early as the late 1800s “those who controlled the jobs also controlled the political system, and those who controlled the political system used their power to exploit the region’s natural wealth for their own personal gain,” writes southern Appalachian historian Ronald Eller (1982, p. xxi). This persisted into 20th century Mingo County. Huey Perry chronicles his efforts to organize the low-income residents in the county during the 1960s War on Poverty, and he describes at length how the political machine, a small group of residents from only a handful of local families, controlled the welfare system, schools, businesses, law enforcement, and even elections in Mingo County (1972). Mingo County gained the reputation of being “the most corrupt county in the state” or as one national magazine labeled it the “vote fraud center of the world” (Perry, 1972, p. 136). Stories persist of residents getting paid for their votes and of the long-deceased voting. Even some of the coal mine mules were said to have voted at one time or another in Mingo County elections. An oft-repeated joke in southern West Virginia alleges that certain enterprising characters broke into the courthouse of an adjacent county and stole the election results for the next ten years. Many of the members of the political machine during this time were said to be puppets of the absentee landowners, i.e., coal companies.

Unfortunately, this political corruption continued into the latter part of the 20th century. A 1988 *New York Times* article on the federal and state corruption inquiry in Mingo County claimed, “If there are more corrupt places in the United States than Williamson and surrounding Mingo County, the embarrassed and stunned residents of
this achingly poor coal community will gladly surrender their notoriety” (Ayres, 1988, p. 1). As a result of enduring political corruption, heavily skewed power imbalances have been the norm in the county. As in many rural areas, certain families have controlled the area for generations (Duncan, 1999; Maltzan, 2006; Perry, 1972). Unfortunately, Mingo County low-SES families and citizens have had little or no voice. And in some instances, claims Perry (1972), low-SES individuals are blamed for their circumstances. Additionally, as Perry contends during his involvement in the local War on Poverty, many of the low-SES families with whom he worked had become skeptical of politicians and the political process.

K-12 Education

While many counties in West Virginia have consolidated their small town high schools, Mingo County has not yet followed suit. However, a consolidated high school merging four of the five schools is currently being built on a mountaintop removal site near the middle of the county. In the year 2006-07 there were 265 high school graduates from the county. Tug Valley High located in Naugutuck graduated 82, followed by Burch High in Delbarton with 57, Gilbert High in Gilbert with 54, Matewan High in Matewan with 39, and Williamson High in Williamson with 26. Additionally, there are two small private schools, a Bible academy and a Christian school, which had 2 and 5 graduates respectively (CTCS & WVHEPC, 2007). Finally, there are five elementary schools, two K-8 schools, two middle schools, and a career and technical center in Mingo County.
Several years ago the state took over the Mingo County school system because of its continued failure to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) in many of the schools. The state appointed a superintendent who had previous experience as a county superintendent but also was originally from Mingo County. County schools have faced persistent troubles. During the late 1960s and early 1970s the Political Action League, the community action organization made up of low-SES residents from the county, identified “inadequate education” as one of its major concerns (Perry, 1972). As late as the 1970s, in some instances, low-SES students living in back hollows had to walk several miles to get to school because of a lack of busing (and paved roads); many low-SES students went hungry during the school day because of a lack of funds for a free/reduced lunch program; there was unsafe drinking water in some county schools; and schools suffered from overcrowded classrooms and a shortage of education specialists (Perry, 1972). This is not to say that the county did not recognize the value and importance of education. An editorial by the local paper during that time stated, “Everyone in the country is always making fun of the Appalachian region, anyway, and the best way for us to overcome such a stigma is through education” (as cited in Perry, 1972). A 1960 survey of the southern Appalachian region, which included Mingo County, revealed that about two-thirds of rural residents wanted their son or daughter to go to college, and variations across socioeconomic groups were “quite small” (Ford, 1962). This belief in education continues today. A local educator indicated to me that most Mingo parents want their children to attend college, yet they do not understand what it takes to get there and succeed. And, an overall lack of financial resources in the County means that there is
little money for education. A survey of West Virginia high school seniors in spring 2010 revealed that slightly over 77 percent intended to go to college (WVHEPC & CTCS, 2010). Close to 76 percent of students at GEAR UP county schools (Mingo County is a GEAR UP county) said they planned on going to college while 70 percent of first-generation students and approximately 75 percent of students from families with incomes of $30,000 or less indicated that they planned to attend college.

Since the state took over the county schools, some improvement has occurred. According to the West Virginia Education Information System Report Card 07, Mingo County now has achieved a passing status regarding AYP in many categories including participation rates, statewide testing, and graduation/attendance rate. However, the State Board of Education judged that it needs to improve its statewide testing for students with disabilities and for students who are “economically disadvantaged” (WV Dept. of Education, 2007). In fact, on statewide math tests 34 percent of low-SES students from Mingo received scores of “novice” or “below mastery.” (This is similar to statewide percentages of low-SES students.) About 24 percent of Mingo’s NON low-SES students scored in these bottom two categories compared to less than 18 percent statewide. Only 6 percent of Mingo’s low-SES students were found in the highest category, “Distinguished,” compared to 12 percent of NON low-SES students. Meanwhile, Mingo County’s average dropout rate is 2.5%, and “highly qualified teachers” teach over 90% of the classes.

5 Statewide Testing categories from lowest to highest: “Novice,” “Below mastery,” “Mastery,” “Above Mastery,” and “Distinguished.”
Higher Education

Mingo County’s 3-year average college going rate from 2005 to 2007 was 53.6 percent compared to an overall state average college going rate of 58.4 percent (CTCS & WVHEPC, 2007). Over this three-year period the college going rate declined in the county from 58.8 percent in 2005 to 54.8 percent in 2006 to 47.2 percent in 2007. These fluctuations may be a result of the small number of high school graduates from year to year, or they could indicate a more pervasive problem with college access among the county’s graduates. However, a regression analysis of all 55 West Virginia counties using median family income and college going rates reveals that Mingo County’s college going rate is much higher than predicted. (There is a high correlation between county median family income and county college going rate in West Virginia as elsewhere.) This is likely due to the community college, Southern WV Community and Technical College (Southern Community), which has a campus located in Williamson, WV, the county seat of Mingo, and in neighboring Logan. In fact, of the 47.2 percent of 2006-07 high school graduates from the County who enrolled in higher education in 2007, nearly 65 percent enrolled in a West Virginia public 2-year institution (most likely the ones in Williamson and Logan, for in 2002 over two-thirds of Mingo County high school graduates who enrolled in WV colleges enrolled in SWVCTC). In 2009, approximately 70 percent of Mingo County students enrolled in a public postsecondary institution were at SWVCTC (WVHEPC, 2010). Mingo County students likely attend SWVCTC at such high rates because of its low costs and its location. Students do not have to leave their rural community to attend this institution, so the conflict faced by some rural students
(“moving up, implies moving out” phenomenon) is resolved. This is explored in further depth in subsequent chapters. Another 27 percent enrolled in West Virginia public 4-year institutions while only 5.5 percent (or 7 students) enrolled in out-of-state institutions. (See Appendix C).

Among the five public high schools in the county, there is some variation among college going rates. Burch, Gilbert, Magnolia/Matewan, Tug Valley, and Williamson had college going rates of 35.1; 57.4; 59.0; 39.0; and 61.5 percent respectively in fall 2007 (CTCS & WVHEPC, 2007). (See Appendix D). Although the report by the WVHEPC does not elaborate on why such differences exist, one can speculate SES, parental education, and perhaps even distance to the community college come into play.

While the college going rate may be surprisingly high, the freshman to sophomore retention rates are depressingly low. Almost one third of college freshmen from Mingo County who enrolled in West Virginia public higher education in fall 2002 did not return to college in fall 2003, approximately a 68 percent freshman to sophomore retention rate. The overall state retention rate at this time was about 81 percent (WVHEPC & CTCS, 2006). College completion or graduation rates are even lower, but I did not have access to this data on the county level; however, the graduation rate (completion within three years) at the local community college where a majority of Mingo students are enrolling is only 12 percent (NCES, 2008).

Part of the retention problems among Mingo County students may be due, in part, to a lack of preparation. Less than one-fourth of Mingo juniors and seniors were enrolled in Advanced Placement Courses (although these percentages were higher than the state
averages). Only about 2 percent of juniors and seniors actually took the AP tests while statewide 11 percent of juniors and 15.9 percent of seniors took AP tests (WV Dept. of Education, 2007). In fall 2005 the average ACT score of Mingo County students enrolling in higher education was 19.6 compared to a state average of 20.9, a seemingly small difference (WVHEPC & CTCS, 2006). However, a staggering 62.1 percent of Mingo County graduates were enrolled in developmental courses in their first year of college compared to 34.1 percent of all West Virginia high school graduates. Additionally, only 15.2 percent of students from Mingo completed 30 hours their first year while 33.8 percent of total West Virginia students completed 30 hours.

Conclusion

The historical and social contextual study begins to reveal what is important in the lives of Mingo County students: family, background, income, socio-economic status, politics and power, quality of K-12 education, transportation networks, community role models, types of employment opportunities, distinctive characteristics of the coal industry, influence of unions, geography and topography of region and their shaping of peoples’ character, and higher education institutional characteristics (e.g., community college vs. 4-yr. institution, proximity of college, availability of financial aid, recruitment practices, image or reputation of course difficulty at an institution, program availability). As I continued to read about Mingo County and the region and as I began to interview residents about their rural culture, I discovered that other factors may also have an impact on students’ decisions to attend college: religion, athletics, other school activities,
popular culture (e.g., music, TV, radio, movies, magazines, youtube, Facebook, etc.),
drugs, crime, health, etc.

“Cultural studies research is historically self-reflective, critical, interdisciplinary,
conversant with high theory, and focused on the global and the local; it takes into account
historical, political, economic, cultural, and everyday discourses” (Denzin & Lincoln,
2008, p. 251). Thus, a social ecological overview of Mingo County is important before
examining the county’s culture and social structures. Clifford Geertz (1973) defines
culture as “an ordered system of meaning and of systems,” and social structure as “the
pattern of social interaction itself,” to deal with social change or a dynamic system (1973,
p. 144). A contextual overview situates research and participants in time and space
(Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Saukko, 2008). Contextual validity, which “refers to analysis
of social and historical processes,” (Saukko, 2008, p. 461) is strengthened by such an
overview. By first considering the historic, economic, political, and social context of the
area, we can better understand the “material context within which individuals [rural
students] are ‘making sense’” (Fine & Weis, 2008, p. 89). My study of how rural
students perceive the relationship between their county’s rural culture and college access
is situated within this richer context. To ignore context would be “the greatest single
disaster which philosophic thinking can incur” (Dewey, 1931, p. 211).

Much of the existing literature on rural students’ college access and success
ignores context and the role it plays in these students’ educational aspirations and
decisions. For example, the majority of the existing literature reveals predictors for rural
students’ college aspirations and enrollment. However, these predictors are not situated
within context. Joseph Maxwell criticizes such a neglect when he paraphrases Sayer (2000): “…the context within which a causal process occurs is, to a greater or lesser extent, intrinsically involved in that process, and often cannot be ‘controlled for’ in a variance theory sense without misrepresenting the causal mechanism” (Maxwell, 2004, p. 6). In other words, if I were to ignore the context in my case study of Mingo County college students, I might “distort” the factors that influence college access for these students. Instead of generalizing “rural” results to the greater rural population as much of the literature does, an in-depth socio-cultural case study of a rural area, which generalizes results to theory, seemed a logical next step.
Overview

Rural education research has been limited by a lack of funding and methodological restrictions (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005) and often focuses on K-12 education. In a review of published journal articles between 1991 and 2003 on K-12 rural education, Arnold et al. (2005) found that very few were higher-quality research. Not a single study conducted a completely randomized field trial. Khattri, Riley, and Kane (1997) found in their review of poverty and rural education that the research is lacking “adequate control variables,” and that it typically does not include comparison groups (p. 81). Lacking control variables and comparison groups makes it hard to determine if results are applicable to rural areas only.

Another general problem with rural research is that definitions of "rural" vary across studies, making it difficult to compare results (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997 and DeYoung, 1987). According to Khattri, Riley, & Kane (1997) the four most widely used definitions are from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the Office of Management and Budget, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The term non-metro also is used in some research in place of rural. In this literature review, I have used the terms that the various authors used in their research. However, even these definitions change. For example, in Beeson and Strange’s 2003 follow-up article to their 2000 article, Why Rural Matters, they cautioned the reader from making comparisons to their 2000 report because although NCES data were used in both, by 2003 NCES had changed the way they define
“rural.” In 2007 *Why Rural Matters* the NCES had once again changed rural codes (Johnson & Strange, 2007). In some studies, the definition or parameters the authors use to categorize rural are not even given.

Another obstacle that rural research faces is the vast diversity among rural communities and schools, including locations, wealth, and economic stability (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995 and DeYoung, 1987). For example, rural Appalachia likely differs greatly from rural Connecticut or rural Arkansas. Rural Appalachia, for example, is 93 percent White (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Therefore, research focusing on a particular rural geographic region cannot always be generalized to other rural regions throughout the country.

Assuming differences do exist among rural, urban, and suburban low- and moderate-SES students, rural students are clearly disadvantaged because of the lack of adequate research aimed at examining and solving access issues for them in particular. Some of the existing research indicates differences in rural, urban, and suburban students. What are these differences? Are they based on socioeconomic status alone or does urbanicity (community setting) also play a role? While there is a body of research that focuses on characteristics, economic and social, that are unique to rural areas, this literature review does not examine this literature beyond the above discussion. Instead, after briefly examining the research on rural and non-rural achievement gaps, I focus on studies that explore rural students and their college aspirations, attendance rates, and success rates. Most of the research in this field is quantitative, many using the High
School and Beyond survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) or the National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988-94 (NELS: 1988).

Achievement Gap between Rural and Urban Students?

For a time rural schools lagged behind urban schools in achievement. Although I only touch on this research, it is worth noting because an achievement gap could explain why fewer rural students attend college than their urban and suburban counterparts. However, most current research has found that this gap has closed (Fan & Chen, 1999; Gibbs, 2000; Greenberg & Teixeira, 1998). While college going rates are different, high school graduation rates between rural and urban students are quite similar (Gibbs, 1998). In a study on rural math achievement, Howley (2003) found that rural scores from the 1996 and 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math test were not significantly different from the national average math score.

Other studies that controlled for SES, ethnicity, and school type also found that differences in math scores among rural, urban, and suburban locales were not statistically significant (Fan & Chen, 1999). However, some researchers have cautioned that while the achievement gap does not occur at the national level, gaps can still exist at the state level (Alspaugh, 1992; Howley, 2003; Lee, 2001). For example, in a comparison of Missouri rural and urban schools using the state’s achievement test scores, a rural and urban gap was found to be related to SES (Alspaugh, 1992). Therefore, state policymakers and educators aiming to improve rural schools should pay particular attention to distinctive school characteristics and the concentration of low SES students.
Greenberg and Teixeira (1998) sought to go beyond the broad rural/urban dichotomy. They not only looked at NAEP scores, but they also broke down the rural/urban categories into smaller categories based on proximity to cities and population sizes. In addition, they looked at individual and school-level characteristics such as parental education, ethnicity, school curriculum, and socio-economic compositions of schools. Once again statistically significant differences were not found. In fact, when these factors were controlled for, no gap existed; and in some instances rural areas had an advantage. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that rural schools were less likely to offer advanced courses, which Greenberg and Teixeira argued could be a reason why rural students are less likely to attend college.

Aspirations & Expectations of Rural Youth

One particular area that has been more extensively researched is the educational and occupational aspirations of rural students. These studies are based upon the basic assumption that aspiration and expectation levels affect the actual college attainment levels (attendance and completion) of rural youth. In other words, the less an individual aspires or expects to attend college, the less likely he will actually attend and/or complete college. Aspirations are typically defined as a student’s desire to attain a particular goal, in these studies a college degree or a certain type of career. Expectations are the “individual’s estimation of the likelihood of attaining those goals, plans, ambitions, or dreams” (MacBrayne, 1987, p. 135).

Studies examining factors influencing the aspirations of rural youth and those exploring the differences in aspiration levels of rural and non-rural students reached
conflicting conclusions (MacBrayne, 1987). For example, MacBrayne (1987) found conflicting results in studies regarding differences in aspiration levels between rural students and non-rural students and contradictory findings for aspiration levels among different groups within rural populations (i.e., race, gender, and socioeconomic class). Because the studies varied in methodology and typically focused on particular regions in the country, she cautioned against making comparisons among the research and generalizing the findings from one region to another. One conclusion that MacBrayne (1987) drew from her review is that aspirations are usually higher than expectations. Although many of the studies she reviewed are outdated, many of her criticisms continue to be applicable to more current research as well.

In the following section, I examine some of these more recent studies that were not included in the MacBrayne literature review. First, I review literature that focuses on factors that influence aspirations and expectations. Secondly, I examine studies that compare rural students’ aspirations to those of their urban and suburban peers.

Factors That Influence Aspirations and Expectations

The rural literature reveals various factors that may impact aspirations and expectations. Economic and educational factors are viewed as common barriers (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Nelson & Beltyukova, 1996). However, some of these studies fail to control for factors such as gender, SES, and ethnicity. Additionally, those studies that do control for these individual characteristics have conflicting findings on predictors for female and male rural students (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004).
There are conflicting findings regarding gender and its impact on college aspirations among rural students. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004), in their study of rural West Virginia youth, found that rural males and females differed in what factors had more impact on their college decisions. Unlike the findings in the Blackwell & McLaughlin (1999) study described below, there was no significant interaction effect between sex and educational aspirations in this study of West Virginia rural students. However, gender did influence which factors had more influence on individuals. For example, non-college bound males were more likely to dismiss college as an option while non-college bound females were more likely to point to barriers as their reasons for not attending. Academic factors, both objective measures (participation in a college preparatory curriculum and GPA) and subjective measures (a student’s perception of his/her own intelligence or preparedness for college), were the best predictors of a student's decision to go to college or not. Parent educational levels also were significant in predicting college aspirations of rural West Virginians, especially of males. The results suggested the males were more influenced by family and peers while females were more influenced by their high school curriculum and their perceived intelligence in relationship to peers. Finally, SES impacted male aspirations but not female. The Blackwell & McLaughlin (1999) study, discussed in more detail below, found that families influenced the college decisions of females more than those of males. It also found that SES impacted both rural and urban males and females. Perhaps, these conflicting results are due to variations among rural areas. Or, the smaller sample size of the Chenoweth & Galliher (2004) study could account for the differences.
Like Chenoweth & Galliher (2004) and Hektner (1995, described in more detail below), Johnson, Elder, and Stern (2005) examined the links among rural students’ residential preferences, future plans, and family connections and implied that these can be conflicting within rural youth (the “moving up implies moving out” phenomenon described below). They found the greater the academic achievement and educational aspirations the less important it was to the student to live in his/her home community. Also, students who perceived their communities as having little economic opportunity were less attached to living in the area. SES was not found to impact residential attachment. Gender differences were not found to be significant in the relationships between residential attachments and outcomes. However, as we examined in Chenoweth and Galliher (2004), while certain variables can influence males and females differently, final outcomes may remain similar.

One study explored the relationship among aspirations and expectations held by rural students, parents, and teachers (Nelson and Beltyukova, 1996). The researchers created survey instruments based on items from the longitudinal study High School and Beyond and the Indiana Youth Institute, a survey designed to study future goals and aspirations of youth. The three surveys differed only in the wording used in order to make each group-appropriate. The sample included 2355 students, 789 parents, and 383 high school staff from 21 rural high schools in 21 states (one rural high school per state). Nelson and Beltyukova (1996) admit that because of survey return rates (students 71 percent, parents 23 percent, and teachers 67 percent) one should be careful generalizing their results across rural schools and groups. They found that there was congruence
among the three groups in expectations for personal and economic success. All three groups viewed economic and educational factors as the most common barriers. Also, the three groups agreed in the ranking of attributes important to personal future. However, in regard to where the student lived in the future, teachers were much more likely to state that students would remain in the area, and teachers valued the locale less than parents and students. However, rural students and parents also placed these types of values below more individualistic and economic ones. A study of Australian rural youth also found that most rural youth who aspired to attend college viewed staying in their local communities as failure; meanwhile, those youth whose aspirations revolved around community and family-life planned to remain in their local communities (Binney & Martin, 1997).

Overall, Nelson and Beltyukova (1996) found the consistencies among the groups encouraging. They asked if similar results would be found in an urban setting. From their study alone, we cannot conclude that these results are unique to rural students since there was no comparison group. Moreover, congruence might not be a good thing if aspiration and expectation levels are lower for the groups studied than for those of other populations. Furthermore, their study failed to consider regional differences among the rural schools since they are only comparing the overall means of the survey results (based on a 1-3 scale). Finally, they fail to control for individual differences such as gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity—variables that have been shown to influence aspiration and expectation levels.
Much of the rural research reveals a tension between education/schools and local communities, often played out in the educational aspirations and choices of rural students. In Michael Corbett’s study of a rural Nova Scotia fishing village, he disclosed the tension between the community and the school (2007). He even described his study as “an account of the slow, uncertain rise of a school-based middle class habitus and the transformation of the community-based habitus of work in the fishery,” as if placing the school and community on opposing sides (p. 50). Rural schools, paradoxically, are at one and the same time the unifying centers of rural communities and the vehicles that remove the individual from the community. By reinforcing individualistic goals that have very little to do with the community, rural schools lean more toward becoming the latter.

Hektner (1995) also sought to explore the differences among rural, suburban, and urban students’ aspirations and to determine if these aspirations conflicted with residential goals. He hypothesized that the lack of economic and career opportunities in rural areas would cause more conflict among rural youth since, as the article title suggests, “moving up implies moving out” for rural youth. This concept could be especially difficult for rural youth from Appalachia, an area characterized by “localism” and “familism”6 (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Hektner surveyed a total of 918 students at three Illinois sites—an urban Chicago neighborhood, a Chicago suburb, and a small town in northern Illinois. The author himself noted that his study was flawed for several reasons. He did not control for the variables of ethnicity and socioeconomic

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6 Localism is defined as “a commitment to the place in which they live or where they grew up,” and familism is defined as a “strong commitment and reliance upon family of origin” (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004, p. 4).
compositions. He admitted his “rural” area would not be defined as rural by the U.S. Census definitions and was made up of predominantly white, middle class students. Given regional variations among rural communities (Some are certainly more impoverished and geographically isolated than the community in this study.), one cannot generalize Hektner’s findings to all rural youth. Also, his study lacked a breakdown of the differences found within each gender. However, he did look at data from NELS: 1988 and found that rural students were more likely than urban and suburban youth to believe that both living close to their communities and getting away were important—conflicting goals. In other words, rural students face greater conflict than non-rural students between staying close to family and moving away from their rural communities. Despite problems with his sample and lack of control variables, his results support this notion of tensions between education and community and the conflict that some rural students face.

Those youth who choose to stay are, in a sense, “resisting,” according to Corbett (2007). He wrote, “In isolated rural places, to resist schooling is to commit at some level to membership in a community of others who stay put” (p. 57). As Corbett explained and as some rural studies have shown, because rural schools promote mobilization, modernization, and individualism, conflict between schools and communities exists. Students are often forced to “resist” community values, which emphasize, for example, the importance of locale and the public good rather than the private good. Paul Willis (1977) first explored this idea of resistance during his study of working-class young males in Britain. Corbett explained how he tweaked Willis’ idea of resistance by
situating it into place or locale. Rojewski (1999) also concluded, “The need to reconcile individual and collective expectations about acceptable postsecondary aspirations are [sic] compounded by negative societal messages about the desirability of aspirations that establish a sense of community, family, and friends” (p. 142, referencing a study by Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996). This conflict might, in turn, lower the educational aspirations of rural youth. Yet, none of the literature fully explores rural students’ perceptions of such tensions and the impact on college going.

What are the implications of individualism and its reinforcement in rural schools? Paul Theobald warned, “When a society openly embraces political, economic, and education theory that hinges on an individualistic and anthropocentric conception of human nature, community disintegration is logical and predictable” (Theobald, 1997, p. 66 as cited in Corbett, 2007, p. 21). Are rural schools and policymakers unknowingly contributing to the decline of their own communities by perpetuating resolute individualism? Michael Corbett asked, “Could it be that rural resistance to formal education can be understood as recognition that one’s social capital is localized and of little value in the face of the placeless and individualistic mobility ideology of liberal schooling?” (p. 29).

Pittman, McGinty, and Gerstl-Pepin (1999) raised another valid concern: “Tying a student’s achievement (knowledge and skills) to an economic outcome (competing in the global economy) places economic considerations in a position to dominate educational decision-making” (p. 19). We must think of a way to reframe the “either/or” choice given to rural students (the individual student and higher education or their rural
community). Otherwise, as discussed above, the implications could be detrimental to the college access and success of rural low SES youth and to their rural communities. In fact, in her dissertation Maltzan suggested that the rural students most likely to persist in college were those who were best able to integrate their rural culture with their college culture because “rural” is part of their identity or self (2006). In other words, these students successfully negotiated around this “either/or” decision. A qualitative study that more fully examines successful rural college students could reveal how such “negotiations” are made.

Only one study reviewed was qualitative in nature (Burnell, 2003). Twenty-six non-college bound, college-able seniors from 11 rural schools in central and northern New York were interviewed to better understand their decisions not to enroll in college, their aspirations, and their perceptions of the “real world.” Six of the students had definite career plans that did not require a college degree. Others wanted to explore available options, start a family, make money, or prepare for college. None of the students held negative views about college, but all agreed that going to college without knowing a major or what they were going to do afterwards was not worthwhile. The students viewed work as the “real world” and as offering greater independence and stability. A qualitative study can provide greater insight into students’ experiences and beliefs that impact college attainment and aspirations. Like other quantitative studies examined in this literature review, the regional focus limits the scope as does the small sample size.
Differences in Aspiration and Expectation Levels

Quantitative studies have compared the aspirations and expectation levels of rural students. In one such study, O’Dell (1988) surveyed students in four rural Ohio schools. Each school was chosen from one of four groups, which accounted for “social and economic differences associated with location” (p. 18). Data on students in grades ten through twelve were collected from student records and from a Student Information Questionnaire. Four hundred ninety-eight of the 632 students completed the survey, and the author used 491 in the sample. O’Dell found that only twelve percent of the mothers and fathers had completed four or more years of education beyond high school. Seventy-five percent of students indicated that they had some conversations with their parents about educational goals; 99 percent of students reported that they thought their parents expected them to graduate from high school. Fifty percent of students reported that they perceived that their parents expected them to go to college. Thirty-six percent reported that they would definitely attend college, and another 26 percent said they would likely go to college. Only about 11 percent of students expected to be in an occupation that would be considered administrative or managerial. O’Dell concluded that most of the students in her study expected to attend college. However, many of the families were low-income, and most of the fathers held skilled or semi-skilled jobs while mothers often did not work. Parental expectations affected students’ plans for education. O’Dell was careful to limit her findings’ implications to only the four high schools she studied. While the data could be useful to these high schools in gauging aspiration levels among their students, the small sample size precludes generalizing these results to other rural
schools. This study lacks a comparison group, so we cannot assume that these results are because of the rural setting.

Studies that compare rural students’ aspirations to those of their urban and suburban peers strengthen the claim that there are factors unique to rural students. It is noteworthy that most of these studies are quantitative studies. The studies of Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt (1989) and Hu (2003) went a step further than the O’Dell study by providing comparison groups. They sought to determine if there were differences in aspiration levels among rural, urban, and suburban students. Unlike the O’Dell (1988) study they did compare rural students to their urban and suburban counterparts. Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt were motivated to determine whether earlier findings that Maine youth had lower levels of educational and occupational aspirations than their counterparts in neighboring states was a national phenomenon found across all urban, suburban, and rural settings. They used the High School and Beyond data from NCES for 10,416 seniors from rural, urban, and suburban locales and matched them for socioeconomic factors. Some of the findings include the following:

- Rural students did not aspire to higher education as much as urban or suburban students did.
- Compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, more rural youth responded that a job was more important to them than school.
- Rural and urban youth aspired to community leadership positions more than did suburban youth.
- A higher percentage of urban than rural youth said that the goal of giving their children better opportunities was very important to them.
- Rural students were not as confident in their abilities to attain a college degree as were urban and suburban students.
• Rural students more frequently than urban ones said that their guidance counselors and teachers did not think they should go to college.

• Rural students more than urban ones perceived their parents as being less supportive of college attendance and more supportive of jobs, trade school, and the military.

The authors concluded that differences exist among these groups of students, and that low aspirations among rural youth are a nationwide problem.

Hu (2003), using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), likewise found that rural students' educational aspirations were lower than those of urban and suburban students, but he also noted that their enrollment levels were lower. Although Hu did not control for SES or other variables, he suggested that the differences he found could be attributed to other variables such as poverty and unequal educational opportunities.

In both studies, the authors compared rural students to their urban and suburban counterparts, thus strengthening their claims that there are factors unique to rural students. However, it would have been interesting to see the breakdown of results by socioeconomic class since those data were available. Instead, the authors listed the percentages for each answer only in the general categories of urban, rural, and suburban. Their results would have been more telling if they had controlled for income.

One such study did indicate the need to look at other factors beyond aspirations (Paasch & Swaim, 1998). The researchers examined dropout rates among rural, urban, and suburban students. Using the NELS: 88 data, they found that high school dropout rates were higher for students with low educational and occupational aspirations. Yet,
although urban students had greater aspirations than rural students, their dropout rates were comparable. Thus, entered other risk factors. Low parental education and low family income were found to be the biggest influences on drop out rates for both rural and urban students. While rural students changed schools less frequently than urban students, they also experienced lower parent-child interaction, which increased their dropout rates. McCaul (1989), using the High School and Beyond data, also examined the rural dropout rate and found a correlation between educational aspirations and dropout rates. However, he found rural students more likely to cite pregnancy, marriage and “being offered a job” as reasons for dropping out.

Hansen and McIntire (1989) also used the High School and Beyond data to explore the effects of family structure on students’ educational and occupational aspirations. Their findings confirmed many of the results in the Cobb, McIntire and Pratt (1989) and Hu (2003) studies, but Hansen and McIntire identified SES and family size as predictors of aspiration levels as well. They broke down the educational aspirations of students by income and found, not surprisingly, that the lower the SES the lower the educational and occupational aspirations. Like Cobb et al. (1989), Hansen and McIntire agreed that educational and occupational aspirations were lower among rural students than among their urban and suburban counterparts. Family size (number of siblings) was another factor: the larger the family the lower the educational aspirations. However, the number of parents or gender of a single parent did not influence educational or occupational aspirations. Finally, more rural students perceived that their parents expected them to get a job after high school while urban students believed that their
parents thought they should go to college. Had the authors combined urbanness and SES quartiles, would they have found similar aspirations between low-SES rural students and low-SES urban students?

One researcher, Rojewski (1999), did look at both place of residence (rural or non-rural) and SES status in college-bound and work-bound youth. His findings suggested that rural students were more likely to be work-bound than non-rural students. However, students in the lowest SES quartile were twice as likely to be work-bound. Not surprisingly, students in the highest SES quartile were four times more likely to be college-bound. Race also influenced whether or not students were college-bound or not. Additionally, college-bound and work-bound predictors were “somewhat” dependent on residence. Rojewski found that SES was the best predictor for rural work-bound students while SES and participation in vocational education were the best predictors for non-rural work-bound students. His data came from the NELS: 1988. He did control for a variety of variables, including SES; however, when examining the differences between rural and non-rural, he combined the urban and suburban students in the study to create the non-rural and rural dichotomy. Given the amount of research that shows measurable differences among urban, rural and suburban students, Rojewski's choice to combine urban and suburban could have skewed his results.

However, explorations on why and how some factors influence one group more than another are lacking. A socio-cultural analysis could expand our understanding of
rural/urban differences. An examination of rural culture, social structure\(^7\), and context is necessary in understanding rural students’ aspirations and expectations and their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward college participation. For instance, the literature reveals that for many rural students higher education is viewed as a private good, a view held by low-SES students in general. Yet, how might this view play out differently in rural versus urban communities? Context matters. As an article on rural education in the Harvard Graduate School of Education magazine concluded, “[R]ural schools are not—namely, urban or suburban schools, only set in remote locations…they can vary greatly, and many of their concerns and challenges are extremely place-specific” (McCardle, 2008, p. 19).

Attainment & Persistence

As previously noted, aspiration levels are assumed to influence actual college attendance and graduation. The literature does reveal a rural-urban gap in educational attainment. For example, in 1993 only 13.4 percent of 25 to 34 year old non-metro residents held a college degree compared to 26.4 percent of metro residents (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999). Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), Blackwell & McLaughlin (1999) examined how family background, school characteristics, and extracurricular activities influenced college attainment. Although educational aspirations differed between rural and urban youth in the NLSY, their attainment levels were similar when various factors such as family background, school characteristics, and extracurricular involvement were controlled. While the urban youth

\(^7\) Clifford Geertz (1973) defines culture as “an ordered system of meaning and of systems” or values and beliefs and social structure as “the pattern of social interaction itself” or actions (p. 144).
were much more likely to have a parent who had some college, the rural youth were more likely to be in two-parent families. Family size and poverty levels were quite similar between the two groups. Urban youth were more likely to have educational resources (newspaper/magazine/library card) in their homes. A little over 25 percent of rural boys indicated that a parent had discouraged them from going to college while 15.5 percent of rural girls reported this. However, for urban girls and boys approximately 18 percent reported parental discouragement. This difference between rural girls and boys is significant. Parental discouragement affected all the groups’ attainment levels except rural girls. Meanwhile, parental occupation did not appear related to the educational attainment of rural boys although it influenced the other three groups (rural girls and urban boys and girls). In none of the aspiration studies cited above did researchers control for gender. It would be interesting to know what parental expectations are for rural boys versus rural girls. Are daughters not expected to go to college and sons expected to work? The authors conclude that educational attainment for girls is “more closely tied to family background and resources than for boys” (p. 42). For rural boys the community education levels were more important in predicting their educational attainment.

Rural students participated in school activities more than urban students. According to Blackwell & McLaughlin (1999), “school activities help form social and cultural capital” (p. 39). Extracurricular activities impacted attainment in all four groups—rural boys and girls and urban boys and girls. Also, community characteristics—high family incomes and higher educational attainment of adults-- influenced student
attitudes toward educational attainment. The authors conclude that the educational attainment levels do not differ much between urban and rural youth. However, within those populations there is a sizeable gap in attainment between disadvantaged and advantaged youth. This quantitative study does explore various factors that inhibit both rural and urban girls' and boys' educational attainment and to what degree. It especially explores how these variables and gender relate.

Such studies reveal the significance of socioeconomic status on college attendance. Nevertheless, a study by Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine (1995) found somewhat conflicting, and surprising, results. They examined financial, human, and social capital and place of residence in predicting college attendance. They contend, “The cultural, social, and economic factors prevalent in urban and suburban communities that serve to push students toward higher education may be weaker or lacking in rural communities” (p. 365). Results showed that suburban students were most likely to attend college while rural students are least likely. Also, suburban students had the highest average family income; rural students, the lowest. Rurality, parental education, family income, family social capital, and community social capital were all found to predict

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8 An advantaged youth is defined by Blackwell & McLaughlin (1999) as someone who is “White, has college-educated parents employed in professional occupations who also provide high levels of family resources, attends a good high school...is in a college-prep curriculum, has high self-esteem, has a best friend with aspirations for a college degree, and participates in all types of clubs” (p. 41).
9 Social capital is “the conceptualization of social relations as a kind of capital or resource” (Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine, 1995, p. 366). Human capital is “the formal and informal education and training of an individual” (Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine, 1995, p. 366).
10 Family social capital indicators used in the study were both parents in the household, mother works, number of siblings, parental college expectations, parents monitor child’s activities and school work.
11 Community social capital indicators used in the study were number of moves since 5th grade and student’s church attendance.
independently college attendance. The major findings using these variables as college attendance predictors were as follows (data from High School and Beyond):

- Church attendance had a positive effect, especially for rural students.
- Family moves had the most negative effect on rural students.
- Parental education had a strong effect on all students.
- Parental expectations significantly influenced college attendance.
- Rural students’ parents were less likely to have attended college and were less likely to encourage higher education.
- Family income strongly influenced college attendance of all students except rural ones. (This result conflicts with most findings from other studies discussed in this review).

The authors found that rural students with high human capital and high social capital had an 83 percent predicted college attendance rate while rural students low in human and social capital had only a 4 percent predicted rate. Therefore, the authors concluded, “investments in social capital at the family and community levels can pay human capital dividends” (Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine, 1995, p. 377). One caveat offered by the researchers worthy of noting is that the High School and Beyond data were not designed to measure social capital. Thus, other social capital indicators not part of the survey are unable to be examined and controlled for in the current study.

Many of these studies also examined social and cultural capital differences among rural and non-rural students. Studies like these provide further evidence that different predictors have different impact on rural versus non-rural students (Blackwell &

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12 High human capital is defined as parents attended college; High social capital is defined as having two parents in the family, mother does not work, no siblings, parents monitor activities and schoolwork, parents expect college attendance, student attends church, 0-1 moves since 5th grade to a new school.
McLaughlin, 1999; Gibbs, 1998; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995). One such study found that rural youth are more likely to live in counties with no college, to have little access to college information, and to have fewer highly educated role models who demonstrate the value of a college education. The study also illustrates the differences in college choice by showing that rural students are more likely to attend public colleges and are half as likely as urban students to graduate from a competitive college. The author concluded that “the findings hint that the social and economic environment help shape students’ decision calculus, and the rural and urban environments are clearly distinct” (Gibbs, 1998, p. 71). Thus, a greater understanding of rural students’ social and economic environment is necessary for a greater understanding of their decisions to attend college or not. A socio-cultural case study would allow for such an in depth exploration of rural students’ environments.

While community and family factors are important, institutional attributes may well impact rural students’ college attendance and persistence; yet, studies have rarely examined these attributes. A few qualitative studies have explored this area to a certain extent by examining rural students’ college experiences (Dees, 2006; Maltzan, 2006; Whiting, 1999). Two of these studies assumed that rural students in college are exposed to different and, at times, conflicting values from the ones in their rural communities, again revealing the tensions faced by rural students in education (Dees, 2006; Whiting, 1999). The first study followed one rural young man, Charlie, and his experiences with his freshmen composition teacher, Bill, at a flagship state university, not named in the study (Whiting, 1999). Although only two individuals were interviewed in the study,
both admitted to having held stereotypes about the other—the ignorant country bumpkin and the head in the clouds, egghead professor. Charlie felt the university setting was a whole new culture. While the study's small sample size can easily be pointed to as a limitation, it does provide one example of a rural student’s difficulty in transitioning to a new environment and the misconceptions held by both student and teacher. The other study looked at 16 rural Appalachian students’ journals to better understand their adjustments to college at the Kent State University Salem Campus and found four types of adjustment patterns—assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization (Dees, 2006). Of the sixteen students ten were nontraditional students. Age and life experience could have influenced how the students adjusted to college life.

Finally, a recent ethnographic dissertation revealed that rural college students are likely to fall along a continuum of behavior that ranges from complete separation from their college community in favor of their rural community to integration of rural and college communities/cultures to complete separation from their rural community in favor of their college community (Maltzan, 2006). The students most likely to persist were those able to integrate the two cultures. Unlike Maltzan, Dees (2006) did not investigate which adjustment patterns were most successful in leading to persistence. How students attempt to reconcile their rural culture and their college culture is unknown. Additionally, the impact of rural culture on college persistence is largely ignored in the literature.

Perhaps, future qualitative studies could include interviews of greater numbers of rural students to determine what, if any, similarities exist in their college transition
experiences. A caveat is in order: Researchers must avoid making assumptions about rural students and their communities. For example, in two of the studies “rural thinking” seems to be equated with backward, narrow-minded thinking. Future quantitative studies examining various institutional predictors on rural, urban, and suburban college students’ success could also be helpful in identifying colleges’ and universities’ policies, practices, and characteristics that are helpful and/or detrimental to rural students.

Conclusion

The rural literature reveals that rural students attend college at lower rates than their urban and suburban counterparts. Additionally, rural students are likely to have lower college aspirations. Why such differences exist remains highly speculative in the literature. A lack of economic and educational opportunities in rural areas is largely believed to be the primary reason for existing gaps. Much of the literature on rural students and college access and success focuses on cause-effect relationships and attempts to identify predictors of college going. This type of research can be helpful in identifying various factors impacting rural student college-going behavior. Given this linear, static approach, the research fails to embrace the rich, contextual past, present, and future of rural culture and fails to illuminate the interdependency among rural culture, rural student behavior, and rural student attitudes/beliefs. Unfortunately, “rural” is often missing from the college access literature. And especially absent is knowledge about how rural culture interacts with rural student behavior.

Some of the literature does reveal tensions that exist across many rural communities. For instance, an underlying tension exists between rural schools and rural
communities, given the rural school’s emphasis on individualism over community and its role in preparing students to leave the community. In fact, rural students who attend college are more likely to hold individualistic goals over community-oriented ones than are their rural counterparts who choose not to attend college. Additionally, the literature reveals that for many rural students higher education is viewed as a private good, a view held by low-SES students in general. While it is important that the current literature has uncovered these tensions and views, the next step is to examine whether they impact rural students’ college-going behavior and, if so, how.

Another shortcoming of a majority of the existing rural literature is its tendency to use rural with a capital “R.” Overgeneralization predominates in the literature. Perhaps, this is due to the heavy reliance on large quantitative data sets and surveys. Additionally, generalization is problematic because the definition of rural is inconsistent across the literature. Again, such studies are useful in examining cause-effect relationships and larger rural patterns. However, they fail to recognize the diversity among rural areas. These cultural and contextual differences could explain the conflicting results found in some of the literature. MacBrayne (1987) reveals the conflicting results of early studies that examined rural student aspirations and expectations and points to regional differences as one possible explanation. Few studies, nevertheless, consider context, particularly cultural context. They also fail to consider temporal context. Semetsky (2008) writes that “at every present moment a system has its past temporal history and is also future-oriented,” recognizing the evolving nature of complex systems (p. 85). Some of the rural college access and success literature tends to provide mere snapshots of rural
student behaviors and attitudes by, unknowingly perhaps, viewing rural communities and culture as unchanging and rural people as holding generally similar values, beliefs, and attitudes that impact behavior accordingly. As globalization and technology enter the narrow hollows and valleys of what were once described as isolated, remote regions, social and cultural conflicts inevitably arise. John Dewey admonished, “that neglect of context is the greatest single disaster which philosophic thinking can incur” (1931, p. 211). An examination of rural culture and context is necessary in understanding rural students’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward college participation.

Although some rural literature controls for factors other than rurality, such as race, gender, and SES, other studies fail to do so. Such oversimplification might explain some of the conflicting results found in the literature. MacBrayne (1987) contends that gender, SES, and race are other explanations for conflicting results among studies examining rural student aspirations and expectations. More recent studies, for example, reveal that various factors influence the aspiration levels of males differently from those of females. Moreover, geographic context may again come into play as males and females from different regions are impacted by factors differently. For instance, one study conducted in rural West Virginia found that family and peers influenced males’ aspirations more than females’. But, another study found that the college decisions of females were more influenced by families than those of males.

As Maltzan (2006) recognized in her dissertation review of rural literature examining college persistence and identity development, much of the rural literature focuses on “rural deficiency” (2007). Indeed, many of the tensions found to exist in rural
communities are framed negatively. For example, Kai Erikson’s descriptions of the tensions found in southern West Virginia culture are somewhat disparaging. Erikson wrote, “[T]he people of Appalachia are self-centered and group-centered at the same time, and they live in such uneasy suspension between those contrary leanings that they find it difficult to develop either strong selves or effective groups” (p. 86). However, tension and conflict within culture and community may be essential for growth or progress. John Dewey argued that tension is necessary for learning and, in turn, continual evolution of a system or society. In accord with Dewey, complexity theorist Semetsky (2008) argued:

Tension is embedded in the constant rhythm represented, first, by the loss of integration with the environment and, second, by the recovery of a new union. These rhythmic fluctuations enable human evolution and growth as a function of the continuous reconstruction of experience based on the ‘integration of organic-environmental connections’ (Dewey, 1929/1958, p. 279). The dynamics of organization were envisioned by Dewey as organic and vital, and therefore irreducible to the paradigm of classical mechanics and the causal model of scientific exploration (p. 87).

These tensions reveal changing social structures and/or cultures in rural areas. Indeed, the lack of such conflict would be more troubling, for a system that is untouched by tension fails to adapt and evolve and will perish (Semetsky, 2008).

One of the major failures of the research on rural students’ educational and occupational aspirations and expectations is its lack of comparison groups, making it
difficult to determine if results are unique to rural students. Secondly, the studies that examine a certain region cannot be generalized to the greater national population. On the other hand, the research that uses national data does not take into account regional variations. Finally, while many of the studies that compare rural, urban, and suburban students find statistically significant differences in aspiration levels and/or college-going rates, they have failed to control for other variables such as SES, race, and gender. Consequently, one cannot conclude that urbanness causes these differences. Also, the studies that use the large data sets from High School and Beyond and NELS: 1988 are unable to account for specific community and school characteristics that might influence the choices, attitudes and behaviors of students, parents and school officials. Moreover, the likelihood of certain risk factors can differ between rural and urban communities (e.g., likelihood of changing schools, parent-child interaction, etc.). Because many variables can affect college aspirations, attendance, and attainment, the research challenges are daunting, especially the challenge to control for all variables.

As noted above, the conflicting results found in some of the literature could be explained by cultural and contextual differences among rural areas. Instead of generalizing “rural” results to the greater rural population as much of the literature does, an in-depth socio-cultural case study of a rural area, which generalizes results to theory, seems a logical next step. The majority of the existing literature reveals predictors for rural students’ college aspirations and enrollment. Additionally, the literature suggests that rural students are conflicted when it comes to college because they often must leave their rural communities to pursue higher education and that there is an inherent tension
between rural schools and rural communities because of the rural school’s role in preparing students to leave.
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Gilbert is a town of about five hundred, Baisden an even smaller unincorporated village. Go to Gilbert and turn left at the coal tipple. The coal tipple is hard to miss with its five-story high piles of coal continually being loaded into coal trucks and railroad cars. Despite the continuous flow of hauling traffic, the piles never seem to look any smaller, a reminder of the non-stop toil that goes on at the nearby strip mines and underground mines. Continue past the coal tipple and after passing through a 1930s railroad tunnel, you go another few miles. This is how you get to Baisden, West Virginia, or as most locals call it, Gilbert Creek, the same name of the small creek that runs through this narrow hollow. On most days the creek is little more than a shallow trickle, but just several months earlier this lazy creek, after several days of heavy rain, tore through the hollow destroying bridges, roads, and homes. Many who have lived on the creek for years said it was the worst flood ever to hit.

Gilbert Creek like all of the small communities in Mingo County is a coal town tucked between steep mountains. Because of the narrow valleys and hollows, most of the towns in Mingo County are found alongside the single, often narrow, roads that follow the rivers or streams that cut through the mountains. I overheard one young man describe the terrain by telling a friend “if you stick out both of your arms, you will touch a mountain on both sides.” The hills leave little room for the houses and small businesses that sit on either side of the road. In the biography of a Gilbert man, the writers accurately capture the feelings often held toward the mountains, describing them as “the
ring of mountains around Gilbert which sometimes look like prison walls locking you in but at other times like great ramparts protecting you from hostile attacks, giving you the security of a mighty fortress” (Foster & Conner, 1992, p. 26).

Driving along Gilbert Creek you pass a small volunteer fire department with a walking track. (Because of the narrow roads, there is no room for sidewalks or, for that matter, a birm). An older man, usually dressed in overalls and with a big wad of tobacco in one cheek, keeps goats at the track and ten to fifteen hunting dogs in makeshift cages along the roadside. I met many of the neighborhood kids during walks at the track. Across one of the many one-lane bridges that span the little creek to the homes at the base of the mountains sat my double-wide, situated in the middle of a family compound. On three of the four sides are houses belonging to members of the family, and on the fourth side there lives an elderly couple who is “like family.” Farther up the road is an old abandoned elementary school, where some of the rooms are being used to stable horses. And if you keep going, you reach Isaban Mountain and on the other side the old coal camps of Isaban and War Eagle, once thriving coal and railroad communities. Now, only a handful of trailers and some old log houses and a skeleton of an old motel hint at the tiny communities’ glory days.

Horsepen Mountain divides the eastern and western halves of Mingo County (Foster & Conner, 1992). Towns such as Gilbert, Baisden, Isaban and Wharncliffe fall in the eastern sector while Williamson (the county seat), Matewan and Delbarton are located in the western half. Tortuous roads connect the small towns. Mingo County is in the heart of the southern West Virginia coalfields.
This is where I lived for almost five months during the summer and fall of 2009 as I interviewed college students and community members from all over Mingo County to explore the college access and success of rural students and the impact that rural culture has on this access and success. To fully understand the culture of Mingo County, I would have had to live there for a lifetime (to paraphrase Hollingshead, 1949, who conducted ethnographic work in small town America). Even then, I probably would not have a complete picture, “for this could come only by personal participation over long periods in every phase of organized social life, combined with intimate knowledge of the people, their backgrounds, activities, interests, obligations, and aspirations” (Hollingshead, 1949, p. 66). However, by living in the county I was able to have a clearer grasp and understanding of the local, rural culture.

Living there enabled me to experience the day to day life of the community and to meet many members of the communities throughout the County. For instance, I attended local community organizations’ gatherings such as Rotary meetings, church services and revivals, County festivals like the King Coal festival and town fairs, homecoming parades, local high school sporting events and other school and community events. I shopped at the local grocery store, checked out books from the Gilbert library, and drove to neighboring Logan County or across the border to Kentucky to shop at the closest Walmarts to Gilbert Creek (a forty-five minute or hour drive, respectively). I made apple butter the old-fashioned way (in a large copper kettle over a wood fire) with the Honeysuckle Garden Club. I explored the reclaimed strip mines and mountain top removal sites on a four-wheeler, a vehicle most Mingo County residents own. I ate at
Wally’s and Billie Ann’s the family-owned restaurants in Gilbert. Several families welcomed me into their homes, sharing family meals, pictures, and stories. As I did these things I talked with people, listened, and observed. Formal interviews, informal conversations and observations added to my understanding of the culture and the factors that influence local students.

The summer of 2008, before settling on Mingo County as my research site, I spent a day exploring the County. This was my first visit to the County in over fifteen years when as a high school student my basketball team travelled to one of the small high schools to play. I remember thinking then how geographically isolated the place was; little seemed to have changed. In an initial visit to the County, I was struck by the newer “McMansions” that were found alongside trailers and much smaller wooden houses. The superintendent of schools commented that these “McMansions” were owned by coal miners. What kind of message might this send to area students?

After deciding upon Mingo County as the focus for my case study, I made two additional trips to the area in late spring and early summer 2009 to prepare for my field work. Few people move to Mingo County; instead, like many places in rural, central Appalachia the population is dwindling. This made it extremely difficult to find a place to live. I called all of the local realty companies that were listed on-line with no luck. One woman, when asked if they had any rentals available, answered, “We don’t, and I don’t know anyone who does. Honey, it’s rough here.” Having grown up two hours away, I had family members still living in southern West Virginia who were able to connect me with acquaintances in Mingo County. Through these connections I finally
found the small double-wide mobile home in Gilbert Creek, about an hour’s drive from the County seat of Williamson where I had originally planned to move. Securing housing was an early lesson of the importance of social capital in a small community.

When telling fellow West Virginians of my plans to move to Mingo County, I often got responses along the lines of “Why in the world would you want to do that?” or “That is a different world down there.” Ironically, when I moved to Mingo County and told Mingo County residents that I was living in Gilbert Creek, I got similar reactions. “You’re braver than I am.” “That is rough territory.” “There are lots of drugs there.”

And perhaps the most colorful response came from a young man who had family there and lived on a nearby creek, “Shit, Gilbert Creek. You better lock your shit up!” While there was some reason for concern because drugs certainly are a major problem in the area, I was immediately welcomed by neighbors (although many were very curious about what I was doing there) and community members.

The aim of this study was to examine college access and success of rural, low-SES students. More specifically, the purpose was to understand more fully the relationship between rural culture and college attendance and success of low-SES students. Living in the area seemed essential to better understand this relationship. In this section I will describe in detail my research design. First, I will restate my research questions. Next, I will outline the design and methodology, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, unit of analysis, sample, data collection and analysis (including validity), and limitations of the study.

Research Questions
• How does rural culture affect the college access and success of rural, low-SES students?
  
  o How are college access and success affected by individual differences such as family background, ties to rural culture, social and cultural capital, gender, and type of institution attending?
  
  o What tensions exist among cultural values? How do they affect college access and success?

Research Design and Methodology

Given the lack of rural research that has examined the interdependency among rural culture, rural low-SES student behavior, and rural low SES student attitudes/beliefs toward college going, I conducted a qualitative ethnographic case study of one rural low-income county in southern West Virginia (Mingo County) and the cultural effects on college-going behavior of college students from the county. A qualitative study was in order since “qualitative research involves understanding the complexity of people’s lives by examining individual perspective in context” (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1994, p. 235). As evident in my review of the rural literature, the majority is quantitative in nature. These studies provide, for example, useful insights into factors that may predict college-going. However, they do not explore why or how such factors influence rural students’ behavior nor do they account for context. A qualitative study seemed appropriate to understand the social constructions and perceptions of rural students within the context in which they live.
A qualitative study allows for inclusion of context. As mentioned in chapter two, a shortcoming of the majority of the existing rural literature is its tendency to use rural with a capital “R.” Overgeneralization predominates in the literature. While such studies are useful in examining cause-effect relationships and larger rural patterns, they fail to recognize the diversity among rural areas. In a qualitative study “context is intrinsic to the investigation, and…results have no meaning stripped of their context” (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1994, p. 248). Moreover, “qualitative research can reveal how all the parts work together to form a whole” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Unlike much of the existing literature, a qualitative study allows for a recursive, non-linear approach in which the results and methods influence each other (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1994). Thus, an examination of rural culture and context was necessary in understanding rural students’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward college participation.

An ethnographic case study seemed especially fitting because it allowed for an in-depth examination of why and how multiple factors, including culture, influence students’ perceptions and behaviors. In fact, Merriam (1998) wrote that the "case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon…the case study results in a rich and holistic account of phenomenon” (Merriam, 1998, p. 41). A case study is an appropriate strategy “when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 2003, p. 1). All of the above criteria fit the current study. Additionally, Yin (2003) contended that the case study is especially
useful when it is difficult to separate phenomenon variables from their context. I argue that one cannot separate the rural and local cultural context from the phenomenon of college access and success of rural, low-SES students if she wishes to have a greater understanding of these students’ perceptions and behaviors.

A case study design has other advantages that are relevant to the study:

- It “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events…” (Yin, 2003, p. 2).
- It is generalizable to theoretical propositions (Yin, 2003). In this case I will generalize to socio-cultural theory and Bourdieu’s ideas of cultural and social capital.
- “[A] major strength of case study design is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence” (Yin, 2003, p. 97).

An ethnographic approach to the case study was also appropriate given the focus on culture in this research. I explored a particular rural culture and its impact on students’ attitudes toward going to college. In addition, I investigated the local cultural values. “An ethnography then, presents a socio-cultural analysis of the unit of study. Concern with the cultural context is what sets this type of study apart from other types of qualitative research” (Merriam, 1998, p. 14). Again context is emphasized in this methodological approach. “Ethnography involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” (Tedlock, 2003, p. 165). I used students’ perceptions of culture and their experiences within rural
culture along with other residents’ perceptions of cultural values to understand more fully why and how college access may be promoted or discouraged in Mingo County.

Case Selection

Although I have stated my reasons for selecting Mingo County as a case in Chapter One, for the purpose of convenience I will restate these reasons here. Stake (2003) says the reason for choosing a particular case is the opportunity to learn from it. I chose Mingo County to examine for several reasons:

1. West Virginia is one of five states that are considered primarily rural.
2. The county is rural\textsuperscript{13} and has a high percentage of low-income students.
3. The county’s college going rate is higher than predicted (based on an initial regression analysis I ran using median family income and college going rates in all WV counties). (However, the college completion rate is much lower.)
4. There is a public community college in the county seat, which impacts the college going rate. (Approximately 80 percent of the county’s college going population attends the community college). However, there is no 4-yr. higher education institution in the county.
5. Having grown up in southern West Virginia, though not this county, I am familiar with the region and have access to information and people that help enrich my study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

\textsuperscript{13} USDA website’s nine definitions of rural
Cultural and Socio-cultural Theory

The definition of culture and conceptions of cultural analysis are widely debated, as outlined in numerous books and studies.

One factor that is undebatable about the nature of cultural studies, however, is its immense political potential. Whether cultural critique rests on Marxist or continental theories of subjectivity (both as physical potential and/or psychological interpolations), or on oppositional dialogues with Right-wing reactionaries (Reaganites in America and Thatcherites in Britain), or is faced with constant interruptions by race and gender analysts, the field continues to challenge every shift in global culture. Cultural studies is therefore championed as an energetic, polysemic, multi-disciplinary field by its advocates, or is denounced by its opponents as a parasitic, cacophonous phenomenon capable of wrecking culture as it is known today. This is because all parties involved agree that cultural studies is an inherently powerful tool with a radical potential for intervening in the education and socialization, i.e., acculturation, of future generations of students. (Munns & Rajan, 1995, p. 6).

In spite of a variety of definitions of culture and ideas about cultural theories, cultural studies remain a powerful and critical theoretical framework, particularly for an examination of the socialization of rural students and their educational values and choices.

I will attempt to summarize briefly those conceptions of culture that will be relevant and most useful for my foray into the rural culture of one rural county in
southern West Virginia. My exploration of culture is aimed at examining the rural culture’s influence on the “social structure and social life” of rural, low-SES students and the way culture and social structure shape their college-going behavior (Smith, 2001, p. 5). A cultural or socio-cultural theoretical framework is especially useful for this exploration of rural, low-SES students’ college participation.

Early ideas about culture have been criticized, I believe rightly so, for their emphasis on promoting an elitist culture (Munns & Rajan, 1995; Williams, 1995 [1958]). For example, Matthew Arnold (1995 [1869]) in *Culture and Anarchy*, described culture as “a study of perfection” (p. 21) and the necessity for this elitist culture to prevail. However, beginning in the 1950s, British cultural theorists and researchers “saw themselves as engaged in transforming British society to such an extent that the cultural privilege, political power, and social authority of the class which shaped the nation until the second world war would never again be regarded as legitimate currency” (Bromley, 1995, Introduction, p. 150). This period marks the use of this critical and activist lens to examine culture and marginalized groups, an approach I have taken and discuss in the following paragraphs.

In more recent times, some conservative American cultural studies researchers used (misused) culture to unfairly blame disadvantaged or marginalized groups for their circumstances. For instance, a “culture of poverty” was argued as the reason for low-SES individuals remaining in and perpetuating their circumstances. Such studies ignored social structure, which many cultural/socio-cultural theorists now argue is inextricably linked with culture. Williams (1995 [1958]) wrote, “The history of the idea of culture is
a record of our meanings and our definitions, but these, in turn, are only to be understood within the context of our actions” (p. 164). Similarly, Clifford Geertz (1973) in his examination of a Javanese funeral ritual separated culture, “an ordered system of meaning and of systems,” and social structure, “the pattern of social interaction itself,” to deal with social change or a dynamic system (p. 144). Or, as he wrote in *The Interpretations of Culture*, “[I]t is through the flow of behavior—or, more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation” (p. 246). It is necessary to examine the social structure or actions and behaviors of the actors, in this case, the residents of and college students from Mingo County. However, culture should not be ignored in fear of “blaming culture” or reinforcing a “culture of poverty.” Instead, as Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson contends, studying both social structure and culture is necessary in understanding poverty and racial inequality or, in this research, college access or educational inequality and poverty.

Some credit early 20th century psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, as the father of socio-cultural theory (although he often used the term socio-historical). He emphasized a multidisciplinary approach to studying psychology that included not only an examination of the direct, elicited behaviors but also, and equally important, an exploration of “works of art, manifestations of unconscious and cultural-anthropological data,” and other historical, social, and cultural considerations (Kozulin, 1986, p. xxxix). Vygotsky’s ideas of behavior and his cultural-historical viewpoint are somewhat reminiscent of John Dewey’s conception of the interrelatedness of the individual and society. In fact, in his address to the American Psychological Association in 1901, Dewey stressed that
psychology could not focus only on the individual; instead, it had to recognize how the individual is culturally, historically, and institutionally situated (Wertsch, 1991). Wertsch (1991), informed significantly by Vygotsky’s writings, described the socio-cultural approach as one in which “the main criterion is that the analysis be linked in some way with specific cultural, historical, or institutional factors” (p. 18) or whose goal is to “explicate how human action is situated in cultural, historical, and institutional settings” (p. 119). A socio-cultural approach requires an examination of context. To understand better the college-going behavior of rural, low-SES students, it is essential to look both at the behavior and at the social and cultural influences on that behavior and acknowledge their interrelatedness. Therefore, in utilizing a socio-cultural approach to my study, my unit of analysis not only included the rural culture and social structure and the rural, low-SES student but also the interaction between the student and culture.

Culture is something that can never be fully captured or understood, for as Williams (1995 [1958]) wrote, “A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealized” (p. 172). Any description of rural culture is apt to be incomplete. Thompson criticized Williams’ idea of culture for ignoring a multidisciplinary conception of culture. Utilizing a more multidisciplinary approach as Thompson (1995 [1961]) suggested allows for a more complete understanding of culture. Additionally, culture is not static. Reminiscent of John Dewey’s argument that the interaction between the individual and society allows for the evolution of society, Williams described the issue of culture “as one in which diversity has to be substantiated within an effective community” or a “feeling of solidarity” (p. 172). Such an
understanding of culture allows for an idea of culture as evolving and dynamic. “The idea of culture rests on a metaphor: the tending of natural growth” (Williams, 1995 [1958], p. 172). Thompson’s (1995 [1961]) review of Williams’ ideas of cultures cautioned that cultural studies should not neglect examining suffering by focusing on growth. Culture can be both positive and negative (McQuillan, 1998).

Although I avoided focusing only on rural culture deficiencies, I did not ignore the negative aspects of rural culture nor romanticize or glorify the positive aspects of rural culture. Instead, I hoped to gain a better understanding of “both the enabling and constraining dimensions of [rural] culture” related to rural students’ college participation (Giroux, Shumaway, Smith, & Sosnoki, 1995 [1985], p. 648). “But to adumbrate a theory of culture it is necessary to proceed from definitions to evidence and back from the evidence to definitions once again; if the anthropological and historical evidence is not fully consulted, then we may not know what it is that we should ask, nor what it is that we define” (Thompson, 1995 [1961], p. 179). As I interviewed participants, examined historical texts, and observed events in the County, my understanding of the rural culture evolved.

“The force of our interpretations cannot rest, as they are now so often made to do, on the tightness with which they hold together, or the assurance with which they are argued. Nothing has done more, I think, to discredit cultural analysis than the construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe” (Geertz, 1995 [1973], p. 247). Kai Erikson’s (1976) description of southern Appalachian culture, echoed Geertz’s aversion to focusing only on the order in
cultural analyses. Instead, he described the paradoxes found in Appalachian culture. For example, he wrote that the people of Appalachia are individualistic yet at the same time group-centered. Some of the existing literature reveals such paradoxes and tensions faced by rural students. It is these paradoxes and tensions with which rural students likely struggle when faced with decisions about going to college. Deeper exploration of students’ perceptions of such cultural tensions is necessary.

These very tensions likely have significant influence on the college participation of rural, low-SES students. Gee (1996) argued that “when people participate in a community of practice or enact and recognize a Discourse (socially situated identity), they learn cultural models. Cultural models (Strauss & Quinn, 1997) are everyday theories (i.e., storylines, images, schemas, metaphors, and models) about the world that tell people what is typical or normal, not universally, but from the perspective of a particular Discourse” (p. 40). Conflicting “Discourses” can lead to power imbalances or marginalization. Rogers (1996), discussing Gee’s Discourses, wrote:

Discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society, which is why they are always and everywhere ideological. Control over certain Discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) in a society. These Discourses empower those groups that have the least conflicts with their other Discourses when they use them (p. 5-6).

Discourses surrounding formal education evolved to incorporate industrialization, urbanization, and individualism; whereas, cultural models found in many rural
communities emphasized “informal education and direct socialization” and community values (Corbett, 2007, p. 11). Therefore, rural students are likely to have conflicting “Discourses” and cultural models. As mentioned above, but worthy of repeating, socio-cultural theory is appealing because it utilizes a critical lens, one that examines power relationships within culture.

In summary, culture is dynamic and rife with paradoxes and tensions. More importantly, an analysis of culture is the researcher’s systematic interpretation of meanings using thick description (Geertz, 1973). Cultural analysis is never complete, for one can never fully capture culture. “Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape” (Geertz, 1995 [1973] p. 249). As I attempted to “capture” rural culture, it was important for me and the reader to be mindful that it is a process rather than a conclusion (Munns & Rajan, 1995). My goal was not to generalize results to rural cultures across the country. Instead, it was to generalize results to theory. Geertz explained that cultural theory is neither predictive nor generalizable across cases; however, it can be used “to generalize within [cases]” (p. 252) and to interpret a culture “as new social phenomena swim into view” (p. 253). So to cite once again Geertz (1995 [1973]) my task was to uncover the structures that inform rural, low-SES students’ college going behaviors and attitudes and “to construct a system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are, will stand out against the other determinants of human behavior” (p. 253-254).
Pierre Bourdieu provided not only useful cultural theoretical insights, but he also offered a fitting conceptual framework for my study. His concepts of cultural and social capital, habitus, and fields have been widely used across disciplines. In particular, they are often utilized in research on college access and success for low-income students. Bourdieu’s concept of “fields” is useful in that it recognizes that capital can have value within certain spaces. For instance, within educational institutions middle- and upper-class “tastes” or standards, e.g., a particular way of communicating, might be more greatly valued. On the other hand, within a rural mining community, different tastes might be valued. Corbett (2007) wrote, “Bourdieu’s great contribution has been to help us understand how these alleged ‘gifts’ are not at all natural, but derived from the social position of individuals who possess them by virtue of the luck of their birth” (p. 48).

Using Bourdieu’s ideas and concepts about culture is certainly not novel, but they allowed me to generalize back to a theory that is widely used, accepted, and understood in college access research. Annette Lareau’s succinct explanation of Bourdieu’s theory is worth citing:

His model draws attention to conflict, change, and systemic inequality, and it highlights the fluid nature of the relationship between structure and agency. Bourdieu argues that individuals of different social locations are socialized differently. This socialization provides children, and later adults, with a sense of what is comfortable or what is natural (he terms this habitus). These background experiences also shape the amount and forms of resources (capital) individuals
inherit and draw upon as they confront various institutional arrangements (fields) in the social world (Lareau, 2003, p. 275).

Other advantages of using Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts include the following:

- Bourdieu synthesizes the micro and macro levels of analysis, which will be useful for the proposed study given its multiple levels and units of analyses. It incorporates subjective experiences with objective structures (Smith, 2001). “[S]ensitivity to the complexity and fluidity of social life makes his theory significantly more persuasive” (Lareau, 2003, p. 276). His theory moves beyond culture of poverty theories.

- The theory is critical theory—it acknowledges systematic inequalities patterned by class and power.

- The abstract theoretical models are backed by empirical studies.

- The concepts (theory) are widely used across multiple disciplines.

- It provides a useful conceptual framework—cultural and social capital.

- Theoretically and conceptually Bourdieu connects culture with social action and outcomes (Smith, 2001). Social position is not just about individual attributes such as intelligence, skill, or effort.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is how he sought to integrate both the subjective and objective interpretations of culture as reflected in social practice (Smith, 2001). Habitus is the preferences, dispositions, aspirations, expectations, and resources we have
that unconsciously influence our behaviors in social settings. Moreover, habitus “is linked to systematic inequities in society patterned by power and class. It [habitus] emerges from these inequalities and produces lines of practical action which are ‘always tending to reproduce the objective structures of which they are the product’ (1977: 72)” (Smith, 2001, p. 136). A greater understanding of habitus and the cultural impact on the habitus of rural, low-SES students is necessary to understand their college-going behaviors, choices, and decisions. In Michael Corbett’s ethnography of a rural Nova Scotia fishing village, he used Bourdieu’s concepts regarding habitus and social and cultural capital. However, Corbett (2007) tweaked the definition of habitus to recognize that there can be competing discourses that influence behavior. For example, a rural student’s academic habitus may serve as an alternative to his or her social class and familial habitus. Given the cultural tensions discussed earlier, this slightly revised definition of habitus made sense for the purposes of this study.

_Economic, social, and cultural capital_

Economic, social, and cultural capital “determine social power and social inequality” (Smith, 2001, p. 137). Simply put, economic or financial capital is financial resources. In this study, the economic capital of the students is lower than average. Money to pay for college is clearly a big hurdle for low-income students’ access to and success in college regardless of locale. However, social and cultural capital also impact college access and success for these students.

Social capital typically refers to an individual’s social networks and ties. Coleman (1988) explained how social capital exists in relations with persons. He wrote,
“The function identified by the concept of ‘social capital’ is the value of these aspects of social structure to actors as resources that they can use to achieve their interests” (p. S101). One form of social capital described by Coleman is “the potential for information that inheres in social relations… [and] that facilitates action” (p. S104). In a county where only about 7 percent of residents hold college degrees, information about how to apply to college and for financial aid and the benefits of pursuing higher education has the potential for being a powerful resource in students’ access to college.

Norms are another form of social capital. Closure of the social structure or the sharing of values and norms is necessary for social capital to be effective. In a small rural community this closure likely exists. Intergenerational closure between parent and child provides social capital but so can relations with others outside the family within a closed social structure. Additionally, social capital can be found in “appropriable social organizations.” This is a relation that “allows the resources of one relationship to be appropriated for use in others” (p. S109). In this study this occurred if a student attended a church and learned of a college scholarship opportunity from his/her minister.

As indicated later in the diagram of my conceptual framework, family background influences students’ college participation. Coleman notes that “family background” is comprised of financial capital, human capital, and social capital. I also would add cultural capital. Financial capital is family income and other physical resources while human capital is measured by parents’ education. In this study, financial and human capital within families is rather low for most of the students. However, higher levels of social capital and cultural capital within the family and the community promote students’
college access and participation. What constitutes this social and cultural capital and how and why it impacts students is what I explored in this study.

Cultural capital refers to cultural preferences, values, styles, and knowledge that translates into resources in the particular context in which they are valued. For instance, in education institutions certain types of literature are valued highly and those with access and knowledge of this literature in turn have more cultural capital than those who do not. This cultural capital can then be transformed into human and/or economic capital.

Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory has been criticized by some for its implicit value judgment of capital. Saying low-SES students have lower cultural capital than their higher-income peers perhaps ignores or devalues their cultural capital, which may, in fact, simply be different, not inferior. Thus, labeling rural students’ cultural capital as deficient is misleading. Using the traditional definitions of both social and cultural capital could reinforce hegemonic structures that tend to privilege white, suburban or urban middle- and upper-class cultures and social networks by suggesting their cultural and social capital is better or greater. However, that is exactly Bourdieu’s point. He acknowledges that the value of cultural capital is subjective and determined and reinforced by power, therefore, perpetuating social inequalities. As Lareau (2003) wrote:

[H]e [Bourdieu] argues that individuals in privileged social locations are advantaged in ways that are not a result of the intrinsic merit of their cultural experiences. Rather, cultural training in the home [and in this case the community as well] is awarded unequal value in dominant institutions because of the close compatibility between the standards of child rearing in privileged homes
Moreover, Bourdieu fully recognized that context matters when it comes to cultural capital as evident in his concept of “field” discussed above. Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital was especially relevant as I examined the tensions revealed in the rural literature between rural cultural values/community and institutions of education.

Additionally, “Bourdieu emphasizes that groups can try to convert one form of capital into another in an effort to cement class power” (Smith, 2001, p. 139). For instance, grassroots organizing gains its power from converting social capital to economic and cultural capital. Individualism has come to be valued in education but that individualism can be transformed. Olneck (2000), for example, discussed how multicultural education might redefine what kind of “aesthetic criteria” are valued and in turn can transform cultural capital. Focusing only on the cultural and social deficiencies of rural students and communities weakens not only our understanding of rural students and culture, but also overlooks how the capital valued by rural communities and students can be transformed or used to strengthen the capital necessary for gaining access to higher education. Elder and Conger’s (2000) research on rural Iowan farm families, examined in more detail below, looked at such social and cultural capital strengths of farm families. It is important to be aware of the implications social and cultural capital theory may have on reinforcing social inequalities. However, by maintaining the critical theorist’s lens intended by Bourdieu, and sometimes overlooked by his critics, this problem is more likely to be avoided.
Elder and Conger’s Ties to the Land

Elder and Conger (2000) provided a useful conceptual framework in their study of Iowan families and whether “family’s status relative to farming makes a difference in the relative success of youth in rural Iowa” (p. 31). Their conceptual model contended that families with ties to the land have certain social and cultural resources for their children leading to youth competence (see Figure 1).

Their model focused on how ties to the land are transformed into social and cultural capital necessary for youth competence. Such a framework was adaptable for my study of rural students. Miles and Huberman (1994) wrote that graphical depictions of conceptual frameworks are useful because “having to get the entire framework on a single page obliges you to specify the bins that hold the discrete phenomena, to map likely relationships, to divide the variables that are conceptually or functionally distinct,
and to work with all of the information at once” (p. 22). Below is a revised conceptual model that seemed appropriate for my study. (See Figure 2).

In the revised graphical depiction “Ties to the land” instead becomes “ties to the culture/community.” In this model ties to the rural culture (family) and community and the family background impact available resources for the student and, in turn, the student’s competences, both of which lead to college access and success. This study identified these resources and more importantly elucidated why and how they influence a student’s decision to enroll in college, their perceptions about rural culture, and their college success. However, the study also revealed that ties to the culture have a negative impact. Students with strong attachment to family were reluctant to leave home for college. Also, relevant in this model is context, which includes economic, political, social, and historical contexts. The model reveals the context’s influence on all of the parts (ties to culture, resources, competences, and college participation). As Corbin and Strauss (2008) wrote:

Context doesn’t determine experience or set the course of action, but it does identify the sets of conditions in which problems and/or situations arise and to which persons respond through some form of action/interaction and emotion (process), and in doing so it brings about consequences that in turn might go back to impact upon conditions” (p. 88).

Of particular interest are not only the resources that impact college-going and completion but the processes or the how and why ties to the culture/community lead to certain resources and competences that, in turn, lead to college access and participation.
Individualism and Rural Culture

Individualism within education is also a concept that arises in the rural literature, as briefly discussed in Chapter Three. The current research on rural students reveals the
dominant belief that higher education is a private good and that individualistic ideals can come to be valued over community ideals. This notion can be especially troublesome for rural students. Lareau (2003) described a “sense of entitlement” nurtured in middle- and upper-middle class children, meaning that they have a “right to pursue their own individual preferences and to actively manage interactions in institutional settings”; low-income students in her research had more of a “sense of constraint” in their interactions in institutional settings (p. 6). That is, they were less likely to pursue their own individual preferences within institutions. Some of the rural research, discussed in greater detail in my literature review, examined these implications on rural students.

Rural schools were once closely connected to their communities (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Community values were an everyday part of the school curriculum. However, the United States began to grow—rapid industrialization occurred—and individualism became more and more emphasized in schools. Theobald and Nachtigal trace this shift in philosophy:

The rationale behind this decision was found in a philosophy which held that the greatest level of public good was created by an “invisible hand” when individuals pursued their own self-interest. This was obviously convenient for eager industrialists interested in individual acquisition. Buying into this philosophy as a nation (along with many others) meant that schooling was slowly converted into an institution dedicated to mobilizing individual prowess [sic] to be used in the race for self-interest. There would be little wrong with schooling for this purpose if the
philosophy were true. But the amount of evidence which challenges this
philosophical position is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. As
sociologist Herman Daly contends, it appears that rather than an invisible
hand building the common good, what has emerged is an invisible foot
that is slowly kicking the common good to pieces (1995, p. 4).

This explanation of how individualistic values became inserted into rural schools echoes
Dewey’s discussion on rugged individualism and capitalism. The above quotation also
suggests that dangerous implications result when these values are perpetuated over
community ones. Some of the rural research, discussed in greater detail in my literature
review, examined these implications on rural students.

What are the implications of individualism and its reinforcement in rural schools?
Paul Theobald warned, “When a society openly embraces political, economic, and
education theory that hinges on an individualistic and anthropocentric conception of
human nature, community disintegration is logical and predictable” (Theobald, 1997, p.
66 as cited in Corbett, 2007, p. 21). Are rural schools and policymakers unknowingly
contributing to the decline of their own communities by perpetuating resolute
individualism? Michael Corbett asked, “Could it be that rural resistance to formal
education can be understood as recognition that one’s social capital is localized and of
little value in the face of the placeless and individualistic mobility ideology of liberal
schooling?” (p. 29). Pittman, McGinty, and Gerstl-Pepin (1999) raised another valid
concern: “Tying a student’s achievement (knowledge and skills) to an economic
outcome (competing in the global economy) places economic considerations in a position
to dominate educational decision-making” (p. 19). We must think of a way to reframe the “either/or” choice given to rural students (the individual student or their rural community). Otherwise, as discussed above, the implications could be detrimental to the college access and success of rural low SES youth and to their rural communities.

Unit of Analysis

In the current study the unit of analysis is multi-dimensional or threefold. It is the Mingo County community and rural culture; the rural, low-SES students; and the interaction of the two. The interdependency between the rural students and their rural community and culture is vital to understanding how rural culture may impact rural students’ college-going behavior and attitudes. In Chapter 2, I provide a social ecological overview of the setting, Mingo County.

Sample

The students included in this study with a few exceptions, which are noted, are all first-generation college students attending the local community college, Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College (Southern), or a West Virginia public four-year university. The exceptions included one student whose father had started college but dropped out after less than a semester, one student whose grandmother had graduated from college, and finally, another student whose mother started college at the same time as her daughter. In fact, they have many classes together. The student says, “It has its advantages, but we’re really competitive about grades. We figured we’d save some money on gas this semester while we can.” None of the students’ parents had graduated from college.
Sixteen freshmen, eight community college and eight four-year college students were interviewed (four female and four male from each type of institution). Of the sixteen, half were Pell eligible (three community college students and five four-year students). Meanwhile, six were recipients of the state’s Promise Scholarship, a merit-based scholarship similar to the Georgia HOPE scholarship (two community college students and four four-year students). Six seniors, four community college and two four-year college students were included in the sample (two male and two female community college students and one male and one female four-year college students). Of the six, two were Pell eligible (one community college and one four-year student); however, one community college student indicated he did not think he received a Pell grant, but he did receive a West Virginia higher education grant, a state grant given to low-income students. Only one of the seniors, a four-year college student, was a Promise scholar. Table 1.1 depicts the student sample. Students came from all five high schools in the county.

I had difficulty finding 4-year West Virginia public college seniors for my sample. Only a small number of Mingo County students attend these institutions and actually go on to graduate from them. For example, only 30 students from the Mingo County high school graduating classes of 2006 attended public 4-year institutions in the state (out of 144 total college goers and out of 263 total high school graduates). The state’s six-year college graduation rate for the 2003 and 2004 cohorts was 48.5 percent. Therefore, roughly only about 14 of the 30 would be expected to graduate. Additionally,
since I only included first-generation students, the potential pool of interviewees was even smaller, possibly as few as six to eight students.

Students (Table 1.1)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
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<th>College Type</th>
<th>Pell Eligible</th>
<th>Promise Recipient</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gilbert</td>
<td>4 year</td>
<td>No</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Parental Backgrounds_

Although the parents were not formally interviewed during this study, questions posed to students allowed me to describe parents’ backgrounds. Many of the fathers
worked in coal industry related jobs. (A few at one time or another had been injured on the job.) There were several disabled coal miners and one with black lung. Some worked underground, some on strip mines, and one as an electrician for the mines. Others worked for the railroad or in the timber industry. Many of the mothers were stay-at-home moms; others worked as a nurse (with LPN) or in health care, as beauticians, or in retail jobs. One student’s parents were both disabled and relied on disability checks. All of the families would be considered working class or low-income.

Almost all of the parents had grown up in the area. (According to 2000 Census data seventy-five percent of West Virginia residents were born in the state.) Some had left the area for a short time but had returned. Many of the parents married right out of high school, foregoing college to enter the workforce. Most of the students’ parents were still married although a few had divorced. One student was being reared by his grandparents whom he called “Mom” and “Dad.” Another student had been in and out of foster care but was currently living with her mom. Almost all of the parents had graduated from high school, but a few of the fathers had dropped out, and one mother dropped out yet later got her GED.

Data Collection

To understand better the county’s rural culture and students, I completed document analysis, observations, and interviews. As Patton (1990) contended “multiple sources of information are sought and used because no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective…By using a combination of observations, interviewing, and document analysis, the fieldworker
is able to use different data sources to validate and cross-check findings” (p. 244). A case study is an especially useful research design because it allows for using various sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). By using multiple sources of evidence, triangulation, i.e., “converging lines of inquiry,” is achieved or developed (Yin, 2003, p. 98).

The document analysis included examination of non-fiction books and articles on the county’s and region’s historical, social, economic, and political contexts; fictional accounts with reference to the area; and local and state economic, K-12, and higher education data. Such data began to provide a contextual or social ecological overview of the culture and community and were useful in refining an interview protocol for the rural, low-SES college students who were interviewed. For instance, longitudinal data on the County’s college enrollment rate reveal a decline in college participation in Mingo County. Books such as Huey Perry’s (1972) “They’ll Cut Off Your Project:” A Mingo County Chronicle, an account of organizing the low-income residents of Mingo County during the 1960s and 1970s, provide a colorful depiction of the economic, social, and political culture. Denise Giardina, a southern West Virginia novelist, writes fictional accounts of many of the historical events that have occurred in Mingo County and provides further insight into the local culture. Her novels’ characters mirror the struggles faced by actual residents. Additionally, I read the local weekly and daily newspapers—The Gilbert Times and The Williamson Daily News.
In addition to document analysis, interviews of county residents and rural, low-SES college students from the county were conducted. Yin (2003) writes, “One of the most important sources of case study information is the interview” (p. 89). I used purposeful sampling to select interviewees. “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting *information-rich* cases for study in depth…[It] focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study,” wrote Patton (2002, p. 230). I conducted informal, open-ended cultural interviews with county residents, which informed my social, ecological and cultural overview of Mingo County. Rubin and Rubin (1995) provided useful advice for conducting cultural interviews, which includes convincing people it is okay to talk about ordinary matters, “persuad[ing] interviewees to allow you, an outsider, to learn about their cultural arena,” and “drawing initial boundaries around the cultural arena” (p. 169). Such interviews were also useful in refining the focus for my student interview protocol. In these cultural interviews I was able to gain greater awareness of the cultural values surrounding education and the cultural tensions that exist. I used snowball sampling to identify cultural exemplars, i.e., those individuals likely to provide a thorough picture of Mingo County culture. These participants included the superintendent of schools, professors and administrators at the community college, other area educators, and community leaders. Do educational values conflict with other cultural values? In my interviews with students, I wanted to understand how these values and tensions influence their attitudes toward college.
After exploring the rural culture of Mingo County and gaining a better understanding of the local context in which students live, I selected sixteen rural, low-SES college freshmen from Mingo County using purposeful sampling. (I piloted my interview protocol in order to refine it before beginning the interviews with the sixteen students.) These semi-structured, open-ended interviews focused on how rural cultural and community ties and family background impacted these students’ access to college and their perceptions of college. Additionally, in the interviews I hoped to uncover what experiences of rural, low-SES students influence their decision to enroll in college and why. Since I am interested in the cultural influence on these students, particularly their decisions to enroll in college and attitudes toward higher education, it was important that students selected attended high school and preferably junior high or middle school in Mingo County. As noted in Chapter One, low-SES students are defined as those students who are first-generation college students, i.e., their parents did not attend college. I purposefully selected students who fit these criteria.

In an introductory meeting during the summer of 2008, the county superintendent of schools agreed to aid me with my research. He put me in touch with the head of guidance counseling in the county. She contacted all the local high school counselors and asked them to provide her with a list of eligible students who were first-generation students and were attending West Virginia public higher education institutions, which she then passed on to me. Additionally, I asked community members, community college
officials, and a GEAR UP\textsuperscript{14} coordinator for any names of students that fit my criteria. I also advertised my study at the community college by handing out flyers in all of the freshmen University 101 classes, and I spoke to a couple of freshmen classes as well. The majority of my sample of freshmen came from the names provided by the local counselors. Some of the students interviewed also provided me with names of friends who fit my criteria and who became a part of my sample.

Because saturation was my ultimate goal in my interviews, I originally anticipated conducting thirty-two interviews with these sixteen participants (Two 1-1 \(\frac{1}{2}\) hour interviews with each participant). However, I found that I was able to cover all of my interview questions in one session (typically 1-2 hours in length) although with two students I conducted two sessions. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found in their study of data saturation that “after analysis of twelve interviews, new themes emerged infrequently and progressively so as analysis continued” (p. 74). Moreover, higher-level and overarching themes were identified using an even smaller sample of six. They did caution that “purposive samples still need to be carefully selected, and twelve interviews will likely not be enough if a selected group is relatively heterogeneous, the data quality is poor, and the domain of inquiry is diffuse and/or vague” (p. 79). Yet, they also contended, “For most research enterprises, however, in which the aim is to understand common perceptions and experiences among a group of relatively homogeneous, twelve interviews should suffice” (p. 79). By interviewing sixteen students, I hoped to

\textsuperscript{14} Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is a federally-funded college access program that is in Mingo County.
identify common themes and still be able to examine some of my sub-questions or subgroups within the larger group of sixteen. (Please see Appendix E for the interview protocol for these sixteen interviews.)

Given my research sub-question that asks whether or not cultural influence differs by institutional type, eight students were freshmen from the local community college while eight were freshmen attending public, 4-yr. higher education institutions in the state. I chose to focus on students attending in-state, public institutions because the college access literature reveals that the majority of low-SES students attend public colleges and universities. Indeed, in Mingo County, three-fourths of the 2007 college going population enrolled in in-state, public institutions. (Only seven Mingo County students in 2007 attended out-of-state institutions). Additionally, within each group of eight, four students were male and four were female because the rural literature suggests that gender differences are among the variables that influence a rural students’ decision to go to college. While these small sub-samples may have prevented me from identifying themes within themes, I anticipated being able to identify larger, overarching themes among these sub-groups in my data analysis.

While my interviews with the sixteen college freshmen may provide some insight into whether or not these students will likely succeed in college or provide awareness of certain factors that might predict success, it is difficult to accurately predict college completion. Therefore, in addition to interviewing sixteen college freshmen, I interviewed six college students in their last year at their respective institutions. Four
students were second year students at the community college, and two were college seniors from four-year public, in-state institutions. How did ties to the rural culture and community (or lack thereof) and family background generate social and cultural resources that led to their college success? See Appendix F for the interview protocol. I conducted one 1-2 hour interview with each participant.

I chose to interview current students likely to graduate rather than students who had already graduated from college because of the difficulty in tracking down college graduates from Mingo County since most leave the county and state after completing college. Seven percent of Mingo County residents have a college degree. Additionally, if I had interviewed Mingo County college graduates, generational differences among my sample would have been likely. Again with such a small group I planned only to identify larger themes within the data.

To recruit college “seniors” for my study I used a snowball sampling technique, relying again on local community members and college officials to help me advertise my study and identify eligible participants. I originally contacted the admissions and financial aid offices of two of the state’s four year institutions where many Mingo County students attend; yet, they were unable to provide information for fear of violating FERPA. Once again I turned to local educators and community members who provided me the names of Mingo County college seniors who were first-generation students. The table below outlines the criteria for the college student participants in my study.
All interviews, with permission of the participant, were digitally recorded and later transcribed for data analysis. (Only one participant, a four-year college male, did not want to be recorded, so I took notes during our interview).

Interviewees were briefed beforehand on the purpose of the interviews and my research. Following the interview I debriefed participants.

As I conducted interviews, I also used observations of the culture to triangulate data. Eisenhart (2001) emphasized the importance of interviews and observations in ethnographic research. “To be involved directly in the activities of people still seems to be the best method we have for learning about the meaning of things to the people we hope to understand” (p. 23). For this reason, I lived in the County for approximately five months. Even before moving to the county, I made some initial contacts with residents and school and community college officials. I initially observed cultural and local school events, college admissions functions, and more informal occurrences within the County. As I began to “know” the culture better, other opportunities for observation arose.

Participant Criteria:

• Attended high school and junior high/middle school in Mingo County.

• Currently enrolled in public, West Virginia higher education institution

• First-generation college student (neither parent attended college)
Throughout data collection, I kept field notes that include descriptions of the settings and my interpretations of events and comments from participants. Fieldwork began the summer of 2009 after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board and continued into the fall of 2009 in order to interview college freshmen. HyperRESEARCH was used to store and organize my data. Participants’ names and identifying information have not been used in reporting the data.

Data Analysis

As I collected data, I also analyzed it simultaneously (Merriam, 1998). Data analysis “refers to the systematic examination of something to determine its parts, the relationships among parts, and their relationship to the whole” (Spradley, 1979, p. 92). Spradley (1979) continued by noting the following about ethnographic analysis:

An informant’s cultural knowledge is more than random bits of information; this knowledge is organized into categories, all of which are systematically related to the entire culture. Our goal is to employ methods of analysis that lead to discovering this organization of cultural knowledge…Ethnographic analysis is the search for the parts of a culture and their relationships as conceptualized by informants (p. 93).

Such analysis increases the likelihood for thick description, which Geertz acknowledged is necessary for understanding culture.

Data were first analyzed using open coding. Corbin & Strauss (2008) defined open-coding as “breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for
blocks of raw data. At the same time, one is qualifying those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions” (p. 73). Spradley (1979) described one such way to do this in his description of searching for domains or categories. “Members of a domain share at least one feature of meaning” (Spradley, 1979, p. 100). To do a preliminary search for domains, Spradley suggested selecting a sample of data such as interview notes; looking for names of things; identifying possible cover terms; and searching through additional data for other terms. In ethnographic research first a surface analysis for domains is conducted followed by an in-depth analysis of one or more of those domains. My examination of the rural culture and context uncovered domains that revolve around education that I then analyzed in more detail. However, Spradley cautioned, “Whatever domains are selected, the choice of focus must be tentative. New domains that are more interesting or important often emerge along the way and lead to a shift in the focus of research (p. 134-136).

In coding data it is important to heed any inconsistencies that exist as well. As I constantly compared data, differences and similarities within the data began to emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Axial coding which refers to “crosscutting or relating concepts to each other” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195) was also employed to compare themes, patterns, and concepts across the data. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) contended, “[O]pen coding and axial coding go hand in hand…though we break data apart, and identify concepts to stand for the data, we also have to put it back together again by relating those concepts” (p. 198).
Throughout collection and analysis memoing allowed me to keep track of emerging codes, patterns, themes, and differences. HyperResearch allowed me to keep track of my codes. The data were coded and analyzed using a socio-cultural theoretical lens. Additionally, the concepts of social and cultural capital and individualism guided data collection and analysis techniques. As noted above, but worthy of repeating here, the goal of this research was to generalize to theory rather than to a larger population.

Validity

Validity has long been a concern with qualitative research. For the purposes of this study, I primarily focused on Maxwell’s four types of validity: Descriptive, Interpretive, Theoretical, and Evaluative (Maxwell, 1992). Additionally, Kvale (1989) raised the idea of pragmatic validity. This too was of concern in this research. I will discuss very briefly how these types of validity were addressed within this study.

Descriptive validity refers to “factual accuracy” or “a valid description of the physical objects, events, and behaviors in the setting they [researchers] study” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 285, p. 288). Keeping detailed field notes and recording and transcribing interviews strengthened descriptive validity. To strengthen interpretive validity, the “participants’ perspective,” I utilized informal member checks to ensure my interpretations of the rural culture and values and students’ perceptions were accurate. For instance, I presented some of my preliminary findings to a local
community organization and then had a conversation about those findings. Data triangulation also strengthened interpretive validity.

“[T]heoretical understanding \( \text{theoretical validity} \) refers to an account’s function as an \( \text{explanation} \), as well as a description or interpretation, of the phenomena” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 291). Socio-cultural theory was central to this study; however, social and cultural capital and individualism were concepts fundamental to the study as well. Social and cultural capital are widely accepted concepts used in college access studies. Moreover, individualism is a concept that arises in some of the existing rural literature. After data have been analyzed and interpreted, it is important to answer the following question when assessing theoretical validity: “[H]ow were data selected to illuminate your point of view?” (McQuillan, 1998, p. 210). Maxwell’s \( \text{evaluative validity} \) involves questions of validity about the researcher’s evaluative or critical statements. This type of validity is dependent upon the other three types of validity (Maxwell, 1992).

Lastly, \( \text{pragmatic validity} \) which refers to “what the study does for its participants, both researchers and researched—and for its consumers” is something I plan to address in the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 280). I plan to share these findings with policymakers and educators in the region and area. Additionally, the state policy commission whose quantitative data I am using is interested in my findings. Nationwide organizations such as the Rural School and Community Trust, the Pell Institute, the National Association for College Admission Counseling, and the Lumina Foundation are likely to be interested in my findings.
findings. Given the renewed interest in college access and success at the federal
level, federal policymakers may also find my results intriguing and useful.

Limitations

As mentioned earlier, one possible limitation of this research is that it cannot
be generalized to the larger population of rural students. However, it can be
generalized to theory and it can provide a starting point and comparison for future
research on rural students and their college access and success. Additionally, my
student sample was likely academically more successful than the overall student
population in Mingo County and perhaps more successful than other Mingo County
students enrolled in college. This is less problematic since my goal is not to
generalize to the population.

My own background and experiences growing up in southern West Virginia
could be considered both a strength and weakness of the research. As noted earlier,
I had access to information and contacts in Mingo County early on in my research
because of my knowledge of the area and some people from the area. Being a West
Virginian, perhaps, allowed me to relate more readily to my participants and to have
greater initial insight into the rural, local culture. On the other hand, I may have
made assumptions or drawn conclusions different from those made by someone who
would have come in as an “outsider,” unfamiliar with the area, its people, and its
culture. By using data triangulation, I hope to have overcome this limitation as
much as possible.
CHAPTER 5: FAMILY

“A family has a life of its own which is more than the roles of its members. It begins and ends almost imperceptibly, so it’s rather arbitrary where one draws the line circumscribing a family’s existence” (Spradlin, 1978, p. 22).

Introduction

Mingo County is described as a “land obsessed by place and by family, the blood tie” (Foster & Conner, 1992, p. xiv). Attachment to family and place is interwoven and almost impossible to disentangle. When students refer to home in interviews, “home” is family and “home” is place. Perhaps no other theme emerged as often or seemed to influence students more than family. The attachment to family, which is the strong ties and relationships among family members, and the family legacies or traditions passed on from one generation to the next, affect the decision-making of rural students. Because of strong attachment to family, students face pressures from their families as well. This pressure influences students’ college decisions and decisions on whether to leave or stay in the area.

As mentioned earlier few people are moving into the county and region. Those who live there often have had family there for at least a few generations. Many of the students in the study live in the same place where a parent and even a grandparent have grown up. Extended family typically live next door or nearby. This historical legacy and the geographical isolation strengthen the reliance on and attachment to family. One student describes the close-knit ties of family and its influence, which is echoed again and again during interviews:
Um, yeah, my grandpa, my dad’s dad, lives right beside me, and my uncle, aunt, and their children live right across the road, so as a child my mom worked, my dad worked I went across the street and they just watched me. It’s [the culture] very family oriented, which is nice. Kind of stressful at times. Sometimes you can be loved too much, I think. Like it’s almost annoying (laughing). [It was hard for the family to] let go, yeah, um, I have two younger sisters who are twins. Obviously my mom never went away to school and my dad never away to school, so it’s not like they had to be away from their parents for any…I mean my entire family pretty much lives in the same place. And they were really upset about it [my going away to college], but I think they kind of just tell themselves, ‘She’s doing it [going to college] for the right reasons. If she quits and comes home, then her sisters will get the wrong impression and then they won’t want to go away and she’ll come back and have to work at McDonald’s or something for the rest of her life.’ So, even though they didn’t go to school they know the benefits of it.

Generational ties are evident in this student’s description of being watched by neighboring grandparents and extended family when she was growing up. She also alludes to the pressures that come with family attachment when she says it is “kind of stressful at times.” Yet, she acknowledges the support provided by her family because they understand the importance of getting an education. In this chapter, I will examine the role of family in rural students’ lives and its impact on college-going and college success, perhaps, the most important theme to emerge in this research.
As discussed in the previous chapter, a review of the current literature on rural students reveals in general, compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, rural youth have lower educational aspirations and expectations (Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt, 1989; Hu, 2003; Hansen and McIntire, 1989). Additionally, parental expectations affected rural students’ plans for higher education and significantly influenced college attendance (Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt, 1989; Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine, 1995). Nonetheless, rural students perceived their parents as being less supportive of college attendance and more supportive of jobs, trade school, and the military (Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt, 1989; Hu, 2003). The students in this study, though, discussed strong parental support and encouragement and high parental expectation, which likely led to their college access and success. A survey of West Virginia GEAR UP high school seniors (which includes Mingo County schools) revealed that parents and guardians were cited most frequently as influencing students’ decisions to attend college (84%) (WVHEPC & CTCS, 2010). Grandparents, other family members, and siblings also were cited as being somewhat or very influential by 60 percent, 55 percent, and 45 percent of students respectively.

Attachment to Family/Place

On any Sunday morning in Newtown, a small town, really a collection of houses, near Matewan, a group of family members and neighbors gather around the kitchen table and come and go in informal shifts while the family matriarch cooks a breakfast of eggs, homemade biscuits and gravy, bacon, fried bologna, red-eye gravy (a gravy consisting of coffee grounds and pan drippings made in the South), and an assortment of other
breakfast foods. This Sunday ritual has occurred for over fifty years. I was invited by one of the family members who moved away from the area long ago after joining the military and attending college on the G.I. Bill. He became a principal and is now retired and lives in a small town outside of the county about two hours away and visits or calls to check in on the family during these gatherings. During my Sunday visit probably twenty-five or more people of all ages/generations passed through the small four room house, taking turns around the kitchen table and talking about the local high school football team and the current events of the community.

After I had finished eating, I joined some of the older men who had gathered outside to “shoot the breeze.” They pointed out the consolidated high school being built on the flattened mountain top above, waved to neighbors who drove past, and shared local history and stories about people in the tiny community. A little later I walked with my father and the family member who had invited us to the gathering to the family cemetery on the opposite hillside that overlooked the house and small valley. Stories of family members past were related.

The Sunday assembly of family and neighbors in Newtown epitomizes the strong attachment to family and place found throughout the rural communities in Mingo County. Students’ descriptions of place and home were most often tied to family. One student when asked why he wanted to return to the area after college answered, “[It’s] just hometown I guess. I love it here, so it’s where you’re born and raised.” There is an attachment to the place, but it is the attachment to family that creates or strengthens this attachment to place. Students described being surrounded by family:
Yes, we live up a holler. Everybody calls it a “hollow”, but it’s a “holler” around here. I had all my cousins right there was like beside me, so it was always family around, a lot of family.

I’ve stayed in the same house since I was born…I live at Laurel(?) Creek and we’ve never moved or anything, so I’ve been really blessed to just stay around home.

No, you go up to my grandma’s and you got mama and papa and you got two aunts and their kids, and then you go on up the road and you have my great grandma and, and you go everywhere else and there they [family] are.

My dad grew up right across the road from where we live. His mom lives there. It’s like all family around there.

It’s all, I think, you’re a little, what’s the word, sheltered maybe. I mean all your family lives close. It’s close-knit. We’re all, we’re all family. We all get along with everybody. It’s pleasant. I like it here.

Being surrounded by family in such small communities only serves to strengthen this attachment to family. Such ties to family may also be cultural remnants of earlier generations when geographic isolation and subsistence farming made reliance on family a necessity. While the last student quoted above did allude to being surrounded by family
as a slight negative, he also recognized the importance of family. Most students often
referred to being surrounded by family as one of the main positive attributes of living in a
small town. Many acknowledge the important role of family in their lives. One student
succinctly summarized this belief:

I think that’s how it works around here. Everybody is like really family oriented
and that helps a lot too. Like, when you go off to school, it’s a little bit of a
change going from complete family to sort of individuality, but I think it’s good
because you know that you always feel like you’ve got somebody behind you or
doing this for you or doing that for you….

In the following sections, I will explore the implications that the strong attachments to
family found among rural students have on college-going and college success.
Differences between four-year and two-year rural college students, the pressures faced by
students and associated with attachment to family, the influence of family legacies, the
role of parental support and expectations, and extended family support are discussed.

Four-year/two-year

Not surprisingly, given the attachment to family in rural culture, a desire to
remain close to home often prevails in students’ decisions on where to attend college.
One reason cited time and time again by the community college students—both male and
female—for choosing to attend nearby Southern was that it was close to home. “Well, it’s
close to home and really [I] wasn’t ready to go off, to be honest.” Another student
explained, “I applied to Southern the beginning of my senior year, and I chose it because
it was close to home for one thing because I didn’t want to have to leave home.”
One community college student remarked how many area students will start at four-year colleges, “but most of the time they end back at Southern. I just think that where they go to the big school first, that they’re cut loose from the family too quick, and they take it [their family] for granted.” In fact, the local community college anticipates this happening regularly and typically begins the semester a week or two later than the public four-year colleges, so when students decide to drop out and come home after a week or two, they can still enroll in Southern. Another student spent two weeks away from home at a four-year institution, but did not like it and returned to attend Southern because “you know what. I’m just gonna go back home. It’s not worth it.” That is, in his eyes the benefits of attending a four-year institution away from home did not outweigh the benefits of being at home, close to family.

While remaining at home was a major factor for the community college students, even the four-year college students return home as much as possible. In fact, many who attend universities closer to Mingo County travel home every weekend. This close proximity to home factored into their decision to attend these universities. For instance, one student explained, “I wanted to be close enough to home to where I could make it in a day, but far enough away to where I was on my own, so to speak.” A handful of students from the state’s flagship institution, a four hour plus drive from Mingo County, wanted to get further away from the county and do not make it home as often. However, those students speak with their parents every day over the phone and try to make it home as much as possible.
Although family attachment is strong among all of the students, many of the four-year college students believe that going away to college and leaving home are necessary to an individual’s personal growth. When asked about whether or not he considered attending the local community college, one student answered, “I did but I didn’t want to be stuck at home. I wanted to experience life.” For this student and other four-year students “experience[ing] life” means leaving home. One young woman at the state flagship said, “…really going away does help with the individuality.” A few even viewed going to the local community college as being too much “like high school.” One student said, “I had a couple cousins, you know, they just went to Southern. They had never went out. Matter of fact, this cousin lives, like her mom lives here and she lives here. And she was sort of jealous, you could say because I was having the chance to go [away to college].” Others responded a resounding, “No!” when asked if they had considered going to the community college. Such answers suggest that some of these students view staying at home and attending Southern as a failure or as limiting their opportunities.

A four-year college senior confirmed that going away to college enabled him to grow and mature. In fact, he believes he has an advantage over those students and high school classmates who have not left home:

I tell you what, going away to school has been a big help to learn to grow up. It really has. Leaving home when I did, I wasn’t mature to be alone. I won’t lie about it. I still don’t know if I am because I don’t have to work, but I have to learn how to manage money to an extent and most people at home never know
what it’s like to be away from home. They’ve never lived away from home, and
for me to go right now and move to Tennessee and work as a lawyer, I’d be fine.
It wouldn’t bother me. Yeah, I’m gonna miss Mom and Dad, but I come home
and see them, you know every now and then, but it’s one of those deals that I’m,
it doesn’t bother me, and a lot of people in my class, I see that they live with mom
and dad and they’re engaged by the time they’re 19, 20, or 21. They put them a
single trailer right behind mom and dad or next to mom and dad. I mean, they
don’t want to leave. And, I think it affects a lot of what they can take their degree
and go do. They’re not willing to leave, and take it to where they could. And
then they complain if they don’t make it.

Perhaps, it is this belief among four-year college students that enabled them to attend a
college away from home despite a strong attachment to family.

Nevertheless, because of the attachment to family, students may feel as if they
have to choose between family and a four-year college, which means leaving home and
family. This study supports the current small body of rural literature that suggests rural
students face great conflict when deciding between staying close to family and moving
away from their rural communities. A more in-depth examination of leaving, staying,
and returning is found in Chapter 7. According to some students, family members (often
extended family members), too, indicate their belief that students are choosing a four-
year education over their families. A four-year college student described her resolve to
attend the state flagship university and the difficulty her family had with her desire to
leave the area:
I know they were so worried about financial. The gas up there, the food up there, everything, you know, and I was always told, “…we don’t know how long we can put you there.” And I cried to my mom the last night before I left and I said, “Mom,” I said, “if I’ve got to go in debt ‘til I’m a hundred,” I said, “I’ve got to go.” I said, “I don’t want anything here,” and it was so hard for her to hear that knowin’ that I didn’t want to go to Southern. If I could’ve went to Southern, I would’ve had a full ride because it’s just tuition, you know, but it was so hard for her to hear that, but at the same time she was proud of my determination. She hated the fact that I didn’t want to be here anymore, but she knew that I had the drive in me to go.

In this instance, the student’s parents struggled with their daughter’s decision to leave home, yet they understood her desire to do so. Many of the four year college students describe pressure from family members to stay at home and attend the local community college.

Like my dad he didn’t want me, my parents wanted me to go to Southern. Like, they kept telling me, “If you come home within the first semester, we’ll buy you a new car.” And they’re like really protective, and they’re still a little bit nervous about me being up here, but they feel a lot better now that they’ve been here, and they know it’s not like dangerous or anything. But, then our neighbors moved out of the house like directly across the street from us, so my parents actually bought it and they’re like, “you can live there and go to Southern,” they’re like, “you can get you a roommate. We’ll pay for whatever. We’ll pay for all the like tv,
anything like that. You can stay across the road.” They’re like, “You can still get to move out.”

This particular student was promised a car and house to stay at home. However, she chose to enroll in a four-year college regardless of the pressure from her family. What enables some students to leave home to attend a four-year college despite a strong attachment to family and place? She explained why she persisted:

…and then I’m like it’s better for me to like transition and go away for a little while now instead of like because they kept saying like, “go in two years.” Go in two years, so I can go to Southern, but I don’t think I would’ve left because I would have been like settled in and like it’s hard to leave high school and I wouldn’t want to leave again. And then like I would’ve already been used to like I mean I knew I would’ve scheduled my classes to where I could’ve like picked my brother up from school on somedays and like been at all the football games and I would’ve got so used to that, I wouldn’t have left. So, that had a lot to do with it.

Again the belief that leaving home is necessary for growth arises. However, the student talked about how it would have been easier for her to stay and get into a comfortable routine. Many of the four-year students expressed how they always knew they wanted to go away to college because they believe that opportunities were limited if they were to stay or as one student phrased it, “I don’t want anything here.”

The young woman above who faces pressure from her parents was an exception among the four-year college students. While many of the four-year college students had
parents who encouraged them to visit on weekends, most discussed how their parents
supported their decisions to go away to college (although it is not always an easy
adjustment for the parents). Instead, it was extended family members who often
questioned students’ choice to leave home as evident by the following quotes from
students:

It’s really like the family that pushes for me to come back especially dad’s side
like I explained. It’s constant, “When are you coming home? Why are you not
here?” all the time. From them it kind of is pressure to come back, but with Mom
and Dad it’s more like, “We know you have to be there [college]. We know it’s
for your own good. Just stay.” So, it’s sort of both for me.

…but I think it’s just, you know, that I didn’t want the same thing she [my cousin
who went to Southern] wanted. That I had to go away to get what I wanted, and I
think that sort of played a part in it, but now, you know, my uncle he’s never had
a daughter go off to school. He’s always been the second father figure to me, on
my dad’s side, and he cried to me. I never saw the man cry before in my life until
I left out of here August the 21st, 20th, and he hugged me and he cried. And he
said, “You don’t have to go. I need a huntin’ buddy.” And I almost busted
[cried]. I did bust. And I was like, “I gotta go. I can’t sit here, you know, and
hunt animals for a living. I can’t do it.”(laughing). So, it’s been hard for them,
but I think they’re starting to adjust.
My dad’s side I’m the first child to go to college on my dad’s side. My Aunt Linda who, god, she’s almost in her upper 50s now, so this is the first big change they’ve had. And she was like, “You don’t need to go. You can stay here. Come back.” And I mean they still cry and call and ask me to come back, but I don’t want, you know, to come back.

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…I know my grandma, my dad’s mom, not the teacher. She didn’t really want me to go. She thought I should go to Southern, so that I should stay home and, but, then she’s been a lot better about it. Like, she comes up here a lot.

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My grandmother was all for that [me going to Southern instead of WVU]. I mean she checks up on information and she’s like, “You know, people tend to do better if they go to a small college for two years and then transfer,” and she’s like, “You should go to Southern.” But I think half of it was because she didn’t want me to leave.

Aunts and uncles, grandparents, and other relatives are more likely than the students’ parents to encourage these students to stay at home. While some extended family members begin to adjust to the student being away from home, others continue to exert pressure on the student to return home.

While four-year college students face much pressure from extended family to stay home rather than attend college away from home, community college students not only seemed less ready to leave home, some also discussed how their parents, while
supportive, encouraged them to stay home and attend the local community college. One community college student had considered going away to college but then changed her mind to the relief of her parents and family. “Well, my mom didn’t like it that I was going up to West Virginia Tech. A lot of people didn’t like that, but I ended up here [Southern], so I guess it all worked out right.” Another community college student related how her parents were happy that she chose Southern and how they are encouraging her younger brother to attend the local community college as well because, “Mom just likes to keep him close to home…They’re like real protective, so they’d like to keep him close to home, but they’d be okay with Marshall [a four-year university only one hundred miles away].” While still another student discussed the possibility of transferring to a four-year college, and when asked what his parents thought about it, he replied, “Oh, they’ll be happy for me, but of course, they’ll be sad at the same time. Yeah. We’re kind of a close knit--we’re a pretty close-knit family. And I would make sure that every weekend I’d be home even if I had tons of homework I’d do the homework [inaudible].”

One four-year student told the story of a high school classmate who received a full scholarship to a state four-year college but turned it down after receiving pressure from his mother to stay home and attend Southern. The four-year student said, “[H]is mom just like cheated him out of an experience for no reason cause she couldn’t deal with it [her son leaving home].” She alluded to family attachment and suspicion of outsiders (a cultural attribute often associated with rural Central Appalachia) as explanation for this behavior when she stated, “Like I said Mingo County has this thing
where everyone’s so mind-warped about the outside world that any inside information is automatically correct, so if your mom tells you, ‘If you go away to college, you’ll, you know, become a bad person.’ And then you’re like, ‘Oh, then I shouldn’t go away to college.’” In other words, attachment to family leads students to follow parents’ advice unquestioningly.

Some might argue that this attachment to family may limit a student’s educational opportunities because students are reluctant to leave home. On the other hand, as discussed in greater depth later in this section it is parental and family support, a direct product of family attachment, which enables students, both community college and four-year college, to attend college and to succeed in college.

**Family Legacies**

“The Appalachian people…they know the value of tradition and continuity, even though they are sometimes ridiculed for this devotion by the outside world. The mountain people value their past and their family, and on Memorial Day ex-West Virginians by the thousands drive back to honor their dead in cemeteries throughout the state” (Foster & Conner, 1992, p. 18). In fact, small family cemeteries perched on the steep mountainsides behind homes are common sights in Mingo County. Family legacies and traditions strengthen attachment to family and increase the pressures felt by students to carry on these legacies. Students discussed family legacies that influence college and career choices. Many also described the resistance to change or the difficulty in doing something outside of such traditions and legacies.
There is a strong legacy among Mingo County students’ families for the men to go to work for the coal mines or a coal-related industry, i.e., blue collar jobs, and the women to either stay at home or work retail-oriented jobs; so students are forging new paths when they decide to attend college. The family legacy of coal mining is evident. A t-shirt sold at the King Coal Festival held each fall in the county seat of Williamson pictured a coal miner and a caption that read, “A Family Tradition.” There is also a billboard found throughout the state that reads, “Our jobs, our families, and our way of life depend on coal.” One community college student when asked about whether she knew many college educated people while growing up responded, “Besides teachers, no. I knew no one thinkin’ back on it. Wow! That’s hard to believe. Nobody. Because all of my family was in the coal industry and all the wives were stay-at-home moms. That’s weird. I have never thought about that.” Another student discussed how it is the norm in the area to go straight from high school to working and how her family struggles with her choice not to conform. “…but then they [entire family] just can’t let go because every cousin, we’ve had cousins graduate since me and they’ve always just stayed. Both of them work in the coal mines. I mean, they live on Ben Creek and it, you know, they have a life, but they didn’t change, and they don’t understand that I can’t go get a job in the coal mine.” Students described their families as being coal mining families. “Like my family is pretty much like the coal miner family, like, besides my cousin, like, that’s around my age and stuff we’re about the only ones that’s actually went to college out of my family.” There is a legacy of remaining in the area and getting a job instead of going to college. Lack of economic opportunity in the region, the historical context of a single
industry economy, and the cultural characteristic, attachment to family, serve to strengthen this legacy.

Family legacies also influence students’ choice in college. For example, two of the students discussed how their families have always rooted for West Virginia University athletics even though their parents did not attend the University. This tradition factored in heavily when the students decided where to enroll:

So, I chose here because my family is just a West Virginia [University] family and neither of my parents went to college, obviously, but my dad did have friends who went to college here, so he spent a lot of time here and since I was a kid, I mean, that’s all you hear. WVU this. Cause I mean it’s the school in West Virginia, and it gets ingrained I guess, so I don’t think I ever really considered another option. Right, even Marshall, which is closer. I probably could have gotten better scholarships. It just didn’t seem to be an option because I don’t think they were really presented to us until it was too late.

Well, the daddy because you know Saturday football was our thing, and my boyfriend’s up there and everybody thought, “Oh, well, she’s going up there to be with her boyfriend. She don’t want that.” But, that’s not. I mean because if I wanted to go anywhere else I could’ve went, but my dream has always been to wear blue and gold and that’s just what I wanted. And like I said I’ve always promised Dad that I would be in those bleachers as a student.
Not only might family legacy impact where a student attends, but it may determine what they choose to study. One student discussed how the men in his family always went into law enforcement or the military.

Uh, let’s see. At first I wanted to be a veterinarian. I think every little kid wants to be a vet. And then like I don’t know it’s just a lot of my family members that I know of like they either had military experience or they had some type of policing experience and I really enjoyed hearing their stories and I like trying to do like the problem solving thing like detectives and things like that. And Marshall has one of the best criminal justice programs in the state of West Virginia, and I’ve always been fond of Marshall because I’ve come here for competitions and things like that.

Given the predominant family legacy of staying in the area and of men working in the coal mines or related jobs and women becoming stay-at-home mothers, there is a resistance to change among some of these families. One four-year college student discussed how hard it is for her family to accept change:

But that’s, you know, it’s hard for them. It really is. It’s hard, and I think it’s the fact that they [the whole family] had to go through the change too, not only me…And I think that’s being what it is they didn’t want to change. They’re a lot of these people that don’t like change. They’ve lived in the same house since I’ve known them. They’ve not changed inside their house since I’ve known them (laughing). This uncle actually wears black t-shirts and jeans everyday of his life. I never see him in anything other than a black t-shirt (laughing). See, he doesn’t
like change and it was hard. I mean, I call him every morning. He gets up early, and I have class every morning early. I always make time to call him and to check in, let him know how I’m going, you know, that sort of stuff.

As discussed earlier, in his study of a rural Nova Scotia fishing village, Michael Corbett (2007) explained that those youth who choose to stay are in a sense “resisting.” He writes, “In isolated rural places, to resist schooling is to commit at some level to membership in a community of others who stay put” (p. 57). Similarly, rural students who leave are resisting a cultural and familial legacy of staying. (One community member described how some families in the area discouraged college-going because they want to prevent children from “rising above their raising.” He even surmised that the ones who go to college may be more rebellious.) However, these students are supported by parents who expect their children to attend college and want them to have more opportunities than they themselves had.

This legacy can also mean no college going for those who do not resist it or Corbett’s other side of the coin those who resist schooling (because schooling prepares kids to leave). Some of the students explained why they think some of their high school classmates, particularly young men, did not go to college. They described the tradition of males going to work in the coal mines and the allure of money that can be made, without a college degree:

I mean, there was smart people that decided to go the coal mines and I guess that’s more like, just like a family history thing. That they were raised by the coal mines and they just felt that they should just stick with it and not really make a
difference. I mean some that didn’t go, I mean, could have probably went but they really didn’t apply theirselves good enough in high school.

In the above quote the student alludes to students, capable of college work, resisting schooling while not resisting the family tradition of working in the mines. Rural students are faced with conflicting pressures. Many students talk about the pull of the coal mines on young men but also allude to how many may not have felt like they had any other option. Additionally, the last student quoted suggested that this legacy of coal mining has to change, given the declining number of coal mining jobs in the current economy:

Then, you know, we always, kids, are like, they grew up with their fathers being in the coal mines and that’s what they brought home, they’re the primary breadwinners and it’s like, ‘Well, if we go to the coal mines, we can do the same’…it[money] sways most people who don’t want to go to college. And actually I’m sure some coal miners didn’t want to be coal miners (laughing). It depends on the person to choose what’s best for them in this area.

Some people had it in their mind already that they was going to the coal mines. They was going to go to the railroad cause that’s what their families been doin’ so much.

As far as the student population… all of them think they’re going to go into the mines and there’s just a mindset that they’ve been set into and they can’t get out of it, but I guess now eventually they will (laughing) when they can’t get a job.
Because of the strong attachment to family and family legacies that may discourage college-going, college access programs should involve entire families to increase college-going in rural areas.

Parental Encouragement and Support

An overwhelming majority of the students had strong parental encouragement and support15 despite parents not having gone to college themselves. Most of the students felt college was always an option for them and expected of them by their parents. In fact, many thought there was no other option besides college. A few, however, said while their parents were supportive, they were not pressured to go to college. Parental support and encouragement are considered among the best predictors of educational aspirations (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). In this study, parental support and encouragement came in various forms and can be grouped into the following categories: financial support; encouragement; help with financial aid and admissions applications; and the view that education is a priority.

Financial Support from Parents

Given that the students in the sample are first-generation students, I expected many of them to have worked in high school or to be working in college. However, few of the students worked or work. Some of the freshmen talked about the possibility of getting a work-study job second-semester or sophomore year. Parents provided financial

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15 Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) differentiate between parental encouragement and support. Parental support is “a more tangible form of parental backing than parental encouragement” (p. 24). Parental support includes activities such as taking their child on campus visits or attending financial aid workshops.
support for all of the students. This support included spending cash and money for tuition and books. Many of the students also had cars which their parents had given them. All of the community college students were still living at home with their parent/s. The students might not work also because there are fewer jobs available in the area for young people and many of them are receiving financial aid and scholarship money to help pay for college.

I was always told if you want to go to school, we’ll find a way to pay for it. That has always been the situation that I was always told, and I appreciated that. I don’t know if other people got that opportunity.

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Other than the leadership thing [a scholarship] Mom and Dad [pay for college]. Yeah. My dad doesn’t like to get loans. He’s like, “If you can’t pay for it, you don’t need it,” and that’s about with anything he goes to get. They don’t like to owe money.

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Yeah, this semester and next semester, we’re paying for, well actually I won’t be next semester because the leadership [scholarship], but this semester yeah, Mom and Dad are paying for it.

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I thought about taking my first semester off and gettin’ a job where I didn’t have any scholarships or loans or anything and trying to pay for it myself, but my mom and dad suggested I just went on and they’d take care of it.
Students’ parents seem to be taking care of the financial needs of their children, enabling students to focus on college. Many parents, according to students, say they will do whatever it takes to send their student to college. One young woman, a second-year student at the community college, speaks about her dad working overtime to help pay for school.

If I don’t get the other scholarship, they are ready to go for the next semester, yeah. It’s just I don’t want them having to pay for it. I mean, Dad’s a coal miner. He has to work overtime for all this stuff. I don’t like it, but they’re willing to do it. They’ll do it. Like Dad said he’ll do whatever it takes and so did Mom, so that’s how that goes.

While many of the students had some form of financial aid, only about half had Pell Grants or West Virginia Higher Education grants (a state level grant for low-income students, similar to Pell). Two students think they will qualify for Pell next year. One’s father had emptied his 401K to buy three new cars, so they were ineligible this year. The other student, one of the few that had worked in high school, made enough money working her senior year of high school, working close to forty hours a week at a local fast food restaurant, that she surpassed the income requirement for Pell. Although not a primary research focus, a couple of students indicated that they and their parents were reluctant to take out loans. Research on low-income students has shown that they are more resistant to taking out educational loans than middle to upper-income families (Baum & O’Malley, 2003; Paulsen & St. John, 2002).
Encouragement

All of the students in the current study, talked about how their parents encouraged them to go to college. Rural research shows that parental expectations significantly influence college attendance among students (Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine, 1995). This encouragement entailed emphasizing the importance of going to college, discussing careers that require a college degree, making clear their expectations for their children to attend college, and telling them that they could go to college and be successful. Every student, when asked who encouraged them to go to college, first talked about their parents’ influence.

They just drill it into you. You see, you’ll be watchin’ tv one night and they’ll be showing news anchors and scientists and doctors on tv and on ER and stuff like that and they’re like, ‘Oh yeah, that would be cool if you did that.’ Law and Order, ‘You should be a lawyer.’ And it’s just, yeah, they show you examples and then they show you, you can’t live a good life and, um, provide for your children in the way you feel you need to unless you go college. I mean some people can because they get lucky but it’s just, me I don’t have any real talent I guess (laughing) except to go to school and to be something and then provide, but, um, it was definitely drilled into me to go to college and provide for my family and just to make everybody proud and I guess you want to make your parents proud more than anything. That’s probably what drove me to go to college.

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I mean from the time I was a little girl, it’s not like they ever put down their own careers, but they would look at doctors or lawyers and say, “does that look like an interesting job…? You know if you want to do that, you have to go to college.” And I’d say, “Oh, really.” And I must wanted to be 15 things when I was a kid. I wanted to be a vet. I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to be an astronomer. And, my mom would always say, “You have to go to college if you want to do that.” And I’d say, “Well, what’s college?” And she said, “It’s a school when you get older and you go to it and you get a degree and then you make more money.” “Okay, that’s what I’m going to do.”

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Mom and Dad’s always pushed me really hard for one thing to get scholarships and--so I could go to college one day, and it was just always--when you grow up you wanna do this, you wanna do that. And well, because there isn’t many jobs--job opportunities either if you don’t have a degree. So--and I love nursing, so--yeah, and I decided that, I think, in ninth grade that I wanted to be a nurse.”

“They encouraged me to go because nobody else in my family had went. And they, the way they done it is they just said like anytime that you have a problem or something, they’ve been like you can do it, you can do it. You know, self-motivation was one big thing. They taught me that. Like, well, if you want it, you have to do it.

Students are not only encouraged to attend college by their parents, but parents also remain an essential part of a student’s support structure once in college.
But it’s like--my parents, I guess, have been the most supportive, I guess, ’cause I talk to them the most. They’re supportive in different ways. Mom’s kind of in that you need to do better--do better. And dad’s like, you’ll do better on the next one.

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My mom [is my biggest supporter] because my dad’s not home hardly ever, and if I’m having trouble mom’s just like, ‘you can do it. C’mon call somebody,’ and something like that, you know. She’s just my little supporter. She’s my cheerleader.

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I’d have to say my mom [is my biggest supporter], cause [she’s] always supportive with everything, anything. She’s always one a those people that keep you going even when you’re having the worst day ever. She’s just always there. Yeah. Some days I’ll get really stressed and she’s just like, “You can do this. This is easy for you. You’re okay.

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Support from my family [enabled me to succeed in college], cuz the stress of the overwhelming, if I didn’t have somebody to fall back on….

Students continue relying on their parents for encouragement and support once in college. After an especially difficult semester one student reflected, “Like I’ve stuck it out, and I knew that I didn’t--I didn’t want to drop out. That was--that was not an option for me. And that’s--my parents, that wasn’t an option for them either. But I made that decision. I
knew that I did not--I was going to stick it out. I was going to finish.” Another senior also credits his parents for helping him stay in college after a particularly challenging year.

He’s [Dad] always told me, “Don’t pass up the opportunity I had. You got a free ride. Work with it.” Because I got in the situation there where I got in classes that I didn’t like, so I didn’t want to try but those classes I enjoyed. When it came to science, my microbiology and my molecular, I enjoyed. I didn’t like ecology. I didn’t like plants. I didn’t like animals…It affected me a little bit, and that was the main reason for the grades. It was one of those deals that you know, quite a bit of arguing. Well, not really arguing but me listening (laughing) to him [Dad]. And it was one of those deals that I realized he told me that he’s like, ‘You’ve got a golden opportunity with this thing. You’ve got a free ride.’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ And it opened my eyes up to realize, you know, don’t mess up. I’ve changed in the past couple years. It became a situation where I got in bad shape. He talked to basically he tells me like it is. ‘This is what you’ve got to look forward to if you don’t do this.’ And it scares me sometimes, so….

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Parents, I’d have to say [have been most supportive]. Mom, uh, she’s been on a punching bag, sorta speak, especially when I was in sophomore year. I was in physics, organic, biology, and animals and you know I had all of these science, chemical lab safety and it was one of those deals that I’d get so aggravated with class, couldn’t do something, and I’d call and start talking and I’d just cut loose,
basically preached about it, and she would just say, ‘I understand. It’s going to be rough.’ At the time I wanted to go home and give it up. They’ve been, you know, ‘Don’t do that.’ They’ve been very supportive.

Two of the seniors had rough years academically, yet their parents expected them to graduate from college and helped them get through these times. These strong parental expectations seemed to motivate these students. Although students say parents continue to be a primary part of their support systems in college, some students talk about how their parents were unable to understand at times what the college experience is like.16 This sometimes made it difficult for the student to relate his or her experiences. A few students talk about how their parents do not understand why it is difficult to sometimes go to a professor for help in a large class or how classes and grading differs from high school or how time management and scheduling can be problematic.

**Help with Applications**

In addition to encouragement, most of the students talk about how their parents helped them fill out the necessary forms for college admissions, financial aid, and scholarships. Despite having not gone to college themselves, parents were willing to do these things. Parents also helped students keep track of important deadlines for applications.

My mom helped me a lot fill out financial aid and stuff.

*See Wartman (1999) for an in-depth examination of parental involvement among working class and low-income first-year students.*
My dad was probably the one that helped me the most.

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Me and my mother done the financial [aid] thing.

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Well, my dad would if I asked him, but he wasn’t. He’s not the kind to intrude. Generally, I don’t ask for help a lot because I guess I’m too proud. That’s my sin I guess. I’m too proud. And, so I think he just knew better than to ask, but my mom was constantly like, ‘Do you need help? When is it due? What are you doing? Are you on top of this, nananana.’ It gets kind of annoying, of course, because you’re just stressed and frazzled anyway because I’m glad she did it now because it made me get through it when I was supposed to.

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Mom did it [applied for financial aid]. Mom did. She takes care of the financial aid part, because I’d get on there and mess something up and end up not getting it. [Inaudible] she’s the one over the money.

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They was like, my dad he was always really pushy with it. He’s like, ‘Have you done this? Have you filled out financial aid? Have you went and visited college? Do you need me to take you to the college?’ He was always really eager to like get me here and everything. And my mom was the same way. She would like every other day ask me, ‘Did you do this? Did you do that?’ just making sure that
I didn’t forget or leave out anything. They was always really on top of me and like making sure I got everything done.

Low-income families typically lack access to college information. Yet, many of these parents sought out such information to help their children. For example, parents of one student in the study were attending GEAR UP meetings to get further assistance for her younger brother who is still in high school. Another student describes her mother not hesitating going to her school principal if she needed anything or was having problems with a teacher (This is a characteristic usually found among middle and upper-class parents according to Lareau’s research (2003). See more on Lareau’s research below.)

Education as a Priority

Although students’ parents did not attend college, they recognized the importance of getting a college degree and pushed their children from an early age to do well in school. Some of the students discussed how their parents encouraged them to make good grades in school. Education was also a priority because parents viewed it as necessary for their child to get a good job.

Yeah, my parents have always encouraged me to like get good grades and go to school and do good. That’s probably one of the reasons why I’ve always thought that college has always been an option is because of them.

Well, my grades is my number one priority and Mom just always told me, ‘You need to go to college.’ She said, I mean, ‘It’s the only way you can get a great job
and…’ I wouldn’t work hard in school if I wouldn’t have gone to college. I worked so hard all through school so I’m definitely going to college.

My dad kind of pushed me all the ways like, ‘You’re going to college. There’s no, you’re not done after, you know, you graduate.’ And it was kind of in the mindset getting ready for it.

Well, they always pushed me even since middle school to make straight As, yeah, if you got a B, you’re in trouble and things like that. They always pushed me with my grades and made sure that I filled out everything for every scholarship coming and going and then the ACTs and things like that. They would always make sure that I was studying and stuff like--and then if I wasn’t then something would get taken away or I wouldn’t(?) [inaudible]. So yeah, they’ve always--yeah. That was first priority.

She [my mom] knew that the options especially in this day and time, that you need a college education, a college degree for a better life. Uh, and you know, she also knows that I’m not a coal miner (laughing). I mean, I’m not cut out for that type thing, and also it was something that I wanted to do. I’ve always for the longest time wanted to be a teacher. Even when I was younger (laughing).
Yes, they’re [my parents] like, ‘You need to make something of yourself.’ Ah, here’s this talk…Like they know that there probably won’t be anything here unless they bring in this big ole business thing that makes a lotta money.

Annette Lareau in her book, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, examined the influence of social class on childrens’ lives and the different child rearing logic among social classes and what impact that may have on children (2003). Working-class and poor parents, for instance, use a more natural growth approach which views “children’s development as unfolding spontaneously, as long as they were provided with comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support… .Parents who relied on natural growth generally organized their children’s lives so they spent time in and around home, in informal play with peers, siblings, and cousins” (Lareau, 2003, p. 248). Working-class and poor children also developed very strong family ties with siblings and with cousins and other members of their extended family according to Lareau (2003). This strong attachment to family is certainly supported by this research which primarily includes students from working-class backgrounds. However, does the parental support provided to these successful students, those who have enrolled in college, support Lareau’s thesis that *middle-class* parents take a more active role in structuring “their children’s talents, opinions, and skills,” (p. 238) *concerted cultivation*, than working-class or poor parents? As a result of *concerted cultivation*, middle-class children are more likely to “develop and value an individualized sense of self” and learn various cultural activities and skills such as assertiveness that arm them for the professional world (p. 241). In other words, middle-class children are taught to believe they are entitled to education and institutional
advantages (Lareau, 2003). While many of the students talk about how supportive their parents are in terms of college-going, much of this support is less active in nature with the exception of helping students fill out college and financial aid applications. However, the support does seem to make a difference in students’ own educational expectations. Additionally, some students did, in fact, expect to go to college and were expected to go by their parents. On the other hand, some did not. Perhaps, there are subtle social class differences found within this group of students that many would label working-class.

Social class differences may also impact interaction between parents and school officials and, in turn, affect how working-class and poor students learn to deal with educators. “Overall, however, working-class and poor parents in this study had much more distance or separation from the school than did middle-class mothers…” (p. 243). Working-class and poor parents were more “subdued” and less assertive in dealing with professionals and with school officials. Middle-class children, on the other hand, learn to become more assertive and expect “for institutions to be responsive to them and to accommodate their individual needs” (p. 245). Such differences certainly can impact the college access and success of working-class and poor students. Why then have these students succeeded? Perhaps, some of these families, although working class and low-income, exhibit traits found in Lareau’s middle and upper-class families. Parental support and encouragement certainly seem to be major factors impacting the success of these students.

While the students in the study were selected based on their status as first-generation college students, income variances existed within the sample as evident by
Pell eligibility. Ten of the twenty-two students interviewed were receiving Pell grants. Therefore, I was able to examine, to a certain extent, whether or not social class differences existed. Interestingly, a survey of West Virginia high school seniors found that a smaller percentage of first-generation students (70%) reported that they planned to go to college compared to students from families with incomes equal to or less than $30,000 (75%) (WVHEPC & CTCS, 2010).

In this study few patterns emerged to differentiate between the Pell and non-Pell students. Some of the Pell students, for example, indicated a desire to return to or stay in the area after college just as some of the non-Pell students did. Moreover, some students in both income groups also said they planned to leave the area. Additionally, few of the students in either group worked during high school or college, and almost of the students had chosen health care or education fields. Perhaps, the only difference to emerge, albeit a telling one, was that more of the non-Pell students had not considered doing anything besides going to college after high school. Two of the twelve non-Pell students had considered other options besides college while six of the ten Pell recipients had.

*Cultural Capital*

Urban youth are more likely than rural youth to have educational resources (newspaper/magazine/library card) in their homes (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999). While some students in this study were introduced to reading, art, and music at early ages, sources of cultural capital thought to correlate with college-going, others said this was not encouraged much in their homes. (It is interesting to note that almost every female student interviewed for this research when asked about reading, noted that they
had read the *Twilight* books, a popular series of teen vampire novels. This, perhaps, suggests that the rural hollows and valleys are not immune to pop culture’s influence.)

There did not seem to be any patterns that emerged among community college or four-year college students. One student described the importance of books in her life and how her family had introduced her to other forms of cultural capital.

Yes, they did [encourage reading]. My mom is a big reader also, so I mean, it was fun for her to be like, ‘Oh, let’s go to Books-a-Million and I’ll buy you five books.’ I wasn’t a kid that asked for toys a lot. I was a kid who asked for books, and I guess [for] a parent that’s refreshing or something. I don’t know because I don’t think I was ever denied a book…When we would go away to places, we would go to museums and things, and it’s not even that I understood, but I saw them. And we would go, we wouldn’t just go to like if we went to King’s Island [an amusement park], then while we were in King’s Island, then we also had to go to the aquarium and the zoo, and I had to learn something about the lion or the jellyfish. ‘What does a jellyfish do?’ They found a way to make something that I thought was fun educational, and I didn’t realize it at the time.

Some of the students discussed how they would go to the library as children. Another one described how her mother worked with her as a child using phonics flashcards. More women than men in the study talked about enjoying reading. The sports culture and also the “macho” culture in the County could account for this difference. Some students talked about how music had been important in the lives of their families. However, some described having had the opportunities but not really
“taking” advantage of them. A few claimed they were not introduced to certain forms of cultural capital growing up.

Well, my mom got me books and stuff, but I’m really not much of a reader, so I didn’t like them. And I never really opened them, so I can’t say much about reading.

I had to be very interested in the book to read. That’s why I hated my English classes here. I got good grades in ‘em, but when they’re like, ‘Read this,’ and I’m like, ‘This isn’t interesting. I’m not reading this.’ But I’ve always [inaudible] I’ve never been a big reader.

My mom was a big reader and she’s tried it, but I just can’t get interested in it. There’s not many books that has interested me. My uncle, I have a couple uncles and cousins who are into music, but I can’t, I’ve tried it but I just, I’m not musically inclined I guess. Mom is big on arts and crafts and I’m not into that (laughing).

Well, they always had it open to me. You know what I mean? And my dad gave me a guitar. I never did learn it. I’m not very musically oriented. I love music though. I do love music and I’m very skilled at air guitar. Yeah, I’m very skilled at that. But--I mean, I--other than in fifth grade I tried out for the band there. And I lasted one day [inaudible]. I had a clarinet [inaudible] and I hate--I felt(?)

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so bad because my mom wasted so much money on that clarinet. Oh, well. But yeah, my aunt also helped me out with the artistic parts, because she graduated [from art school].

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An interesting side note is that all of the students were given the option of a Walmart gift card (the suggestion of local educator) or an Amazon.com one for participating in this study. Almost all the students chose the Walmart gift card. Those few individuals who chose the Amazon gift card were all four-year students. More than one student commented about never having used Amazon before. This too could be an indicator of cultural capital.

Do Better than Parents

Many students talked about their parents’ desire for them to go to college so that they would live a “better life” than their parents had. Almost all of the parents worked blue collar jobs, many doing physical labor, working in the mines, at a sawmill, at fast food restaurants, or at other local businesses. They did not want their children to have to “work so hard for so little money.” Parents also viewed college as a means of getting a good, well-paying job. Thus, they encouraged their children to attend college because they would make more money afterwards.

According to the students their parents also want what is better for their children in other ways. Several young men spoke of their parents making them promise that they would not go into the mines. Many parents did not have the opportunity to go to college or regret not having gone to college. They want to ensure that their children go to college.
Much research shows that the greater the parental education level is the more likely the child is to go to college (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). In this study none of the parents had completed college; yet, according to the students interviewed those parents value education, a characteristic typical of college-educated parents. Other students described how their parents wanted them to have the experience of college. Moreover, just as students equate college with getting a good job, so do their parents. Because an overwhelming majority of students, both four-year and community college students, stressed how their parents wanted more for them, it is worth quoting at length from the students’ interviews evidence of this belief.

I used to think it was monetary reasons [why parents wanted her to go to college] because my mom always would say, ‘Be a pharmacist. Be a doctor.’ Um, I mean, my junior year of high school I decided I want to be a teacher and the starting salary for a teacher in West Virginia is like $36,000. I’m paying more to get my degree than I’m going to be making; so, I kind of had to change why I thought she wanted me to come to college, cause when she found out what I wanted to be, it’s not like she decided that I shouldn’t go to college anymore. She still wanted me to go and before I left she told me that she didn’t want me to sit in my dorm room and spend all my time with my nose in a book. She was like, ‘Part of why I want you to go to college is so you can see what’s out there.’ She’s like, ‘Go on trips with people, go to the Rec, do whatever you want, do things.’ I think that is why they actually wanted me to go is for the experiences.
The thing that’s sad, going to college, it was one of those deals that Mom not so much pushed but Dad. And Dad wanted me to go into engineering because I was always good at math. My teachers hated me in school because I didn’t pay attention and I cut up because I didn’t have to pay attention. It came easy to me. I made “As” in their math classes and it made, like, ‘Well, you made an A.’ It made them so mad because I didn’t have to do any work to do it. And, but he wanted me to do engineering, but he actually had the opportunity after high school, his teachers, some of them were my teachers, uh, they got him a free ride, the Mingo-Logan coal company in the area, trying to send him to MIT to the engineering school, and he wouldn’t go. He said, ‘I’m making enough money now in the mines.’ And then like 7 or 8 years later it collapsed. And, he regrets it every day.”

My dad never finished high school, like he quit in middle school; and my mom made it to graduation, but she never went to college cause obviously I came along (laughing). And, um, I guess growing up I saw what the financial bind that my father’s always been in because he’s always been stuck with a job that, you know, which he couldn’t find a job that really didn’t want him to have a high school diploma or a GED or something of that sort. So, you know, money and our income was always something that my father stressed, you know, ‘You don’t want to be like me. You don’t want to have to worry about where the next payday is going to come through and worrying if you can, you know, support your
children and your family. You want to go out and you want to do something with your life.’ My mother was pretty much the same way. She really wanted me not to, I guess, go down the same path they did; so, I mean, they were always encouraging me to go out and do something better with my life.

Cause my dad where he was always a coal miner cause he didn’t make it through high school, and my mom she had my brother when she was 18 and had me when she was 21; so she didn’t have a lot of time to get an education, so I want to have something for my family that they want me to have that they didn’t have.”

“Well, my dad where he’s always worked so hard in his life cause where he’s always been a coal miner, like, he’s always giving me these speeches and everything how he wants so much more for me, like how he wants me to be able to have what he couldn’t have. He wants me to be able to give my children what he couldn’t give me….

I’ve thought about it [going into the coal mines], but then, like, my dad pretty much, like, I don’t know, he was like, ‘No.’ He was like, ‘I wouldn’t let you.’ He was like, ‘You’re going to have something different.’

Umm, I think because like my dad worked in the coal mines and stuff and he got hurt, and it was like a hard job, and then like my mom she didn’t go to college but she could have if she wanted to because, like, I don’t think she got her first B on a
paper until she was in 11th grade. But she just wanted kids and she wanted to get married and all of that. So I think that they kind of saw that they struggled in the beginning until they got used to it until they were able to adjust. And like my mom’s parents didn’t want her to [get married so young] so she actually snuck out her window to get married, and then she forgot her driver’s license, so she had to sneak back in and then sneak back out again. So, like, I think they want me to like, mostly I think they don’t want me to have to depend on someone else, like, if I were to just straight and get married because they know how I am, and I don’t even like depending on them; so I don’t think the whole time that I had a job that I asked them for anything…And, um, so I don’t think that they wanted me to like have to depend on someone else. They wanted me to be able to like stand on my own two feet, like say if I got married and got divorced or something, like I already had the career. I didn’t have kids and try to go back to school and like work at Hardee’s because they saw how stressful that was. I think I always had like dark circles under my eyes, so I think cause they just wanted what was best for me, and they knew that that would make me more happy than anything else, even if I didn’t realize that at a young age. So they were tryin’ to tell me and so, yeah, I understand that like they want the best for me because I want the best for my brother. And I know that like this is the safer route and this and you learn so much and it’s like you grow as a person because of college and you get, like, the teachers, not just like about the classes but in English or math or whatever it
teaches you about life, and so I think it’s just like it’s a good thing. And they just
wanted what was best for me.

My mom has always pushed because when she was nine her mom had passed
away. She had to step up and take care of the family because her two older sisters
were already out married, so she had to raise her brother who was three, and she
took the responsibility of mom. Then she had to take care of her dad who had
cancer; so she never had that opportunity, and I’ve always heard all my life,
‘Don’t let anything stop you from going for what you want.’ And she said, ‘If I
would have had it over, said I’m not blaming anything that happened in my life
for not getting to go to college but’ she said ‘if I could have financially afford it
and things would have went my way as a child then things wouldn’t have
happened the way they did that I would have went [to college].’ And she said, ‘I
want you to have that experience.’ So it’s always been a real pushing thing with
my mom, and then my dad is different for him cause I’m an only child. He
missed out on a lot as a kid. Friday night football was our time together and he
got put on night shift. We lost all of that. He got to see me perform one time my
senior year at senior night and that busted him. I graduated on his birthday. That
didn’t help any cause I had promised him years ago that I’d be valedictorian, and I
thought up until the last couple days, I thought I was knocked out of it, and I just
didn’t have the heart to tell him. And I never told him I was valedictorian until I
got there and I put the medal around my neck and then it was bad. So, I mean, he
saw what I always worked for. He knew that I wanted it. And as bad as, in a way he didn’t want to see me go, he wanted to see me do what I wanted and do what I’d promised him. And since then, it sort of went.

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Since we’re around here, we’re obviously going to go to the coal mines just because we’re in this area and that’s something, it’s true. But, you know, you don’t. There’s some of us that will go that way, and, but, there’s others of us that we don’t want that kind of lifestyle. And I think since my dad has worked in the coal mines, he has really pushed me to steer away…he’s, he believes that the longevity of the coal mine isn’t going to last much longer. He says it will last ‘til after he can retire, but after that it’s going to be short-lived. It’s not going to be, last much longer. So it’s really, you know, you people always need doctors and they always need lawyers and need somebody to cook food for you. You need people to make you clothes and stuff like that, so he says pick a job where people actually need you to be, so that’s one of my biggest things, is what do people need and follow a path like that in order to always have a job, especially in this day and time because people are losing their jobs day by day.

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Well, they [my parents] encouraged me to do what I wanted to do and be happy, but they told me that whatever I done if it wasn’t about coal mining that they would encourage me in that. They wanted me to move out of the coal mining.
Students want better than what their parents have and see attending college as the way to accomplish that. They also discussed having seen how hard their parents worked in the mines, at a sawmill, a fast food restaurant, or other local business and what a tough life it was for their parents to do the kind of jobs they did. The students said they realized they wanted better than that and the way to accomplish that was by going to college. Students view college as a means to getting a good job, one that is steady, non-physical, and pays well. Legendary blues musician and songwriter, Bill Withers (who wrote such well known standards as “Lean on Me”), originally from Mingo County, described coming to the realization at a young age that he wanted to do something besides what he saw his father and other men in the area doing.

When you see people coming out of the hole in the ground covered with dust, and then as you start to learn you become aware of the people that don’t do that, like your teachers, and you become aware that this is not an achievement, it’s a survival, not an achievement, and it’s honorable. I mean you have all the respect in the world for them that do it, but you become aware that I don’t want to do that. You know, I don’t want to do that. You become aware of literacy and things like that, I mean, you don’t go in the coal mines on a scholarship (Bill Withers, p. 28). Although Withers respected those who worked in the coal mines, just as the students respect what their parents do and their hard work, he understood that the options were limited. He states, “I like this place, I love these people who nurtured me and who cared for me, but I don’t want my life to be this hard” (Bill Withers, p. 28). Some of the students express similar reasons for attending college:
I grew up in a low-income family, so I had four sisters and a brother, so it was pretty tough living with that many siblings and having low income. My mother and my father both are disabled, so they draw SSI maybe $600 a month at the most, and that’s just enough to pay the bills. So it’s like I wanna do something and be successful for myself so that maybe when I grow up and I marry and have kids I won’t have to have my kids struggle through what I had to.

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I think I knew from middle school. My mom and dad, I grew up knowing that I was gonna go to college because I seen them grow up or I seen them work so hard for so little and Mom and Dad just always encouraged me to go to college.
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The older I got the more I realized I didn’t want to have to do physical labor with Dad, so I decided I’d go to college.

Several students described seeing the toll working in the coal mines has had on their dads’ bodies. One young man’s father worked underground for fifteen years, starting as a high school senior, and has black lung but continues to work on a surface mine. The student said, “If you go in the coalmines your body’s just gonna go down the drain and stuff like that.” Another talked about how her father’s knees are shot, while still another described the constant back pain his father has dealt with since a roof fall injured him when he was a young man.

Again students are faced with conflicting notions. There are familial and cultural legacies that may discourage college-going; however, more importantly, the majority of
parents of students who go to college encourage college-going. There is likely less conflict among community college students who while they are not working in the mines or other traditional area jobs, they are at least staying in the area.

Considerations besides College

Because of the strong parental support, very few of the four-year college students had considered doing anything after high school other than attending college. Many of the four-year college students never considered not going to college nor did they ever think it was not an option for them. These students had difficulty imagining what they would be doing if they had not gone to college. In fact, the students thought their parents always expected them to attend college; and talking informally with some of the parents, this was, indeed, the attitude. For instance, one father said because he had decided to work in the mines rather than get an education, he wanted his son to go to college. “It wasn’t if he went to college. It was where would he go.” A local teacher discussed how she and her siblings all went to college because it was never an option in her family not to go, despite her parents never having gone. They were “expected” to attend. Students expressed similar expectations:

Neither one of them [my parents] went. Dad, later on, he said that he wished he would have done—gone on and done something because he went—he was—when I was born, he was in coal—he worked—he didn’t work in the coal mines, but he worked on the strip. So he was a coal miner. And then my mom worked at a drug store. So if she would’ve continued working, she would eventually became a pharmacy tech. But then she—she was actually an aide at the school for a little
while. And then my brother was born and she quit. So--but [inaudible] it was never an option. There was never an option that you’re not going to school. It was, “You’re going to college.” Of course, I wanted to. I did want to. Like maybe when it--I don’t know. It’s--I guess I kind of grew up in the time where it was--it really wasn’t do you--do you or don’t you.

I don’t know if there really was ever a, ‘I’m going to go to college.’ I guess it was always in my mind. I just always knew I was going to go.

Yeah. From like a young age I knew I wanted to go to college. I mean, from junior high I was like, Okay, I’m gonna--at first I was like, I’m going to Marshall to do this. I wanna be this when I grow up. And it was just making the choices where I wanted to go [inaudible]. But I’ve always known I wanted to go to college.

I just never thought it [going to college] like wasn’t an option, so like from the time I found out and pressing it on me all this time. And then like they [my parents] always expected me to. Once I think my mom mentioned, ‘Well, we can’t make her go,’ or something. And I was like, ‘Really? I thought you were going to make me….’ Like I’ve never really ever considered it not being an option until like I’d already applied for school and stuff, and they [my parents] said it and I was like ‘Wow.’
Umm, not really. I thought about taking my first semester off and gettin’ a job where I didn’t have any scholarships or loans or anything and trying to pay for it myself, but my mom and dad suggested I just went on and they’d take care of it.”

“At the very beginning. My dad kind of pushed me all the ways like, ‘You’re going to college. There’s no, you’re not done after, you know, you graduate.’

And it was kind of in the mindset getting ready for it.

These students’ parents expected them to go to college; thus, so many of these students had not considered doing anything besides attending college after high school.

I mean, I don’t think I ever gave myself the option not to [go to college], and, like I said, I don’t think everyone has to go to college, but I think for myself I just always kind of knew. No [I never considered doing something else], and it might be because of the area we live in. That there’s not other opportunities. I mean, we had like a vocational school, but it’s not really something we were taught about or we went on a tour there once when I was like in 8th grade, and after that nobody really talked about it. So, it’s not like we were exposed to other options. It was either stay here and do nothing or go to college, so I just kind of always knew that out of those two black and white choices that I would go to college.

No, I’ve never considered it [not going to college]….Yeah, it’s hard to even imagine, cuz I’ve always loved school. And I still don’t--even after I graduate, I really--I can’t picture myself not going to school, because it’s just--it’s always
been there. I have a feeling I’ll end up being one of these full-time students for the rest of my life.

I couldn’t--I don’t know what I’d be doing if I didn’t go to college. I would probably still be stuck here trying to find a job.

No I haven’t. I have never considered it. When I was in high school, I actually never considered anything besides college.

Almost all of the four-year college students had not really considered doing anything besides going to college. One male said he briefly considered the mines but not seriously because “…it’s just not something I want to do for 40 years cause, I mean, you look at the older guys and it’s just, I mean, they make great money and they enjoyed it, but I mean, they’re worn down at fifty-something cause it’s hard labor, and I don’t want to have to do hard labor my whole life. That’s why I’m going to college. That’s a major advantage I guess.” More than one student when asked about what they might be doing if they had not gone to college answered that they probably would be doing “absolutely nothing,” “just laying around,” or “just sitting at home.” This reveals the students’ belief that few options are available to them if they do not go to college. Additionally, I would surmise that those who always expected to go to college and have not given serious consideration to other options may more likely stay in college. The importance of parental expectations is revealed.
The majority of community college students also talked about not having considered anything else besides college after high school. When asked if they had considered other things besides college, a handful answered, “No,” “No, not seriously, no,” or “No, I don’t think I’ve ever considered not going to college.” Others elaborated:

I think I knew from middle school. My mom and dad, I grew up knowing that I was gonna go to college because I seen them grow up or I seen them work so hard for so little, and Mom and Dad just always encouraged me to go to college. ..no, I never. I couldn’t, wouldn’t have a plan if I didn’t go to college. I don’t know what I would do. So, college has always been the norm.

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My parents and teachers and everybody [encouraged me]. It’s, you know, they said there was no hope for you if you don’t go to college. And especially around here, you know. They said you might be lucky if you’re in a bigger city and catch on and meet some lucky people and they can help you out, but around here it’s, it’s just you have to go to college. Your teachers drill it into you. Your parents want you to be successful, so they tell you to go to college. And you want to make them proud and you want to do what’s best for yourself, and college is that thing, for some people. I mean other people college might not be it, but, yeah. Many of these students saw college as a necessity. Without college the hope of finding a good job is highly unlikely, particularly in the region. This belief is held by both community college and four-year college students. In fact, many of the students who
would like to remain in the area have chosen fields, such as nursing or education, in which there is a greater possibility of finding a job in the region.

Overwhelmingly students in the current study believe that it is necessary to go to college to get a good job. Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) found similar results in their large longitudinal study of students and parents in Indiana. Both students and parents indicated the most important reason for attending college is to get a job. Students in the current study primarily defined a “good job” in terms of high pay and/or job security. One student said he sees college as a “necessity.” Other students when asked if they need a college degree to get a good job overwhelmingly agreed that they do.

Absolutely (laughing). I think if you didn’t have a college degree it’s very, very slim unless you’re extremely lucky, but most of us aren’t. But, I mean even in the coal mines you need to have a college degree, and, uh, everywhere else it’s a primary need. You have to have it. I think it’s, if you have a college degree, it’s a better source of income for ya. If you have that degree and they see that kind of expertise. I think it’s very necessary.

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Oh, yes, yes. You can’t be in Mingo County. It’s just, uh, if you don’t want physical labor, you need an education, higher education.

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(nodding) Yeah, pretty much, yeah. I mean, there’s jobs out there that you can, you can get that make pretty good money without a college education, but there are, they’re few and far between, so.
You have to go to college to have something around here…I mean, if you wanna make seven or eight dollars at McDonald’s or Wendy’s that’s fine. It is income. But if you want to actually have something in life and have a career, you pretty much have to have at least an associate’s degree.

Today in modern time, yeah. Cuz that’s what is demanded. They want you to have some type of degree, because if you go and ask for a job without a degree and someone else comes in with a degree, most like the one with the degree’s gonna get it.

Yeah, pretty much, cuz the way the economy’s going, yeah, I just don’t see it picking up anytime soon. And people who still get college degrees are having difficulties now getting jobs, and it’s becoming more stressful and impactful on us, because you have to get a degree. We have to go out and do something, or we’ll end up doing nothing with our lives.

Yes. Because now you have to have a high school diploma to be able to work at McDonald’s. And any other place that you really want, that you’re going to be able to get paid good, you have to have a degree. The only other place around here is WalMart. And, I mean, some people do work at WalMart for a living, but I don’t want to be one of those people. I want to have more money than that. I
kow that sounds selfish or whatever but...I mean, I want to go to Europe one of these days.

Getting a good job to earn a good salary seems to be a primary motivator for students to attend college. When asked what might motivate kids to go to college, one student answered the following.

That they can make more money when they get out of school instead of just working at like a fast food restaurant or something, so just making more money make people want to go to college and get a better education.

Students seem to be receiving this message from a variety of people and sources. Many students said their parents reinforced this lesson. A local GEAR UP coordinator spoke of an exercise she had students do last year in which they were given a budget. At a variety of stations students had to choose how much to spend at each place for a car, house, insurance, etc. She said kids spent a lot on the cars and didn’t have a lot of money left for food and other essentials. However, if they went to college, they had more spending money. The exercise was to show them if they had a college degree, they got more money. A local educator even exclaimed that higher education in the county is viewed as “H-I-R-E education,” meaning that students attend college in order to get a good job afterwards. This is the common message students are taught about the benefits of going to college.

Although students for the most part think they need a college degree to get a good job, they do not all agree that they need one to be considered successful. In fact, most said that success tends to include having money and being happy and fulfilled with one’s
life, and they knew many people who were successful who did not attend college. Given that none of the students’ parents had college degrees, I am not that surprised by their answers. In Mingo County there are people who have made a lot of money in timber and coal who did not go to college. For example, one of the richest men in the County and the state, “Buck” Harless, did not go to college. However, even with all of his millions, he still believes that his life would have been even richer had he gone to college.

Unlike the majority of the four-year college students, a handful of the community college students had considered other options besides college. In fact, one young man worked for over a year on a strip mine and drove a coal truck before returning to community college only after he had been laid off by the coal company.

[Y]eah, well, I mean, Dad and them when I started working for a strip right out of high school and then it rolled around to August well I was already signed up to go to Southern 2009. Dad, seeing how I liked working for the strip and stuff, he told me he said ‘I can’t choose what you wanna do with your life.’ He said, ‘I’m gonna leave it to you.’ He said, ‘But, I want you to know that I’d rather you go to college.’ But he said, ‘But you’ve gotta do what makes you happy.’ And that’s what I thought was gonna be a good job, but I found out 10 months later that it wasn’t.

He readily admitted that he would have continued working on a strip mine and not gone to college had he not been laid off.

For some students working in a blue-collar job made them realize that they wanted to attend college. For example, another student worked at a saw mill the summer
after high school and quickly realized this was not something he wanted to do. A few other community college students had thought about other options such as attending cosmetology school, joining the military, going into the coal mines, working for the post office or following other technical careers.

That was actually one of my thoughts before going to college. I was going to enroll in the Air Force cause I wanted to be a fighter pilot but that’s still a dream of mine is to fly planes. I actually thought about going to try to get into the Air Force Academy. If that’s still possible, I’d actually try that.

I guess my tenth grade year I was kind of--I was like--we--I had the option, I think, in tenth grade to say if I wanted to go to Vo-tech or not, so I was kinda considering that; but I was like, ‘Well, I don’t think I’ll be happy with that.’ So then I was just--I buckled--really started buckling down. I wanted a scholarship, and then I got a scholarship for Southern.

Did I consider doing anything else? Well, I really considered if I wouldn’t get any scholarships I really considered, as bad as I hate to say it, a military thing just--I mean, because I wouldn’t wanna put all that on my family again. You know what I’m saying? I think that’s sometimes a burden on my mom and dad, because [inaudible] we’re, of course, not made of money [inaudible]. I mean, very few people are fortunate to have tons a money. Yeah, I was--I had the
[inaudible] conclusion that if I didn’t get some scholarships and get help I would just [join the military], yeah, like the air force or something like that.

I thought about cosmetology, because my sister--and I have this skill; I can paint fingernails and toenails really well. I’ll show ya an example. I just done these the night before last actually [shows me her toenails]. So I thought about that, cuz she’s gonna open her own shop. She was just in a bad accident, too, two weeks ago, and she’s gonna--when she gets back on her feet and she--she’s gonna work a while, get her masters in cosmetology and her boyfriend’s dad, which is her father-in-law, he’s the friendly barber in Williamson, and so he’ll be retiring 20 years, 10, 15 years from now, and he told her that if she wanted she could take over the shop. So she’s gonna open her own little place and I thought about helping out, cuz I’m good at makeup, too. And she’s a very excellent hair stylist. Yeah. So she could do hair. I could do nails and makeup and then her boyfriend got this big idea he’s gonna buy some tanning beds and throw in there, too; so, we was just gonna have this whole big family business. I told her, I said, ‘Well, you know, if nursing don’t work out for me I can always,’—I said, ‘Or even I could go to beauty school, because I think it’s only like a ten month program.’ And I said, ‘I could go there part time and become a cosmetologist and work with you while I’m not working there.’ So—cuz, you know, if it’s her own shop, she can make the hours and everything. So I wouldn’t be obligated to be there all the time. So it would be pretty easy.
Another interesting finding was that a few students (not in my sample) enrolled in college in order to collect unemployment for a longer period of time. A college student, whom I met in the community college library one day but was not interviewed for this study, explained how he, too, had been laid off from the coal mines. By enrolling in college, he was able to collect unemployment for a longer period of time while he searched for a job. Other educators in the state described how some students enroll to get financial aid money and loans in order to live rather than with the goal of getting an education. (Perhaps, this might help explain the high loan default rate at the community college).

However, when asked about what might prevent them from finishing college, both four-year and two-year students claimed that hardly anything could prevent them from finishing, now that they were there. One exception noted by many students--family illness or a family problem or emergency--again alludes to the strong attachment to family.

I really don’t know. It would have to be a serious illness or, uh, a serious illness of my family or something that would make me not go to college. Umm, but if anything would prevent me from doing it, I would still have college in the back of my mind and know that when it’s over I’m still goin’ back.

I don’t think nothing can. You know, unless, it was an extremely traumatic event to where I lost you know an immediate family member, and I’d have to provide for the family. That would be probably one of the only things. It would be tough
to quit college cause you know it’s the road to success, and I really need to follow
that in order to be successful; so, hopefully, anything can’t stop me.

I mean if there was a significant change in my family’s health, then I would go
home, but that’s the only reason. I mean, if it was a monetary change, then I’m
gonna find money somewhere, but if like my mom got really sick and needed me
to be home, I would gladly quit. Or if my dad got really sick and couldn’t work,
I would gladly go home and work at McDonald’s, but anything outside of that
isn’t going to change anything.

Um, I don’t really know. Like, I mean if I had some type of like family
emergency or something, like I know a lot of people quit for that and then….Like
my English teacher’s daughter, her dad passed away last year, so she quit for a
little while. And I, like I know that’s something I would do and, like, um, there
was a movie where this …girl quit college because her like mom got killed, to go
take care of like her siblings, and I’m, like, I would hate if that happened, but I
know I would go do that. I mean just family emergencies or like if something
really bad happened, I would; but as far as just like if I like fail a class or
something like that, and it’s going to put me behind and, like, that’s my own fault.
I should have studied more. I can’t throw the rest of it away like all the classes
that I passed. They’re going to be like wasted and stuff; so, I don’t think I would
let that stop me.
A professor at a public four-year institution where Mingo County students attend, expressed his surprise at how often students miss class for “family emergencies” or when parents or extended family need help of any kind. Many of the students noted, however, that they would return to college after the illness or family emergency had passed. A few students related stories about their parents who had to forego college to support their family or care for an ailing relative. “My dad went one year, maybe a semester to Marshall and his mother passed away; so, he dropped out and came home and helped with his dad and then got a job. He’s really one of the lucky ones actually to have a job like that without a college education. I think back then it was, there was more variety and more jobs available for people who didn’t have a college education, but now it’s just [not that way anymore].”

Although many of the students at both the community college and four-year institutions worried about money and losing a scholarship, money would not prevent them from finishing college. Yet, a change in family circumstances might. Again, while the majority of students were concerned about failing a class or classes, this too would not prevent them from finishing college.

Parental Involvement and Social Capital

Elder and Conger (2000) in their study of rural Iowan farm children, found that parental community involvement led to academic success among the children. “The inheritance of family farms across generations ensures a measure of involvement and leadership in community life among farm families” (Elder and Conger, 2000, p. 46). Similarly, many of the students came from families that had been in southern West
Virginia or neighboring Eastern Kentucky for several generations. These community connections are essential for social capital. For instance, church involvement “build[s] social trust and shared communication, essential elements of social capital” (Elder and Conger, 2000, p. 47). Elder and Conger found parents that were more tied to the land (i.e. full-time farming vs. part-time farming vs. non-farming) were more involved in their communities and had children who were more involved as well.

Rural students in this study were for the most part very involved in extracurricular activities in high school and had parents who were either formally or informally involved in community organizations. For example, some students’ parents were involved with school, church, and community organizations. One student said his parents were not very active in community groups; however, his parents owned a local business, which made them very connected to the community. The few exceptions of students not very involved in high school extracurriculars were from families that seemed less well off financially and whose parents were not very active in the community. Such involvement exposes students to greater social capital resources. Elder and Conger found that families with no ties to farming were more socially isolated, and academic success among these children was rarer. The students in the current study may come from families with greater ties to the community, contributing to their educational successes. (Further discussion on community involvement and its implications are found in the non-family support section.)

Extended Family Support
In Elder and Conger’s (2000) study of rural Iowan farm children, they found “greater proximity and frequency of contact are expressed in stronger social ties between Iowa farm youth and their grandparents, compared to other young people” (p. 40). Similarly, many of the students in this study indicated close relationships with their grandparents and other extended family members. Elder and Conger’s work is helpful in informing this current study, given the intergenerational support of the families in the coal mining county where many have ties to the land and place. Likewise, strong ties within the family are found in both studies, which Elder and Conger (2000) surmised is a result of shared activities such as farm chores and jobs and “from the shared community life of each generation, expressed through 4-H clubs or a local organization of the Future Farmers of America” (p. 42).

Many of the Mingo County students live beside or nearby their grandparents and other relatives. Much like the Sunday family breakfasts in Newtown I described earlier, I was included in another family of four generations who gathered after church in the home of “Mama” and “Papa” for a big Sunday dinner. The children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren sat around the kitchen table or in the living room. One of the granddaughters, a college graduate who has returned to the area, shared with me how her grandmother, the only other person in the family with a college degree, had encouraged her and her siblings to go to college. In fact, her younger brother had recently dropped out of college and had been most worried about disappointing his grandmother. Students in this study talked about grandparents’ influence on their lives. They talked about how
grandparents or aunts and uncles watched them growing up when their parents worked; others talk about cousins being like brothers and sisters.

In addition to grandparents, other family members were also very influential in the lives of students. Several of the students with older siblings who had already gone on to college discussed how these brothers and sisters served as role models and encouraged them to go to college. Other research on college-going has found that students with siblings who attended college or were currently enrolled were more likely to have higher education aspirations (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Given the close ties to family in the region, it is not surprising that extended family members supported the students as well.

I think that’s how it works around here. Everybody is like really family oriented and that helps a lot too. Like, when you go off to school, it’s a little bit of a change going from complete family to sort of individuality, but I think it’s good because you know that you always feel like you’ve got somebody behind you or doing this for you or doing that for you and really going away does help with the individuality.

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All of my family [encourage me to go to college]. They uh, most of them didn’t go to college, so they pushed.

Several students talked about turning to other relatives for support if they didn’t feel comfortable talking with their parents about something. Some students had extended
family members help them fill out financial aid forms and encourage them to go to college

My mom’s side of the family greatly encouraged it [going to college].

Like everyone [family members and neighbors] I ran into, they’re like, ‘Are you going to college?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ Like, ‘Well, you need to.’ I’m like, ‘Okay.’

Yeah, uh, my uncle, the one I said went into the military, his wife is actually like the financial advisor at Morehead State University; so, like, she actually sat down with me and helped me fill out my FAFSA and helped me apply for some things. And she’s like, ‘Well, I do this for a living, so come over here’.

I think, I got really close with my cousin and my sister cause my sister went to nursing school and my cousin, both my cousins, they were twins, they went to Morehead State, and one of them actually went to the police academy and was a trooper and the other went on to Louisville and become a dentist; so, I really kind of thought enough that they really inspired me. I look at them for support and stuff. You know, whenever I go to the dentist, me and Josh talk about what classes will do and how many hours I’m taking and how’s the homework…. So it helps you to have somebody like that. I really appreciate them being. And I still talk to my sister which she takes classes at State, and I think we both have math problems (laughing). For some reason. We talk on the phone about our math
classes. She’s in a higher level than I am, but we still struggle with it. I don’t know if it’s genetic or what.

The above student talks about both his cousins’ and older sister’s influence. One student’s aunt and grandmother were teachers, “So they’ve always my whole life pressed teaching on me.” This student has decided to become a teacher because of these relatives’ influence. While extended family in some instances encouraged students to remain in the area, they also served as important elements of students’ support structures. Close proximity to extended family and strong attachment to family likely increases the roles families play in students’ decisions whether to attend college.

Success for Others

While most students said they want to succeed for themselves, they also said they want to succeed for their parents and family. Given the strong attachment to family and the strong parental support, it is not surprising that students wish to succeed in college for their parents.

Being successful, graduating from med school would be, like, that’s a dream if I could do that, I’d be ecstatic. To be a doctor and just to come back here and to hang around and be a doctor and your family’s close by and you have close relationships with all your patients. I think that would be a huge success for me.

Well, it’s important to me, but I guess my mom and dad are my support. They, uh, I don’t want…My dad’s almost 50 and I’ve seen times where he can’t move
because he’s so down, and I want to be successful where I can support him and then they won’t have to worry about nothin’ as they retire.

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So success--I don’t--it’s just--I think it affects an entire family, but I mean it’s--if-like--me, especially with my cousin graduating this weekend, him getting this, my family’s gonna consider that a success. He put the time into it. So the whole family will celebrate that. When I graduate in May, my whole family will celebrate that because we’ve not really had a lot of people who’ve gone to college.

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Definitely my mom and my dad, especially my mom because she’s always, mom’s the rock behind me. Dad helps. Dad maybe like a little smaller rock holding up mom (laughing), but mom is there. It’s always been her dream to see me go there. She cries every time I come home. She cries every time I leave. She cries on the phone and I guess I haven’t cried yet. I have not cried the first time, but you know there’s times when I miss it, but I know at the same time if I keep myself goin’, I push myself to go, I keep myself busy, I give myself the drive to go, I’m going to be successful. I’m going to make Mom proud. I’m going to make Dad proud, and I’m going to make myself proud, most importantly because you know I see what the drugs around here do to people, and I, that’s what I’ve told my mom, “I don’t want that.”… And I think that’s sort of what pushes me extra, too, because I look back and I see what my cousins are going
through. They have children that never stay in the same home together. They’ve lost their house due to drugs. They’ve wrecked their car because of drugs. They have no way to get around. I mean, it’s a sad story, and as weird as it sounds, that drives me. That pushes me.

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Most important, it’s [my success] important to me, but you know my parents want to see me successful. My grandparents want to see me successful and everybody, your whole family wants to, but it’s most important, I don’t feel like I have to show anybody that I’m successful as long as I feel that I made it and that’s the most important thing.

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Um, the biggest thing is probably letting down myself or putting down my parents. You know, I want to, I don’t want to fail a class because I’d feel like I’m a failure; but I know that’s not the truth and I’d just try it again, but letting down myself is probably the biggest thing and letting down my parents and letting down my friends, you know. I just, once you get going you don’t want to stop. So, hopefully, I can keep it going and keep it strong and keep my college learning skills to be up to par.

As one student explains, her successes are also considered a family success. This belief among students serves as further evidence of the strong attachment to family.

Student as Role Model
The students with older siblings who had gone to or are currently enrolled in college looked to these siblings as role models. Similarly, the students with younger siblings see themselves as role models for their younger brothers and sisters. They understand the influence they can have on younger siblings’ educational aspirations and future decisions about college.

I think I was a little apprehensive at first because one of the big reasons was my little brother; he’s like me. He was, we didn’t like school ‘til we got older, and he doesn’t struggle, but he doesn’t like it, and sometimes I would go on vacation with some of my friends and he’d be having trouble with homework and he’d call me and I’d be like, ‘Ahh, I’m going to have to stick around to help him.’ So I was like, I can stay around here and get a good education and get a good start. You know Southern was a good choice. They have a good nursing program, but I wanted to go and be a doctor, so I took the first step, I guess, so I think Southern it can put me there. It’s not going to allow me to be…and it’s just close. It’s close to where I live. It’s relatively inexpensive, but yeah.

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She [my sister] was, I always looked up to her and he [younger brother] looks up to me and it’s just a stepping, a ladder to follow behind one another. Hopefully, he’ll go to college. I hope I can help him.

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I mean my entire family pretty much lives in the same place. And they were really upset about it, but I think they kind of just tell themselves, ‘She’s doing it
for the right reasons. If she quits and comes homes, then her sisters will get the wrong impression and then they won’t want to go away and she’ll come back and have to work at McDonald’s or something for the rest of her life.’ So, even though they didn’t go to school they know the benefits of it.

So, I want to succeed for myself. But not even my parents but my sisters they’re 13. If I come up here, and I, if I party and I waste my money and I go home and I say, ‘I quit.’ Then what are my sisters going to think? ‘Oh, I should go to Morgantown and party and waste my parents’ money and drop out, and they’ll still love me.’ And I don’t want to give them that impression. And I’m not going to shepherd them into ‘you have to go to college. It’s the only thing you can do’ because I don’t think that’s true, but I do want to encourage them because it’s outside of the education, it’s just a good experience. It’s different to meet people and do things that you couldn’t do otherwise.

I don’t know this around my 10th grade year I started getting really good grades. I started getting like a 4.0 average and things like that, so I actually started thinking in my head, ‘Wow, I could actually do this [go to college].’ So I want to do it as kind of proving to myself that I can do it and making my friends, my family, and everyone around me like proud of me and you know plus I have a little baby brother. He’s five years old, so if I go to college and do something
good, he always looks up to me. I’m like his little superhero, so maybe he’ll go off and do something like that and it’d be nice to be an influence to other people.

I think cause they just wanted what was best for me and they knew that that [going to college] would make me more happy than anything else even if I didn’t realize that at a young age, so they were tryin’ to tell me and so, yeah, I understand that like they want what’s best for me because I want the best for my brother… I know it’s [my success] important to my parents and like for me, um, I do not want my brother to go into the coal mines or something dangerous like that, and I want him to go to college even though he says he’s going to the NFL. I preach to him all the time, ‘You can’t go into the NFL if you don’t go to college.’ And he says he doesn’t need to, so like, for me I think it’s like my simple, like not very many people do leave Gilbert like that are born there, and I think that I want to show him like your opportunities are endless; and like if I went and did it, you come from the exact same family like they’ll help you the same way they helped me. You can do it. And so like anything I’ve ever done in my life, like my mom and dad they teased me one day like, ‘You just don’t do bad stuff because you don’t.’ I’m like ‘No, I don’t do bad stuff because I know I wouldn’t want C. doing it and that when he’s my age and he does it, then I can’t tell him you shouldn’t have done that because then he’s like, ‘Well you did it, too.’ So, like for me, it’s like the minute my mom had my brother, I became like a second
mom, so everything I done in the back of my head, ‘Would I be okay if C. did this?’

Yeah. It’s a struggle getting him [my brother] to do good in school. I encourage him to, cuz I’m too--I tell him all the time that it’s, it’s so much better than high school and he’ll love it and that he should definitely try to get himself on the right track and go. But I wanna support him whatever decision he makes.

These students hope, by example and encouragement, that their younger siblings will attend college someday. They described helping younger siblings with homework, talking about the importance of a college education; and one even admitted that part of the reason why he chose the local community college was to be there for his younger brother. In an area with few college-educated role models, older siblings can have a major impact on the college-going of their younger siblings.

Attachment to Family Might Mean No College-Going

Just as attachment to family can lead to college-going because it is translated into support and encouragement, attachment to family can also lead to non college-going behavior among rural students because of family legacies of not attending college. A local, college-educated preacher related the story of a young man who almost did not attend college even with a full scholarship because the boy’s father argued that he did not go to college so why should his son. It took much convincing on the preacher’s part before the boy was allowed to enroll. Other community members interviewed discussed similar attitudes among some rural people who believed that going to college would
make students get “above their raising,” that is, they would no longer be like their parents.

When asked about what factors might affect Mingo County students’ opportunities to go to college, students indirectly point to attachment to family and family legacies as possible reasons why students do not go to college or do not complete college.

We lost a guy the first class. He came up one day and then went back home and went to Southern. Left all the free, even the parking permits were paid for by them. You know what I’m saying? [Did he leave because he was homesick?]

Yeah, he just left. I’d seen everybody that went to campus, but I hadn’t seen him. That kid went home. He just said, ‘I don’t want to do this. I’m going home,’ and it was one of those situations that I didn’t want to leave home either. You know, it was a big step. That was a step that I was one of very few in my class that was willing to take that step. And, uh, I talked to her [a woman who worked for a scholarship program in which the student participated] for a long time. It was hard to stay. And it, I got over it about my sophomore year. I’m like I don’t have to go home that much anymore.

One student’s parents shared a story with me about dropping their son off at college. After they moved him into the dorm they drove the two hours back to Mingo County. About five minutes after they arrived home, their son pulled into the driveway saying he was homesick. He returned at his parents’ insistence, but they got teary-eyed as they talked about dropping him off on campus as a freshman. The student is one of the four-year seniors interviewed for this study. Without supportive parents he likely would not
have returned. One student explained that if a student’s family does not encourage college-going, then it is unlikely the student will go. “You can’t pound something in somebody’s head if that’s what their family puts in their mind, if that’s what they see, you’re not going to change it…."

A family legacy of going into the mines is strong and the lure of good money right out of high school equally so. Large, lavish mansions owned by coal company officials are found in the county. In fact, one of the richest men in the county (and in the state) made his millions in lumber and coal and did not attend college. Coal miners often own larger homes and newer trucks and motorcycles. It is easy to understand how young people might be tempted by these images and stories. Others in the community mention that some parents do not encourage education, particularly college, because they do not see the need for it since they themselves did not attend. While many of the students in this study say their parents want their kids to do “better” than they, an attitude of not wanting their children to “rise above their raisin’” persists in other families, according to some locals.

Although mining continues to attract young people, that is not to say that students and people in the community do not recognize the dangers associated with coal mining. In fact, they are reminded almost on a daily basis. Students in this research talked about the toll coal mining took on their fathers and other male relatives and the other dangers involved. One elderly woman recounted how her husband, who worked in the mines for thirty-five years starting at about age fifteen, had worked at the Buffalo Creek mine the morning before the earthen dam broke killing 125 people and injuring over a 1,000
people as black water swept through the hollow. She spoke of her husband’s friend, another coal miner, and his family who were killed, including a ten year old son. She vividly recalled the “little coffin” being carried by and still got emotional as she talked about it. Shortly after I moved to the area for this research, a local young man’s legs were shattered in a roof fall. And, in the spring of 2010 while writing this manuscript, the nation was reminded of the dangers of mining when an explosion killed 29 workers at the Upper Big Branch mine in a neighboring West Virginia county. Yet, the mines continue to attract young people from Mingo County. Perhaps, not only the money but also the option to stay close to home and family entice young men to enter the mines. Additionally, some may feel that college is not an option because of the perceived high costs of attendance. Options seem limited.

Lack of Parental Support

Students interviewed often cited a lack of parental support as one reason that some of their classmates did not make it to college.

I think the biggest problem that the kids in our community is, like I said, not having the support system at the house because there’s so many kids around here that their parents really don’t care about them. And I think if they had the motivation, they would know to make something better of themselves and, uh, where there isn’t much to do around here no wonder kids are getting into mischief, you know. So….
I think a lot of--I think they just--they don’t want to go through college. They think it takes too long and a lotta people think it’s pointless. I think some people--some parents I think around here tell ‘em that it’s pointless, that college is pointless. You know what I mean? Because they didn’t go, they’re like, ‘Look at me, I mean, we’re fine.’

I mean, I think, it just sort of depends on what your family expects of you, and most of them that can’t go to college it’s sort of financial too. And I think that sort of plays into where they have to get a job and then normally they just end up staying.

I think everybody did, because as far as--maybe their parents didn’t push ‘em as much, but as far as the schools and the off--the classes that were offered and--every time they would come and say, ‘Well, apply for this scholarship, apply for this test,’ and things like that, it was really in their own hands whether they wanted to go or not.

However, as evident in a couple of the above quotations, at the same time acknowledging a lack of parental support, students also blamed a lack of self-motivation among non-college going students as a reason for not going to college. There are implications for blaming the individual. By blaming individuals, the social barriers that prevent college access are more likely to be ignored. In fact, many students believe that all of their high school classmates had the opportunity to go to college. Yet, some
acknowledged that financial reasons or a lack of knowledge about college, particularly financial aid, may have prevented some. Another reason given was the rampant drug problem. Students describe those who do not attend college below:

I think everyone has the opportunity to go college. It’s just, umm, if you have the motivation to make something better of yourself and I think they lack that so….

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Money, definitely, around here because we’re such a, I guess, a poor place financially. It’s mostly money and if like most people just don’t want to. People around here are really lazy (laughing). They really are.

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They was the ones that really didn’t care in high school and they just never had that motivation, I don’t think. Most of ‘em didn’t have, you know, the proper, well they didn’t have parents that motivated them, and so that’s probably why they never even thought about college.

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I would say yes in a way. I would think some of ‘em it’s unfortunate. I think that some of them--like they could have got financial aid, but they were just too lazy. You know what I’m saying? But I would say everyone had, I guess, a fair enough of a chance. They need to have more scholarships though I think, definitely.

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Hmm, well, some people they just didn’t like high school in general, and they didn’t like to do the work and some of them, mostly some of the boys like they
didn’t want to do work and like they were just glad to get out of school. In general, they didn’t even consider college, so I guess that was never an option for them because they hated it to begin with.

Many students said it is laziness or a lack of self-motivation that keeps some students from college. However, that begs the question of why those students do not do the work in school or why they hated school. This could relate back to both family legacies, discussed above, as one possible answer. However, Paul Willis in his description of British working-class youth who resisted schooling, posited that resisting schooling, which prepares students to leave, was those students’ way of choosing their communities and families. Additionally, were those students in Willis’ study not encouraged by family or by their school? Some students in this study acknowledge college is not for everyone. While I certainly agree with this statement, it is necessary, however, to make it a viable, affordable option for all students. The rub, according to the students interviewed, is making rural students understand that college is an option.

Similarly “senior” students cite self-motivation as enabling them to make it to college and getting through college and attribute a lack of self-motivation to those who do not make it.

I think that a lot of it is because you don’t get prepared or that they were forced to come by their parents’ encouragement saying you need to go to college. You need to make something of yourself, and then they just didn’t want to do the work. The main problem was, is they did not do the work. I was in classes with
them. I would come to class; they wouldn’t. I would do my work. They would call and try to get the work off me. And, I’m like, ‘Do it yourself’.

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But, the people who are graduating seem to have a lot of self-motivation and really want to make it through.

Again while self-motivation certainly is essential in the formula for college success, the key is instilling this motivation in all students. Overcoming social barriers is a necessary part of this process.
CHAPTER 6: COMMUNITY, HIGH SCHOOLS, AND PEERS

Introduction

As noted earlier, rural students with high human capital and high social capital have an 83 percent predicted college attendance rate while rural students low in human and social capital have only a 4 percent predicted rate (Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine, 1995). Parents provide crucial social capital and support, but so do community members, peers, and local educators. In fact, many students and community members interviewed described small town advantage as knowing everyone and, in turn, having support from the community. This type of social capital can be instrumental in a student’s college access and success.

Several students talked about how others besides family members encouraged them to go to college. In fact, a survey of West Virginia high school seniors found that after parents, teachers (69%) and friends (65%) were most frequently cited as influencing students’ decisions to attend college (WVHEPC & CTCS, 2010). Because of the nature of small town life, interaction with others in the community is practically unavoidable. However, some students may have more meaningful community interactions than others, as was discussed in parental involvement. Recall Elder and Conger’s (2000) finding that parents with greater ties to the land are more involved in community life and their children are as well. This involvement likely leads to high social capital, which predicts greater college attendance. Many students in this study described being asked repeatedly about their post-high school plans and were told by community members that they should go to college.
It was one of those deals where everybody knew everybody. I mean it’s one of those things that in high school which was very surprising with Mom and Dad owned the [local business] you seen a lot of the community. Uh, they always, which surprised me, they were always wondering how I’m doing in school; or you applied for this scholarship, this local scholarship they were giving away, and it’s like they knew everything that you did and they knew the kids that, you know, the wild ones, I guess I’ll call them, the ones that got mixed up with the wrong crowd type deal. They knew who they were. They knew what they did. They knew people like me that went to school and, you know, worked and applied for like 30 scholarships, and, you know, in the honor society. They knew all of that and it was one of those deals that it wasn’t…, people knew who you were and what type of person you were and in that way they were willing to help you. If people had the power to help you, they were willing to help you in any way they could, and I enjoyed it.

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I have people behind me. Like everyone I ran into, they’re like, ‘Are you going to college?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ ‘Like well, you need to.’ I’m like, ‘Okay.’ [Who were those people?] Anybody that I asked…yeah, neighbors, family, church members.

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[E]everyone was like if they asked me and said, ‘Are you going to college?’ and I would say, like, ‘I don’t know. I’m not sure yet.’ They would like try to persuade me and tell me all of these different things and stuff like that, and no one
like told me not to go where it was pointless, you know, to go or something like that. Everybody was real encouraging about it…like people from my class and then they, just like friends I knew in general and friends’ moms and things like that, and then there was my brother.

Many students described friends and neighbors as being “like family.” Given the strong attachment to family, this statement is telling when examining the importance of non-family support.

And then I have like a lot of my friends I consider them pretty much my brothers cause like I’ll call their mom, ‘Mom’, and they’ll call my mom, ‘Mom.’ Everybody’s mom is everybody’s mom that’s the way we call it.

I mean everybody they pitched in. Everybody felt like if, just like with Megan, she’s always felt like a sister because we have been so close and so tightly knit, so it’s always been nice to, you know, have somebody, you know, that knows your situation, that knows you personally that well, and it’s always somebody to relate to. There’s always a friend somewhere. It was good. I don’t think I would ever change that. I really don’t.

I witnessed this firsthand in the “bottom” where I lived. One elderly couple was not related to the family that lived all around them, yet the couple was “just like family” and treated as such. They were often brought food by the family next door, and one young man said they were like his grandparents. When I moved into the neighborhood, this same elderly couple often sent me home with dinner or a treat of some sort.
In the following section I will discuss the role of high schools, community, and peers in the educational success of students.

High School Encouragement

Rural students more frequently than urban ones said that their guidance counselors and teachers did not think they should go to college (Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt, 1989). The students in this study, however, indicated that teachers and other school staff encouraged them to go to college and said college-going was encouraged in their high schools. This school support came in various forms including helping students prepare college and financial aid applications, taking students on college visits or to college fairs, talking about college in the classroom, and encouraging students to pursue higher education. When asked if college-going was encouraged in their high schools and how, many students responded positively.

[E]specially during my junior and senior years they created a lot of opportunities for people to come in and talk to us and to take us to field trip and college days and take us, they took us to WVU one year. They took us to Marshall one year. And they really get us out there and to experience college can be fun. People talk to us and the teachers talk to us during class, you know, they really, they singled you out and they were like, ‘You’re good at this. You need to go towards this path because that’s where you’re best at.’ You know but you’ve got to look for that happiness, so they really looked at it as something they had to do as a teacher to push you on to college, but it didn’t affect some people, I guess, as much as us.

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Yes, it’s…the main, it’s supposed to be all they talk about is from about 9th grade year we started doing little, just little things that showed us what workforce we’d be in and where we should of or what we should, um, study I guess after high school. And, they push it pretty well.

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[T]hey were always pushin’ us to do our best, and they were always, you know, tellin’ us how great an experience college was and that there was more options out there other than staying in southern West Virginia and goin’ into the coal industry and[the guidance counselor], like I said, was a great guidance counselor. He was always, ‘You need to apply for this and apply for that. Colleges is coming up. You need to do your, financial aid is comin’ up in the next little bit. I want it done before Valentine’s Day.’

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All the teachers they’re really concerned with like how did you do, so like they’ll come and they’ll help you, and like my English teacher, I know, she motivated us all like majorly telling us, ‘Do this.’ And all of them are pretty much like that because like they all like I guess because it’s such a close school and it’s not very big. Like, you get personal with everybody; so I think everybody was pushed to go to college by at least somebody. But, um like, financially I know a lot of people probably didn’t, but then I think like the people who financially their parents couldn’t afford it then they probably got a lot of grants where they could; so I honestly don’t think that anybody out of at least my class or the class before
mine that I was close with, I don’t think that anybody that wanted to go to college didn’t.

Students described attending college fairs in which all students were invited to attend or going to hear a college representative speak about his or her college. These were school-wide events that were open to all students. The local community college organized much outreach according to students. For instance, the community college helped with the large fall college fair that was held in the county seat. Additionally, college access programs such as GEAR UP and College Summit that partner with the local schools also play a role in not only educating students and families about college but also encouraging them to go to college. I attended a GEAR UP event at one of the local high schools which included a small group of students (8th, 11th, and 12th graders) and their parents. Several students say they had help filling out applications in their College Summit course. These access programs also take students to college campuses. One student recounts the importance of a College Summit overnight campus workshop.

It was like I don’t think I had ever really heard of work-study ‘til then, and I then I didn’t really know what FAFSA was until then. And then, so like they set up games and it’s like for you to interact with new people, and then like you don’t get to pick your roommate while you’re there; but I ended up, they just randomly draw, and I ended up with a girl that I went to school with, and my roommate was actually the girl that is, um, going to room with me next semester and then, um, some other girl…. So like they taught us all about that and then like they made us write like our, for some colleges you have to have an essay and stuff. I didn’t
have to do that here. They made us write that; so then I ended up I was able to use that essay that I wrote for a lot of classes actually because they made us use cs.org or something like that and it keeps everything for you. I haven’t been on there for a while. It keeps like your FAFSA stuff. It will keep your hours and essays. It will tell you all this information and then it makes you fill out stuff about yourself, and that’s what we did in College Summit class, but then like the people who went to College Summit, they’d already done it, so then they were able to help and stuff. So I think that is real helpful to our seniors.

Many students, whose parents did not attend college, may be unaware of things such as work-study or FAFSA. College access and awareness programs are helpful in educating students and families. At the GEAR UP event I attended, one parent who had a college degree said she would not have been able to fill out the FAFSA without the help of the GEAR UP coordinators.

While some of the encouragement and support from the schools targeted the students as a group, more often students discussed being encouraged personally by individual teachers and school officials. Or, individuals in the schools made a big difference in students’ college-going by helping with applications or preparing students for what to expect when they get to college. One student continues to ask her high school teachers for help with her college work. Several educators were mentioned by a number of students as being particularly encouraging and helpful. In such small schools, individual teachers and guidance counselors can have a positive impact on many students.
Yes, yes…the science teacher, that’s always been a major, she’s been, she kept up with me through the whole applying process, the room, picking out where I needed to live, giving me parking information tips because her son’s actually up there now too, so he graduated a year before I was; so he sort of knew a little bit of tricks and trades, and she sort of, you know, she kept up with our progress, made sure we were on task, always. She was so excited when we got into the new dorm. She could not have been anymore happy that day, and she was just always, you know, she was the one we went to, to tell our good news to about college.”

“Oh yeah, [my guidance counselor] was great. I don’t think I woulda done half the things I done without him. I mean, he was there pushing me [inaudible], you know, ‘You need to make this deadline and this scholarship is due by today. You need to get it done and get it turned in.’

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Even the teachers often times would, I don’t know how many times I heard teachers just on a daily basis say things like, tell students, ‘You’ve got to be more organized. You’ve got to do this. You’ll never make it in college if you don’t do it, if you don’t get with it.’ And there was always talk about college. My friend who, uh, the girl I was telling you about who I always thought would be a teacher, she, uh, our AP English teacher in 12th grade, there was talks then that she didn’t know if she was going to go to college or not. That’s when she first started, and she kind of got, our teacher was basically like, ‘What’s wrong with you?’ you
know (laughing). So there were little ways and then there was actually, uh, you know, there was effort made. There was effort made.

Although many students agreed that college-going is encouraged, the types of colleges that students are encouraged to attend are limited. For instance, very few Mingo County students enroll in out-of-state colleges, especially highly selective institutions. Instead, most enroll in in-state institutions, a majority of whom attend the local community college. According to several community members and from my own observation, most teachers in the county schools are from the area and attended in-state four year colleges. Therefore, some of the only college-educated role models are teachers who attended in-state institutions. Students are encouraged to attend college, but few are pushed to consider out-of-state institutions or more selective colleges. Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) write in their new book, *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities*, that low-income students aim low when it comes to selectivity, and some could go to more selective institutions. This is certainly the case among rural students in Mingo County. One student says they are not encouraged by local educators to look at selective institutions.

It’s [college-going] really not [encouraged], and I guess I wish I could say that my high school encouraged you to go away to school but they really didn’t. I mean they encouraged us to go to college, but they didn’t say you should aim for a academically high school as long as you go away to college in Williamson you’re automatically succeeding because not many people do, so it doesn’t matter where you go as long as you go somewhere.
Reluctance to attend out-of-state institutions could also be attributed to a desire to stay closer to home. Additionally, the majority of students in this sample was academically successful and was more likely to be enrolled in college preparatory classes where college is likely to be encouraged. One student explained that some teachers encouraged college-going more than others.

I think it’s the, well, a lot of the teachers teach the upper, the honors and the AP students, so I think it was those teachers. There was some teachers that really didn’t encourage it. They discourage but they didn’t encourage. It was kind of neutral, but some teachers that encouraged all students to go. That’s really what all of them need to do, I think, but not everybody’s going to. But, overall I think all the teachers pretty much encouraged the students to do that.

When asked if everyone at their high school is encouraged to go to college, a few students admitted that not everyone is encouraged although no one is actively discouraged from attending.

**Who Is Not Encouraged?**

Some students did say that college was only encouraged for those who showed an interest and who were good students. In fact, the superintendent and another community member discussed how some teachers stereotype students from certain families. For instance, students from “bad families” are believed to be “bad seeds” as well, so it is unlikely that they are encouraged to go to college. Students described students who might not be encouraged.
But [my high school] more or less probably wants to encourage it [college-going], but if you don’t show no effort into it, they’re not gonna put a whole lotta effort into trying to push you to go.

Well, they push it for everyone to a limit, I guess, and then once they realize certain ones don’t care and aren’t going to, they’ll kind of just like slack off on them I guess. They still push them but not as much as they do the ones who they see are going to be successful.

And then another thing is that I think they think that it’s only for really smart people. They think that unless you got a 30 on your ACT and you’re brilliant and you want to be a chemist, then you don’t go to college. That it’s only for like really intelligent people. And that’s not true but once again that’s not something that we’re exposed to. Like in high school you get awards for being top of the class or the best at this. You don’t get encouragement that says, ‘Oh you’re number 15 in the class and that’s still great. You can still go to college.’ We’re not told that. Right, [only the top students are] pushed. And the rest are just kind of like background noise because I think that the teachers and the counselors just kind of give up on you before they even ask. They just see your initial attitude about it, and I think they’re scornful because they don’t really understand it. Because their parents probably didn’t go to college either, and maybe their parents didn’t encourage them to go, so I think counselors and teachers see that
and they say, ‘Oh, they’re a lost cause. Don’t even bother.’ It’s not helping them. They’re just continuing the tradition that Mingo County has of not going to college.

In *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*, Carr and Kefalas (2010) say one of the problems with rural education that adds to the decline of rural areas is that teachers and communities rally around the high achievers who are groomed to leave. Meanwhile, there is “chronic underinvestment” in those who are likely to remain in the area and not attend college (p. 147). They call for reform of rural educational systems that include greater investments into the “Stayers” (the non-college bound students), for they are the ones upon whom the rural towns’ survival depend.

One day while at the local library I spoke with a young man who was a “Stayer” who asked me for help to use the computer. He said he never liked Gilbert because “you were nothing if you didn’t have money….and girls wouldn’t date you if you didn’t have a car” (which he didn’t). This young man would likely agree with Carr and Kefalas. The day I helped him with the computer at the library, he said he wished he had paid more attention in his computer class during high school. He is currently looking for a job but has had very little luck. While my research primarily focused on students who were in college, in a community with so few college graduates it is impossible to overlook those who did not go to college.

Extracurricular Involvement
High schools also indirectly impacted the educational opportunities of the rural students through students’ involvement in extracurricular activities. Through extracurricular activities students’ social and cultural capital were expanded. One study of rural students found that they participated in school activities, which “help form social and cultural capital,” more than urban students (Blackwell & McLaughlin, 1999, p. 39). Elder and Conger (2000) also found that rural youth with greater ties to the land were likely to be more involved in the community than those youth from families without ties to the land. Other research indicates a positive correlation among high school involvement and educational aspirations (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Extracurricular activities impact college access and attainment. Students, for example, talk about being exposed to different parts of the state and country because of club or athletic trips. The students below discuss how being involved in extracurriculars introduced them to the college where they would eventually enroll.

I’ve always been fond of Marshall because I’ve come here for competitions and things like that. They have a competition here called SCORES… I came here with my graphic design class that I took at Matewan over at the vocational school. Doug Martin. He’s a great teacher. He used to be an imagineer for Disney. He used to be one of the designers for Disney. He’s a really good teacher and, like, I came here my junior year and I got a gold medal in designing a newspaper ad. And then my senior year I got a silver medal in designing an ad for study abroad. So like, I was already familiar with the campus and I was fond of it and I knew some of the workers and some of the people here.
And I had--I came--I’d actually done some--it’s called FluteWorks. The flute professor here, Dr. Dobbs, I’d done that through middle school and high school, and I really liked--I’d been on this campus a bunch and I really liked the campus. I’d done basketball camps here, too. I liked the campus and then my senior year for All County or--guess the conductor was Mr. Barnett, the band director here, so--and he’s the one that told me [inaudible] marching band.

Activities not only expose students to new experiences, but they also introduce students to a greater variety of people. These experiences and contacts with adult professionals also helped students choose their own career paths. One student who at one time was interested in social work talked about how her majorette coach, a social worker, got her involved in a summer camp that serves foster kids and got her to do some job shadowing. Through those experiences and her conversations with social workers, the student realized she did not want to do that career. Instead, she has decided to pursue a career in education, which would still allow her to work with children. Another student who plans to become a teacher says she participated in the Hi-Y club which did read aloud programs for local elementary schools.

Social capital can lead to greater exposure to college educated role models. However, given the low percentage of college educated individuals in the county, it is not surprising that students also talk about knowing few. When asked if they knew many college educated individuals while growing up, similar responses were given:
No, not really. No, it’s pretty much..there might have been a few like a handful that had college degrees, but usually everybody else was coal miners and stuff.”

“Not really. Very, very few until I moved to North Carolina cause around the house it was come out of high school and they just start logging or go into the mines or coal industry, something with the coal.

So, no, I mean, I was exposed to like doctors and my mom’s friends who were lawyers and things like that that had college degrees but not anyone who was close enough to me to relate their experience.

Just my teachers, I think, that’s about it, really, just the teachers.

Umm, other than my teachers, not really.

Some students when thinking of people they know with college educations often said their school teachers, but surprisingly for some students their teachers did not come to mind. Perhaps, as one student indicated above, no one “was close enough to me to relate their experience.” A handful of students did indicate knowing some college educated people to whom they went for advice. One young woman peppered her pediatrician with questions about becoming a doctor, while another student talked about her aunt who is a teacher and her cousin who recently graduated from law school. Unfortunately, these students were the exception. In an area with so few college graduates, meaningful interactions with college educated role models and exposure to college information and
life is necessary. Those students who are more involved in community life are more likely to get this type of exposure.

One type of community involvement that may positively impact students is church-going. One quantitative study of rural students found that church attendance had a positive effect on rural students’ educational outcomes (Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine, 1995). The study did not determine why this was the case, but some of the students’ comments in the current study may begin to provide insight into why. For example, one student matter-of-factly stated: “My pastor’s wife, she’s raised me practically….I can always go to her and other elders in the church.” While not all the students interviewed attended church, those who did said it was a big part of their lives. (There did not seem to be any type of patterns among the students regarding who attends church and who does not.) They emphasized the support and encouragement they receive from their church family when it comes to college-going.

I’ve had different people support me. Like, people at--at church. I mean, you--you were there. All the time, Doris [a church member] comes up to me. ‘How’s school?’ They all ask how school is and it’s—that’s constant.

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[M]y church family. They’re a big part of my life. Yeah. And they would be like, ‘You going to college, K.? ’ and all that. So…asking and encouraging so they still ask me now how my classes are going and if that’s going well and stuff like that. So yeah, I’d say my church had a good, good influence, too.
Local ministers may also serve as college-educated role models for some students. As one student, when asked about college-educated role models, said his pastor and other elders in the church were the only people he knew with college degrees. Although not all the students attend church, all but one consider themselves to be Christian. Given the importance of religion in the culture, ministers have a certain amount of influence in the communities. One local, college-educated minister shared a story about a father and son in his church. The son had been given a scholarship to attend a public, four-year institution; yet, the father did not want the son to go since he had not gone to college and did not think his son needed to go either. After much convincing by the minister, the father agreed to send his son, who became the first one in the family to have graduated from college.

In these students’ lives church-going has had a positive impact on college-going; however, one community member thought that some of the more conservative Pentecostal churches in the area might actually discourage college-going, particularly among young women. However, this study did not search for evidence of that kind nor did any arise.

Small Town Heroes

The story of educational access in Mingo County is not complete without mention of the large impact a few individuals can have on a small community and its students. As one community member added, “In a small town everyone knows the heroes and the villains.” Another West Virginian quipped that sometimes they are the same people. In my interviews with students and community members and in observations and research
about the County, several individuals came up time and time again when discussing educational opportunities for young people in the area.

A handful of individuals provide college scholarships for local students and/or support for students interested in college or already enrolled in college. Perhaps, the most mentioned individual (and likely the wealthiest) is “Buck” Harless. Mr. Harless provides scholarships to local students and moneys to the schools and school organizations and for a variety of community groups and events. One community member was cited in Buck’s biography as saying, “Take Buck away from Gilbert and it’ll be nothin’” (Foster & Conner, 1992, p. 8). Buck did not go to college, but he certainly values education (Foster & Conner, 1992). He sent one man, who grew up very poor, to Harvard Law School. This man is now a distinguished lawyer in the area. Although Buck is at times recognized for his philanthropy, just as often he goes unrecognized. The large Gilbert community center with fitness facilities, café, meeting spaces, and a computer lab was funded primarily by Buck and named for his deceased son. One of the public universities provides classes there and has provided support for the computer lab, which usually had young people in it when I would visit. In an area where high-speed internet is not up to par with most places in the country, this allows community members without internet at home to stay connected.

There are a few other individuals who provide scholarships for local students. One college senior admits that he would not have stayed his freshman year if it were not for the Pam Skaggs’ scholarship he received, named for the local attorney who provides the funds. Not only does the money help, but also students feel a sense of obligation.
Another Mingo County native, Robert “Doc” Foglesong, a retired four-star general, started the Appalachian Leadership and Education Foundation (ALEF) which provides scholarships and a leadership curriculum to students. One student interviewed who was an ALEF scholar credited the program with keeping him enrolled in college. President Obama, impressed with the program, donated $125,000 of his $1.4 million Nobel Peace Prize money to ALEF.

Theresa McCune, a local public defender in Mingo County, recognized the need for a program that encourages and helps students apply for more selective colleges. She meets with a group of interested students almost weekly. In the late summer she and a few others in the community host a “Back to College Shower” for students in the area going away to college. Party guests bring college supplies for the students. While I am certain there are others in the community worth mentioning, the important takeaway is that in such a rural area individual community members can and do have a large impact on educational opportunities in the county.

Peers

“Spontaneous peer associations are a natural part of the developmental process, but they can place children at risk of failure and antisocial events when they flourish in the absence of adult nurturance, investment, and supervision” (Elder and Conger, 2000, p. 51). Such was the case in Paul Willis’ (1977) study of working class boys in the United Kingdom who learned to resist schooling from their peer groups. Lareau (2003) would likely agree with the view that lack of adult supervision can be detrimental to educational success and would contend this is more likely to happen among working-
class and poor families given their logic of child rearing which is less active in fostering children’s talents and skills. Yet, the rural farm children in Elder and Conger’s (2000) study tended to have fewer unsupervised peer activities and had parents who were involved in their children’s activities.

The overwhelming majority of students in the current study also had positive peer support and talked about how their parents supported their pursuits. The influence of peers may have been more positive in nature because of more parent supervision and involvement in the lives of the students. Additionally, as students talked about their friends’ parents being like moms and dads, in a sense child rearing could be viewed as a shared enterprise in the rural community. Students whose parents are more involved in community life have more adult supervision leading to more fruitful peer interactions. Peers provide encouragement and support. In addition, they influence students’ college decisions including where they enroll and whether or not they remain enrolled. So, getting parents more involved would help create more positive peer interactions and, in turn, a better environment for college access and success.

Programs like the Posse Foundation which send groups of peers to college together recognize the importance of peer support and influence on student success. Many of the students in this study also described how peers influenced their decisions to attend college and to remain enrolled. Often students acknowledged feeling more comfortable, whether at a two-year or four-year institution, when their peers were there, too. Several four-year students chose to go to college together with high school friends. Many are even rooming with high school classmates on campus. This could be one way
students cope with the dilemma of having to choose between home and college. Living with high school friends provides a feeling of home away from home. Meanwhile, the two-year college students discussed how nice it is to have so many high school friends at Southern.

We’re all a big group of friends. We still talk to each other a lot; so, most of us are here so…it’s a little bit easier too because you get out of class and there’s your friends and most of your friends are in your classes. It’s kind of like high school but it’s different.

Both two-year and four-year students talked about how most of their close friends were also going to college and how their friends encouraged them to go to college.

My friends was behind me, too. Me and all my friends, was like, college is a must for us, so.

[Most friends are] going to college. There’s a slim number that works and, uh, a couple of them work in the coal mines and a few of them hang around the house and a couple of them said they’re going to take a year off before they start, but the majority of us went to college, so that was impressive (laughing).

A lot of them [my friends] are going to college. A lot of them, there’s one boy I know he’s trying to go to college, but he don’t have the money. He’s workin’ to
go to college. A lot of people workin’ tryin’ to pay their way, but there’s a lot of them going to college, a lot of people I know.

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The majority of ‘em did [go to college]. I have a few friends that were like, ‘Well, I’m gonna go to college,’ and they just decided, ‘Well, I couldn’t afford it. I can’t go.’ And you know, they found jobs and they’re working. And I mean, they’re doing really good for themselves. But it was all pretty much everybody that had the opportunity is gonna take advantage of it.

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I think pretty much all of them [my friends] go to college that I used to hang out with. Marshall, WV Tech, umm, Glenville, here (laughing).

However, some students also had a small number of friends who did not attend college. Well, (pause), um, they’re all kind of different. One of my best friends, she, it was a girl, she, uh, I always considered her smarter than I was. I thought she was, and she always wanted to be a teacher, and I never doubted that she would and she didn’t go to college. She went, she got married and that’s all. She’s just a housewife, but I suppose she’s happy, but I just (laughing). And then I have this other friend. I didn’t know if he would, I figured he would go to college, but I wasn’t for sure, but he didn’t either. He, uh, he’s a daddy now, but my other friend she is, she is taking classes here and she’s also taking those Friday and Saturday Marshall classes, the 2+2, for elementary education. And actually I didn’t, it wasn’t that I didn’t think she would go to college. I didn’t think she
would be a teacher, but that’s what she’s, the classroom observation, she’s further along than, she’s had more than I have. She’s actually been in the classroom a lot and things. So, some of my friends have kind of surprised me. I thought some would go one way and some would go the other….

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There’s probably, there’s probably quite a few [friends] or quite a bit, yeah, that have--didn’t go [to college]. They moved and got married or something. Yeah, or they just didn’t want to. So I know one friend, he comes to the house all the time. He missed the deadline this semester, so he’s gonna start next semester. The reasons these students’ friends were not in college ranged from starting a family to missing the deadline to apply to not having the financial resources to attend.

Students discuss making college decisions with their friends. One student says he chose to go to Southern because he and his two good friends decided to “go for like a year or two and then we’re gonna switch and go to Marshall. So we’re gonna try to stay together...We’re like, ‘Ah, let’s just go here and get the basics over with and then we can go to Marshall and [inaudible],’ I’m like, ‘That’s fine with me.’” Not surprisingly the community college students spend a lot of time with their high school friends who also remained in the area. Four-year college students say they try to see high school friends when they come home for visits. Four-year college students also discuss the importance of peers in their decision-making.
When we were freshman in high school we were like, ‘We’re gonna go to college and we’re gonna be roommates,’ and it ended up happening. So it was really nice.

I graduated with her [my roommate]. So we planned to go here together, and we were the first two who wanted to go here out of our class. And like everyone else just followed. But, um, when she moves out, my best friend…she graduated with me and she’s moving in and then her roommate right now is from Gilbert…

It was common for students to say knowing people on campus made their transition easier. This peer group also included older students from the same high school. For example, one young man discussed how a former student from his high school has been helping with his transition. “She’s kind of been helpin’ me get used to the college life and livin’ in the dorms and things like that.” This same student carpools home with two older students from the same hometown since he does not have a car; so, support comes in various forms.

While one student acknowledged how having high school friends around made her college transition easier, she also warned that it can prevent students from meeting new people and experiencing new things in college. Recall many of the four-year college students believe that college and leaving home are necessary for personal growth.

And sometimes it’s a good thing that my high school friends are here because when I came up here I didn’t have to be completely alone or completely isolated. Like if I felt lonely I’d walk across the hallway, ‘You wanna go get something to
eat?’ But, at the same time it’s almost a bad thing because instead of when you’re lonely, you go and meet somebody new. You’re like, ‘Oh, I’ll just walk across the hallway.’ So, it’s a lot harder to make, and I have to make myself like push myself like don’t walk across the hallway. Walk down to the lounge and talk to somebody you don’t know. So, I think that’s one thing kids from Mingo County should do. Don’t go to school with your best friend because I did, and I don’t regret it because I love my best friends, but it’s like you’re holding yourself down a lot. You’re pinning yourself to something that you don’t need to pin yourself to…it does [make the transition easier]…during the first couple of weeks it was like, ‘Oh, why should I go meet someone new when my best friend is across the hallway?’ Why would I do that? And then a couple weeks later I’m sitting here and I’m like, ‘Why would I do that?’ But, at the time it seems like the right decision.

A four-year college senior discussed how it was nice having high school classmates her freshman year. However, as time progressed and she started getting involved in campus activities, she was able to expand her friend group. Especially worth noting is how the student also credited making new friends as part of growing up and as an essential aspect of her remaining in college:

Now when I first got down here, I mean, I had--like I said, there was seven of us from my high school. And we pretty much hung together our freshman year…we would--like, a lot of us would hang out. And then as each year went on and as time went on, we stopped hanging out with each other and we don’t see each
other as much anymore, but I was down here a week before anybody else because I came down for band camp. And I met so many people in that first week. It’s like, every class that I went to, there was somebody in the band. So that helped. And it’s like now, I know so many people on campus, and I have good friends. I mean, I met my fiancé through band and all this stuff. It’s like, I have made—I don’t want to say better friends, but I have friends that are closer to me now who I’ve known for less time than friends I’ve had since kindergarten. So I got--but that--and it’s--it’s a different experience. I mean, you are on your own. You have to--I’ve grown up a lot. I mean, you have to. If you don’t grow up, you go home. You go home.

I transitioned into it really easily because like I joined majorettes, so that was something that I always had and I know that was here, and then my best friend was going to join too, and then she decided not to at the last minute, so then I was like thrown into it by myself, and I thought I was going to have her, so I was scared about that at first. But, like, cause I was always in band and stuff, it was really easy that to like get to know those people, but in like, they were in my classes, and then that was an easy part, and then like, I don’t know, cause where I was like always with the same group of people. Like, there was only like 64 people that graduated. And right now the sorority has like 37, so it’s just like I have my own little group, and it’s just a lot easier that way because it’s what I’m used to.
This research certainly supports the large body of literature that credits student involvement in leading to college success. Peer support is likely stronger among students who are involved. Involvement in college activities certainly expanded students’ social capital. Even at the community college where extracurricular activities are limited, the students interviewed talked about being able to turn to college employees they had grown close to through involvement in activities or a work-study job. College involvement strengthens students’ support structure to include other adults outside of their family. For example, one community college student who worked in the library for a year as a work-study student said he continues to turn to the librarian for advice. Others talked about turning to a woman in student support services or the head of a leadership program in which some of them are involved. Such individualized support leads to greater likelihood of student success.

While peers can be a positive influence on students, clearly the flip side is also true. Students discussed some of their peers who did not attend college and talked about how they were influenced by others. For instance, one student described how her former best friend got involved in drugs, so the student had to cut her out of her life for fear she would be dragged into that world. Many of the students with boyfriends and girlfriends talked about wanting to succeed for that person and the support their significant other provides. This is not always the case according to one student who says often times “…a lotta guys, the girls will be in high school and if they have older boyfriends they’ll try to make ‘em quit, they don’t want ‘em to go to college, ‘Let me support you, I’m the man. I’m supposed to do this’.” This particular student feels fortunate that her boyfriend is
supportive of her college career despite his own decision not to go to college. A local educator tells a different story about a young man with an athletic scholarship who at graduation admitted to him that he was unlikely to go to college because his girlfriend did not want him to leave. Instead, the young man said he would probably get married.
CHAPTER 7: LEAVING AND RETURNING/STAYING

_I think most of ‘em sticking around here, like the guys, you’ll see them going off [inaudible] and going in the coal mines and going in the ground [inaudible] or doing something like timber and stuff. That’s pretty much all that’s open around here. And then the girls that normally don’t go to college from up around here pretty much after a few years you see ‘em married off, and have families, which is not a bad thing, you know? But that’s normally how [the] pattern. It’s kinda like if you don’t take your chance and get out when you can, you never find the opportunity again. It’s like once you get sucked in, you’re here for good (student interview)._

Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 3, the current rural literature suggests that students with greater educational aspirations and academic achievement were less likely to want to live in his/her home community. Also, students who perceived their communities as having little economic opportunity were less attached to living in the area (Johnson, Elder, & Stern, 2005). Hektner (1995) hypothesized that the lack of economic and career opportunities in rural areas would cause more conflict among rural youth since “moving up implies moving out.” Rural students in his study believed that both living close to their communities and getting away were important. In this study almost all of the students interviewed indicate the lack of economic opportunities in the areas with the exception of a few fields, including coal mining (although many students believe its future is uncertain), health care, and teaching. In fact, those who wanted to stay in the area often were majoring in fields that would allow them to find local jobs.

Furthermore, one study of Australian rural youth found that most rural youth who aspired to attend college viewed staying in their local communities as failure; meanwhile, those youth whose aspirations revolved around community and family-life planned to remain in their local communities (Binney & Martin, 1997). The same phenomenon was
evident in this study as those students who intend to leave the area often phrased staying in the area in negative terms such as being “stuck.” Or on another occasion, I had the opportunity to meet with a small group of high school students who were interested in attending more selective four-year institutions. When asked whether or not they planned to settle down in the area after they graduate from college, they all answered a resounding, “NEVER!” Nevertheless, there are students who intend to remain in the area and those who plan to leave. In this chapter, I will examine who stays or returns and why, and who leaves and why. Also, I will discuss the conflicting messages students face about leaving and staying and the implications of those messages. However, before this discussion, it is necessary to briefly describe students’ perceptions of their community because those perceptions likely influence their decisions to stay or leave.

Students’ Perceptions of Community and Culture

When asked about the advantages of their communities, students, both community college and four-year college ones, overwhelmingly answer that they know everybody. The community, they say, is close-knit, so one can depend on others for help and support. “I mean everybody they pitched in,” says one student. “There are no strangers,” says another. One student says, “You can trust your neighbors.” A few of the community college students also perceived their small towns as being much safer than urban areas. All the students would likely agree with the following statement made by one interviewee. “Southern West Virginia, Mingo County is probably some of the nicest people you’ll meet. Everybody knows everybody, and they just take you in like family.” Again this relates to the earlier discussion on community and social capital.
However, some students agree that knowing everybody in their community is both a positive and a negative. They say that by knowing everyone people “know your business.” “If something happens everybody knows about it before you’ve really gotten it out there,” complains one student. One student summed up nicely the advantage and disadvantage of knowing everyone in the community:

I know everyone. That’s both [an advantage and disadvantage]. Both because anytime I do something good it’s like the entire community kind of rejoices for you, so that’s great. I come to college, ‘Oh that’s great!’ You do something bad and like everyone knows, everyone knows. They’ll look at you and be like (scolding look). ‘Don’t look at me like that. You don’t know me that well’.

This knowing everybody described by students may account for some students being stereotyped by teachers and others in the community as being not fit for college and others as being college material. Students are often associated with the actions of their family members, and in a small town these actions are usually known by many. On the other hand, as the above student suggested, the community rallies around successes.

Another student described being watched over by others in the community who would inform her parents if she got into trouble. Once again parents’ relationships with others in the community would make this more likely to occur. This is similar to the idea of being raised by a village. Those parents and families more involved in community life are more likely to have others looking out for their children.

I love having like the small town thing, but it’s like I--of course, now I don’t know everybody. But that’s another advantage. I liked [inaudible] I knew
everybody. But you couldn’t really get into trouble because your parents knew
before you got home, they knew.

One student also said that since she had grown up knowing everybody, she was
taught to be wary of outsiders. Appalachian people are often described as being
suspicious of outsiders by those writing about the culture. One community member who
has lived in the area for thirty years, but is not originally from there, agreed with this
characterization and thought it stems from the Coal Mine wars when outsiders came in
to fight the local coal miners. However, when I asked a local community member about
this, he adamantly disagreed and, instead, said that most people are very welcoming of
strangers. I certainly was welcomed by many but found that people were also very
curious as to what I was doing in the area since my accent tipped them off that I “wasn’t
from around here.” For example, more than once while at the local community center,
locals who struck up friendly conversations inevitably said that I didn’t have a Mingo
accent and wondered why I would be living in the area. While people were curious as to
my work, they welcomed me readily. The congregation of the small 25 member church
that I attended threw me a going away party and one family invited me over most
Sundays to their family dinner.

Another advantage of small town life mentioned by most of the students was
attending a small school because they not only knew all of their classmates, but their
teachers also gave them more individualized attention. One student described her
calculus class which had only three other students in it, so the teacher was able to sit with
her and go through any problems she had. Many students talked about the one-on-one
attention they received from their teachers. (Would non-college-going students have similar responses? Carr and Kefalas (2009) argue that these students are overlooked too often in rural schools.)

The schools in the county, like in many rural areas, are consolidating, which has many people up in arms. The small communities revolve around the schools. The town goes out to support the high school football team or to watch the homecoming parade. Several hundred people (in a town of about 500) dressed in the school colors of purple and white lined the streets to support the football team at the Gilbert homecoming parade. The stands were also full at the first home football game. A lot of community events are school-based ones. “The town definitely supports the school in almost everything,” explained one student. Communities’ identities are often wrapped up with their local schools. Students discussed the importance of the schools to their local communities.

I think they’re very important, because each little town likes to have their own little--I don’t know how to explain it--they get excited about their football teams and whatever else, and that’s what the kinda downer is about that, maybe the school is--everybody’s gonna be combined and it’s gonna be away from all the other little towns and people are kinda upset about that part.

Another student talked about how the local schools provide the opportunities for the community to come together:

They’re consolidating our high school, and the community is really outraged by this because they’re really outraged and I mean there’s nothing else for us to do. But on Friday you go watch football, and during basketball season you watch
basketball and, um, I mean, if anything that’s like something that keeps kids off the street from doing drugs and things because there’s a high school event of something of some…it doesn’t matter what it is. They don’t care what it is as long as it’s something where other people are there and they can interact with. That’s all people want, interact with other people. And I, I’m glad that, I mean, my family did that growing up. They would take me to things like that. I mean, other people had done things I hadn’t done and that got me interested in other things because even though it was just football you learn a lot of things from the people just sitting around you. One of my friend’s mom is a speech pathologist, but she used to tell these stories about how she had to take an anatomy course in college and she had to dissect someone. She’d tell these awful stories, but it was interesting. And I mean, I learned what those things were from doing something.

The importance of the school in the community was again exemplified when tragedy struck the area. In the spring of 2009 a major flood hit the area shutting down several county schools for the last few weeks of school. Several students talked about how because of the flood they almost were unable to have graduation at their schools. Some students talked about being robbed of their last days together with classmates. One described the community and class coming together to clean up after the flood, so they could hold graduation at their school. In fact, at graduation they started singing “Country Roads,” the unofficial anthem of West Virginia, as an expression of solidarity. Local schools are a very important aspect of rural community life according to students.
While students were quick to talk about the advantages of rural life, they also
described some of the disadvantages of living in the area. Many students complained
about there being “nothing to do” in the area. Perhaps, this could be geographical
isolation. Also, there are not many retail stores nearby. Several complaints heard over
and over again were the following:

There’s just nothing really to do. I just wish there was more attractions and stuff.

You have to go to Charleston if you want to do anything other than go to the
movies or something

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It was kind of boring. Ain’t nothin’ to do around here really but Giovanni’s [a
local pizza joint/gas station/convenience store].

Not surprisingly, complaints such as these were more common among students who did
not want to remain in the area. However, even some who intended to stay also made
similar comments.

A disadvantage about which all students agreed was the lack of economic
opportunities in the area. Recall the findings that students who perceived their
communities as having little economic opportunity were less attached to living in the area
(Johnson, Elder, and Stern, 2005). However, some students do intend to remain despite
their belief that economic opportunities are limited. They hope to do so by choosing
careers that are still somewhat viable in the region, including jobs in healthcare or
education. Even a few of the students not planning to remain acknowledged that it is
possible to stay by becoming a teacher or nurse. Several students felt that given the lack of opportunities in the area, that they had no choice but to go to college.

Around here, umm, unless you have a college degree, around here the mines is all we have that’s a very good job but it’s gone down, so I mean our economy is going down in this area. It’s just awful around here.

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It’s never really been a question [whether or not I’m going to college]. It’s just like around here you have to do something or else there’s nothin’ else to do, so you have to go to college, in my opinion.

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It was either stay here and do nothing or go to college, so I just kind of always knew that out of those two black and white choices that I would go to college.

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I pretty much think that unless you wanna be a nurse or you wanna do something like coal mine industry related that Gilbert and the southern counties really isn’t the place for you…The town is so small there’s not a lot--have that--really have to offer here.

Mingo County is primarily a single-industry economy. The economy is dependent upon the coal industry and few jobs exist outside of it, a fact that the students readily acknowledged.

If you don’t like coal, there aren’t any [job opportunities]. Even my mom, my mom is a beautician, by the way, even her job depends on the coal company
because everyone’s hair she does is either a coal mine owner, their secretaries, their wife, or their child, and all the lawyers in town either work for Massey [a coal company] or sue Massey, so I mean there aren’t…I mean, I’m saying you can have jobs outside of coal industry obviously but it’s very, very limited and dependent upon it. You can’t go back and say, ‘I want to be a civil engineer.’ There’s no place for you. You can be a mining engineer all you want, but you can’t just go back and say, ‘I have an English degree.’ Well, what are you going to do with it? Something for the coal company. If you’re not working for them, then you probably should find somewhere else to live cause there’s nothing there really.

This lack of economic opportunity is exemplified by a story I was told during an interview with a local educator. He spoke of a young woman from the county who recently graduated from an Ivy League school with a degree in a social science field. She had returned to the area but could not find a job and had enrolled in the community college to get an associate’s degree in a “more marketable field.”

Staying/Returning

Nevertheless, many of the students cited this lack of economic opportunity as a reason for attending college. Students clearly recognized the lack of economic opportunities in the area. Many even noted that the decline of the coal industry is likely to happen in the next couple of decades. Yet, despite these obstacles there are students who indicated a desire to remain in the area or to return to the area after completing their four-year degrees. Why do some students want to stay?
Interestingly, there are both community college and four-year college students who say that they would like to live in the area after college although more community college students fell into this group. Many students who want to remain or return cite many of the advantages of small town life described earlier—knowing everybody, people are more trustworthy and friendlier than those in urban areas. There is an attachment to place that exists among these students. As one student says when asked why he wants to return, “[It’s] just hometown I guess. I love it here…it’s where you’re born and raised.” Another stated, “I just like this area. I really do. I like being able to know a lot of the people and trust most everybody.”

Attachment to place is common among those who want to stay, but perhaps the bigger draw is the attachment to family discussed in the family section. Students who want to stay mention being close to home and family as the primary reason.

I wanted to come back because all my family’s here….

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[I]t’s not far from home, so I could go home if I wanted to.

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Being successful, graduating from med school would be, like, that’s a dream if I could do that, I’d be ecstatic. To be a doctor and just to come back here and to hang around and be a doctor and your family’s close by and you have close relationships with all your patients. I think that would be a huge success for me.

Carr and Kefalas (2009) in Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America examined individuals who chose to stay in or return to their rural
Iowa community, “Stayers” and “Returners.” Their “Stayers,” however, do not attend college. Instead, they are young people who after high school start blue collar jobs and even families and “quickly they start looking and acting like adults” (p. 20). All of those community college students in the current study who plan to stay in the community are currently living at home. Several described the community college as being similar to high school; thus, I would not describe them as quickly transitioning into adulthood. Although understandably there are exceptions to categorizations, there were some four-year college students already engaged who were planning to leave. (It will be interesting to see if they actually do not return.) The “Stayers” in the Carr and Kefalas (2009) study cited similar reasons for staying as did students in the current study.

The “Returners” were divided into two groups “High-Flyers” and “Boomerangs” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). The “High-Flyers” were college-educated individuals whose desire to return was attributed to their disillusion and dissatisfaction with urban life. “They found what lay beyond Ellis unwelcoming and disorienting and, given the choice, prioritize the familiar over the possibility of something else” (p. 23). Carr and Kefalas (2009) wrote that “Returners abandon the Achiever trajectory” (p. 23). Meanwhile, the “Boomerangs” tended to be two-year college graduates who were eager to start “grown-up lives” and return to “the safe and familiar” and were similar to the non-college going “Stayers” (p. 23). These categories of “Returners” seem to focus on individuals’ deficiencies to explain returning, i.e., they could not handle the diversity, newness, and competition encountered in urban life. For example, Carr and Kefalas (2009) wrote that “[High-Flyers] describe college as a time when they could not find their footing and
became increasingly disillusioned with a world that had seemed so appealing when it was just a daydream” (p. 23).

While some of the students in the current study may fit into these categories, others do not. There are high achieving four-year college students who plan to return to the area; yet, they have successfully navigated college life outside of their rural communities. They choose to return not because they are “disoriented” with life outside of their rural communities but because they value some of the perceived advantages of rural life described earlier more than the perceived advantages of urban or suburban life. (Granted, there are some freshmen who indicate they want to return, but they could change their minds.) Carr and Kefalas (2009) are subtly privileging urban life over rural life and negatively framing those who return to rural areas as failing at city life.

All of the four-year college students who want to return and those community college students who plan to stay have chosen the few fields that they believe will allow them to do so. They have largely chosen degrees in healthcare, primarily nursing, and education.

There’s not a lot to choose from around here. I mean, you could go into the coal mines or you’d teach or something to do with either one of those. They don’t have a whole lot of different things. I mean, you got Wal-Mart, but you have to kinda leave here to get anything--I mean, you got hospital field too, but other than that…. 

What are the implications if these are the only fields—mining, healthcare, and education—that are seen as viable options for individuals wishing to remain in the area?
The small body of rural research reveals that when economic and career opportunities are perceived as limited by students they are less attached to living in the community and they are more conflicted when it comes to staying and leaving (Hektner, 1995; Johnson, Elder, & Stern, 2005). Additionally, normative or stereotypical gender roles may come into play since nursing and teaching jobs are traditionally viewed as female roles and mining jobs are typically held by men. In fact, women are still considered bad luck in the mines by some. A coal mining ad from earlier days even stated, “It takes a helluva man” to mine coal.

These gender stereotypes likely impact educational aspirations and expectations among rural boys and girls. Furthermore, they could influence students’ decisions on leaving or staying. The few men who indicated a preference to return wanted to be a doctor, a coal company lawyer, and a teacher/coach. Meanwhile, the women who want to return or stay were planning to be nurses, teachers, and a mortician. However, some of the students who want to leave are pursuing those fields. Recall that there are few college-educated role models in Mingo County, so students could be going into fields with which they are familiar. Also, research has shown that low-income college students are more likely than higher income students to choose technical/vocational fields rather than liberal arts fields (Goyette and Mullen, 2006).

Some students talk about how traditional gender roles persist in the region. According to these students, men are expected to be the primary breadwinner in the household, while women are expected to rear the kids and perform household duties.
It’s very like 1950s housewife, um, I know especially with coal miners like, like I said the town is a coal miner town. And usually, or the railroad too, they’re interlinked. The coal miner will come home and his wife should be waiting there with his two kids and the dinner on the table. And it doesn’t matter if she has a job or not. That’s still her responsibility even now. It definitely is, and I see it in my friends’ families, and I see it in people I don’t know, just out buying groceries and things. It’s definitely still a woman’s job to run the house. There aren’t like stay-at-home dads where I live. There are plenty of stay-at-home moms and that’s socially acceptable and expected, but there’s not really gender neutral roles.

Especially for in Mingo County they always expect a guy to go to the coal mines. Like if they say, ‘Well, I’m not going to college. I’m gonna go to the coal mines,’ they’d be like, ‘Oh, well. That’s what you need to do anyways,’ and things like that. And I’m not saying they’re not good jobs. But who knows what’s gonna happen with the coal industry in a few years? And then women, if they just wanna stay home and be housewives then they wouldn’t--nobody would really say anything about it. It’s just really what people are comfortable with. But yeah, I’d say it would have a big influence on whether a man or a woman would go to college or not around here, cuz it’s just, just a common thing to do.

When young men were asked what they would be doing if they had not gone to college, many answered mining, logging, railroad, or military. Women’s responses, however, were more likely to resemble the young woman’s whose reply was, “Probably a
housewife so--I can’t really think of anything else.” When talking about job opportunities in the area, many students would differentiate between those for women and those for men. One recent college graduate who works for a local chamber of commerce in the area explained that the most available jobs for college-educated women are in nursing and teaching. There are, however, visible women doctors and lawyers in the county, yet the students interviewed still talked about persistence of gender stereotypes in various careers. Other women echo the type of jobs that are available for men and women and are viewed as appropriate.

Yeah, like I said about the nursing and the coal mining that’s basically stereotypical. Whenever you see a male nurse you don’t really see those around here like one or two. I think I’ve only seen one male nurse ever around here and not very many women go in the coal mines (laughing), so that goes along with that too.

Others said it is not necessarily different expectations for men and women but a lack of options and resources that pushes, for instance, men to go into the coal mines. “I don’t think there’s as much different expectations but I mean if the guys aren’t going to college, it’s always automatic assumption, go to the coal mines.” Men without a college degree in the area have the opportunity to make a good salary working in the coal mines (although this opportunity is declining). The lure of working in the coal mines impacts men.

Umm, well most people think like well I can go to the coal mines and make like twenty-some dollars an hour and so I might as well just do that than to waste my
time at college. But really it’s just better to get an education and keep on getting a higher education degree but that’s what most people think like, ‘I can go and get this money right now. Why should I wait?’ mostly guys they think that.

I would think that a lotta people, like, and the boys especially, like, they just want to go straight into the mines honestly, even though they’ve been warned most of the time their whole life. And I think a lot of--I think they just--they don’t want to go through college. They think it takes too long, and a lotta people think it’s pointless. I think some people--some parents I think around here tell ‘em that it’s pointless, that college is pointless. You know what I mean? Because they didn’t go they’re like, ‘Look at me, I mean, we’re fine.’

On the other hand, women without college degrees are not provided this same opportunity. Instead, their choices for jobs primarily include low paying retail or caregiving work.

[I]t is sort of automatic assumption if you don’t go to college that you go to the coal mines here and I think more of the girls if you don’t go to college you’re just sort of here, kind of, working in a grocery store or working at the Dollar Tree. I mean, I think, it just sort of depends on what your family expects of you, and most of them that can’t go to college. It’s sort of financial too. And I think that sort of plays into where they have to get a job and then normally they just end up staying.
Thus, women believe they have to go to college or as some women interviewed said “do nothing” or get married. Additionally, some women feel that they have no choice but to leave.

I’m not a guy. I can’t go get in the coal mines somewhere. It’s hard for a woman. I’m not gonna sit here and just be some housewife all my life. And I think it’s hard for them to adapt too because most of them don’t work and they are housewives. So, I think that’s why they sort of, they weren’t really discouraging but I did hear a lot of, ‘You’ll come back.’ You know, I did hear a lot of it. And I think it hurts even more now that they realize that I’m not comin’ back. So, but other than that, they have been real supportive.

The same student said she “had to go away to get what she wanted.” Some students said they did not think expectations for men and women were that different, but then when they began to discuss it, their answers revealed a different story. For example, one male student later laughingly admitted that a woman would be turned down if she wanted to work in the mines or drive a coal truck. Another explained how a man could not be a waiter in the local restaurants because people in the area view it as a female job. And still another said he did not think women should be pastors; yet, he maintained that expectations are not different for males and females.

How do these different expectations impact college-going among rural youth? If there is pressure to start a family for women or to make money and to be the breadwinner for men, then students might be tempted to forego college. If these are the norms in the area, then why rock the boat? One young man talked about how some of his male friends
would laugh at him for going to college because they already had jobs lined up after high school. They were doing what other men in the area have done for generations. However, some students indicated that people in the community also think that going to college is a good thing to do. Once again students get mixed messages.

I think so [that people have different expectations for men and women]. I’ve always felt that way. I’ve always felt like, um, a lot of, especially the older people think like, ‘Well, girls shouldn’t be goin’ to college. They should just be starting families and they should work in the home.’ And like, I know my dad, and mom actually, says that my mom shouldn’t work and that she should just sit at home. I’m like ‘No. that’s not, that’s just not right.’ It’s not how it’s supposed to happen, but then at the same time like everybody says, ‘Yeah you need to go off to school.’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, but when I don’t stay at home, you’re going to be telling me that I should do that too.’

Most students agreed that in their communities, going to college is viewed as a positive thing to do by the majority of people. However, as mentioned earlier some community members and a few students believe that others in the community do not necessarily think that their children should go to college. Furthermore, while most students agreed that traditional gender norms still exist, especially among the older generations, a few students acknowledged that this is changing in the area. Most students said they do not necessarily agree with the traditional expectations held by many in the county and believe that everyone should have equal opportunities.
However, some students said that traditional roles are okay for those individuals who choose them. More than one student talked about good friends who started families right out of high school. “[My friend] she got pregnant and so now her husband works in the coal mines and she has an adorable little baby and she’s like the happiest person in the whole world.” (R. Blankenship) Problems arise when choice and opportunity are limited for males and females because of norms and expectations. Also, limited economic opportunities seem to perpetuate traditional gender norms. One college educated man who had chosen to come back to the area said although many of his friends and classmates who did not go to college but went into the mines may make more money than he does, he feels some of them are bitter because they know they are trapped here and do not have options. It is important to remember that there is a difference between individuals who choose to return or stay and those who feel as though they have no choice but stay.

Leaving

Leaving, or not, does not result only from young people’s individual preferences; instead, it is a reflection of their resources, particularly the messages they receive from their social networks. Simply put, leaving is something that young people must be pushed, prodded, and cultivated to do, whereas staying just sort of happens (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 9).

Michael Corbett (2007) sums it up in the title of his book about a rural Nova Scotia fishing village, students “Learn to Leave.” Given the family legacies described earlier of staying and working in the mines or starting families, it does make sense that
“staying just sort of happens,” while leaving is learned or pushed. The small body of rural literature suggests that students “learn to leave” in school. The ones who are high achieving are taught in school that in order to find success and opportunity they have to look outside their rural communities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Hektner, 1995). Students in the current study talk about learning to leave.

They [the teachers and school employees] make sure that they, you know, get through, but they focus mainly on the die-hard people. You know, we want to get out. We want to change. But, I mean, it is. They try to, they push it for everybody, but when they push it and if you show interest or not, that determines how much they push from there because they give everybody the first effort. They always give everybody the first effort, but if you show no interest, ‘Aaa, I’ll never leave Gilbert,’ they just sort of, you know, they put you in a group, and they give you that same attitude. And I can’t blame them, you know. You can’t pound something in somebody’s head if that’s what their family puts in their mind, if that’s what they see, you’re not going to change it, and I think they see that, but other than that, I mean, they really do.

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I mean they encouraged us to go to college, but they didn’t say you should aim for a academically high school as long as you go away to college in Williamson you’re automatically succeeding because not many people do, so it doesn’t matter where you go as long as you go somewhere.
The first student implied that the school encourages those to go to college, but those who want to stay are not supported. This reinforces Carr and Kefalas’ (2009) finding that “Stayers” are often overlooked or ignored. In fact, those who “never leave Gilbert” are viewed as failures. Meanwhile, the second student reveals that by leaving, a student is automatically considered successful. Thus, students learn to equate success with leaving the area.

Consistent with other rural research, students who were planning to leave the area cited lack of opportunity—economic, social, recreational, etc.—as the primary reason for leaving. Others also simply said they wanted a change. They do not like that “everybody knows everybody.”

I just, I want to move to a prettier area with more activities.

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[When] I moved to North Carolina and I realized there was better, better stuff out there so Gilbert’s just limited or Mingo County is limited. I like the different atmosphere.

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It just depends on where job openings are at. I preferably not want to be here.

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I mean, Logan and Williamson [hospitals] may be a good place to start out [as a nurse] with a little bit, but I don’t know--I just don’t--sounds so bad to say, but I just don’t trust them as well… I would like somewhere with more updated facilities and things like that.
I was ready to get away from the small town where everybody knows everybody. While several students indicated a desire to leave, many were conflicted over their decision. This conflict likely arises because of their attachment to family and place yet the push to leave from those who think it necessary to succeed (including the schools). Additionally, students are receiving mixed messages. Staying is looked down upon by some and staying is encouraged by others. Likewise, leaving is both encouraged and discouraged. For instance, some of the students who went away to four-year colleges were encouraged by parents yet discouraged by other family members. One student when asked whether or not his parents wanted him to stay or leave answered “They did but they didn’t” and talked about how his mother “was pushing me to leave because she wanted me to experience life.” Yet his dad said he could do whatever he felt was best. Another student discussed how her two best friends ostracized her when she told them she was going away to college. Meanwhile, a senior at a four-year college who plans not to return to the area after graduation said, “Mom hates it [the student’s decision not to return]…but the rest of my family was telling me, ‘Go somewhere else. There’s more opportunities somewhere else.’” The following student is uncertain whether she will leave or return to the area after college.

I’m kind of torn between it because I really love West Virginia and I don’t think I would live anywhere else and I’m not saying Mingo County. I love the state, but I would like to go back to Williamson because it would be amazing to change something about Williamson, but I also think that some things are just beyond
saving. Like sometimes things just get too far out of hand and you can’t stop
them anymore especially if you’re just one person. I mean one elementary school
teacher isn’t going to change a hundred graduates every year. It’s impossible, and
it’s not something we’re encouraged to do. We’re not encouraged to come
back…[by] anyone. We’re encouraged to go away…I think they see the climate it
is and the kind of mindset the people, the older citizens have and they, I think,
they’re afraid that young people will go to college and come back and be all fresh
and full of learning and knowledge and then get sucked in and just forget, so they
encourage us, they say, ‘Move away. Don’t come back. Come to visit, but don’t
come back.’ And that’s what people who go away do. They don’t come back.

Her conflict seems to arise because she feels as if she has been taught to believe that
returning is a failure, yet she has an attachment to the area. She described a young
woman who wanted to attend Southern and got made fun of by classmates because she
did not want to go away to school. Ironically, most students in the county who go to
college will attend Southern; yet, there does seem to be a stigma attached to attending a
community college. Some four-year students saw the inability to leave home as the
reason for students not going on to a four-year college. She continued to further describe
the attitude toward leaving in her community when she tells of her community’s shock
when an Ivy-educated individual chose to come back to the area. (This was a different
individual whom the local educator had described.)

Some of the same students who talked about the importance of leaving the County
to get an education also emphasized the advantages of home. They hold conflicting
views—both a desire to leave and remain. Recall many of the four-year college students thought going away to college was necessary for personal growth. One four-year student described the necessity of “letting go of home” to be able to make it at her university, an example of the perceived choice students face between family/home and leaving. One student who plans not to return to the area after college said, “I’m not saying I won’t ever come back here because you know this will always be home no matter if I go to California, Texas. This will always be home and I’ll always kind of want to come back.” Despite a desire to leave, there remains that attachment to family and place.
Rural students were not as confident in their abilities to attain a college degree as were urban and suburban students (Cobb et al., 1989). In this research, I explored two particular reasons why they may lack confidence in attaining a degree. Concerns about the cost of college or losing financial aid or a scholarship and worries of failing classes were prevalent. This is particularly troubling given research that shows academic self-efficacy is a strong predictor of college performance and persistence (Robbins et al., 2004).

Many of the freshmen discussed a fear of failure, particularly in math classes. When students were asked about what worried them most about college, the following were common responses:

Math! Yeah, like I am so horrible at math, and, um, I don’t like it.

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My biggest fear is failing a class, which I’m con--my Math class I know for a fact I’ll pass. My Nutrition, I’m pretty confident in that class. Anatomy, we just--my problem with that is we have three tests and a final and that’s the whole semester. So you really, really have to work hard to make a good grade in there. So I’m worried about that and my English class. I’m not a writer. I never have been, never will be.

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Just as long as I pass. I’m worried that I may get a class that is it really gonna be tough on me? And I’m just… as long as I can do good in it, that’s really the only thing that I’m worried about….If something happens like I get a hard class like that or something and I can’t pass it, and if it’s like past where you can withdraw from it, and it may make me, and I may be able to go on either probation for financial aid or I may lose it. Because, I mean, I could probably have to work like almost a full-time job and probably pay for it; but if weren’t for financial aid, I really wouldn’t be able to pay for it.

One college senior said that his math classes were his least favorite thing about college. He explained how he was not prepared for college math and had to take remedial courses. He dislikes math to this day because of the difficulty he had in his classes. Many students had to take remedial courses their freshmen year, but this was particularly common among the community college students. Some students even referred to them as “bonehead classes” that they had to take, indicating, perhaps, a stigma attached to taking such classes, which could lead to lower self-confidence in academic ability.

This worry of failure could be attributed to their academic preparation. Again many students said their math preparation was woefully lacking. A small handful, however, said that, overall, high school adequately prepared them for college classes. Two of the community college students and one of the four year college students even claimed that college classes were easier than they had expected. A majority of students had taken at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course in high school. However, West Virginia Department of Education data show that in 2008-09 zero percent of Mingo
County sophomores, juniors, and seniors took an actual AP exam. When asked if high school had prepared them for college, students, community and four-year college ones, had similar responses:

On most levels it did, but most of the schools in Mingo County we had our math teachers and our science teachers are…that’s where we are most ill-prepared actually, especially in math. I used to be decent; now I’m…that’s a good reason why I went to Southern because they had, you know, prerequisites to the actual college level classes and I took some of those to recap what I learned and didn’t learn….So we just had substitute teachers and there were teachers in and out, and I didn’t have a steady teacher until probably my junior year. It was hard for most of us. Most of my friends, you know, there’s a few of ‘em that caught on to because they’re just good at that stuff. Most of us, we were, it wasn’t good for us.

For the most part other than the math, cuz we had no good math teachers. When I was there we had subs, cuz they couldn’t find anybody at the time. And then right after I got outta there they got a math teacher. So…I took 095 and 096 and now I’m in 123…095 and 096 are the ones that they call bonehead classes or whatever. Even students who were honor students in high school had to adjust to the tougher classes in college. More than one student said that high school was not challenging, so they were surprised when they got to college and had to work harder to pass:

It’s not high school. I--that’s [inaudible]. When I graduated, I was an honor student in high school and my first semester here was a rude awakening. I didn’t
party. I--I was not a partier. I--I don’t. I had--I don’t drink. I don’t--that’s not me. But it’s like, I was used to not really having to study. I had got the stuff. That was not the case here. It’s a lot different. And people dropped out. They’re not used to it. And if you don’t want to put the time in to f--to change it, you’re just--you’re in trouble. And I think a lot of people dropped because of that reason.

When asked about whether or not high school had prepared him for college another student answered:

Yeah, some of my teachers did, and I mean, some of them didn’t, but you’re going to have that. But overall, overall I was prepared. I was in all the honors programs and stuff too.

However, students also talked about individual teachers that had been instrumental in preparing them for college. For example, a science teacher at one of the local high schools was praised by most of the students interviewed from that school. Other students discussed how some of their teachers helped prepare them for college.

Yeah, like Ms. C. and Mr. M. they kind of taught on a college level at a sense, but kept it still high school, so like here. And like they would use words that we wouldn’t really know, and you know they’d explain everything and we had to learn all these different definitions and just things like that, and all the work they put on us it seemed like a lot just like in college. But, you know, we’d always get it done or mostly get it done. You know, they taught at a level to where it’s kind of even, so when we got here, we wasn’t like totally overwhelmed. And I’d have
to say I haven’t been really overwhelmed with anything, so I think it was prepared really nicely.

One student described how her difficulty in math taught her to take the initiative and meet with her professors, something she did not have to do in high school because of the small class sizes.

I did in math because I’m not very good in math. My specialization is English and usually English people aren’t good at math. I’m true to that stereotype. I’m not good at math. And, uh, it wasn’t even I was struggling with the class. I was just struggling knowing how to like, knowing how to work together in a class with a professor, and so, if you sat down and talked with me it was really helpful cause, I mean, I had to schedule an appointment to talk to him, but once I got there he didn’t act like I was just a number. He talked to me and seemed concerned.

A lack of confidence in academic preparation and abilities, particularly in math, could account for rural students being less confident in their ability to attain a college degree than their urban and suburban counterparts. Additionally, the worry of failing a class is tied to losing scholarship money. Just as college cost is cited as a reason students believe some of their high school classmates did not attend college, it is also a reason some students give for the possibility of not finishing college. Losing scholarships or financial aid (and having to pay for college) was one worry many of the students had. Several students indicated that this could prevent them from finishing college. One student had tears in her eyes as she related the story of learning that she had gotten a full-
ride scholarship to the community college, so it is not surprising that students worry about losing these scholarships, too.

I get a little teary eyed thinking about it, man, you know how lucky I was? Cuz I know so many people apply for ‘em, and as hard as I’ve had it, I thought for sure I’m gonna have a hard time paying for college; I’m gonna struggle [inaudible] not being able to go. And they tell me you have this full paid scholarship and I’m like, oh my gosh, thank God... I applied in probably--it was probably February/March-ish and I found out May the 27th that I got it. It was on awards--senior awards day at school and they had a representative come from Southern and he gave them out. So the only thing is out of the three people that received ‘em they just got 15 hundred dollars, 2 thousand dollars and I got full ride.

*What if anything would prevent you from finishing college?*

In Chapter 5 students were quoted as saying they would take time off from college if their family needed them in the case of a death, illness, or other family emergency. Nonetheless, students say they would return to college. However, financial loss is seen by many as something that would make it unlikely for them to continue their education.

If I don’t have like financial resources to go, like I know I get everything paid for, but if they stopped paying for my books and that will be harder for me to supply books for myself and that’s about it, just money in general.

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Maybe I guess if something went wrong like financially, something--I mean, there’s always a chance of that. I guess that would be the main thing.

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Probably financial loss, cuz I really--I like staying on campus, but I think I would be happier with living on my own and getting myself adjusted to that. So--cuz I know like there’s a lot of the scholarships and grants and stuff that I received this year that they’re like just the one year thing. They’re not like a renewal. Like Promise is…and you know, grants and the loans you can get are like that, but there are some of the things that I, I’m not gonna be able to get back. So I’m kinda worried how the financial part’s gonna go. I think I’m gonna pretty much have to drive to finish. It’s not [inaudible] withdraw or drop out or anything. But more of if I can afford to go.

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The only thing that would prevent me from finishing would be I don’t know probably if I can’t like afford it or keep up with it, but as for the actual school work and education goes, I think I’ll be fine in it because it don’t seem that hard, and they say the first year is always the hardest. So, like the cost would probably be the only thing that would prevent me from stopping or taking a break or something like that.

*What worries you about college? (freshmen)*

Students were also asked what worried them about college. Many were anxious about keeping scholarships or failing classes.
Well, keeping a 3.0—(Oh, to keep your scholarships?)—yeah, that’s a little bit stressful. It’s a little bit more than a little bit stressful, because I have—I still have a few questions to ask her about that scholarship, like if she’ll—if they’ll admit it if—if they’ll still have my scholarship if I have to drop a class.

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I mean money always worries me because I mean there’s five of us in my family and not a very big income, obviously, so I always have to think if I buy this $70 hoodie then what am I really getting. That’s $70 that I could be spending on something else. And, I’m a worrier anyway. I stress out really easily, so things like that really trip me out.

One student who is struggling in a freshman science class says she is concerned about losing her scholarship if her GPA drops below the minimum requirement. She recounts going from a straight A student in high school to getting a C on her first science test.

I thought, ‘Oh my god, you know, what if I’ve messed myself up to where I have to go back home?’ I really did. I called my grandma, and I cried… and I thought, ‘Oh my god. What if I’m losin’ my scholarships? What if I have to go back home?’

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[P]robably losing my Promise scholarship. If I get bad grades, I’d have to actually pay for it…Just if I had to pay for it, I don’t know where the money would come from.
Paying for college was a major concern among almost all the students interviewed. Fear of losing financial aid or a scholarship due to failing a class was a predominant worry among the students. Such worries could account for rural students’ lacking confidence in their ability to graduate from college. Students’ worries also show the need of remedial courses, special services, tutoring, and perhaps, smaller classes with more individualized attention, at least, freshman year. (The large 200-300 classes at larger universities seem to be for freshmen required courses.)

Negative Stereotypes

Additionally, negative stereotypes of the region could negatively affect students’ confidence in their own abilities. Some contend that negative stereotypes of West Virginians are rooted in national attention garnered during the Hatfield-McCoy feud and later reinforced by the coal mine wars and the Matewan massacre (Foster & Conner, 1992, p. 7). These stereotypes are pervasive, which is evident when students are asked what the stereotypes about the region are. What effects might these stereotypes have on rural students’ educational expectations and successes? First, let us examine the predominant stereotypes related by the students. Most of them include variations on being ignorant hillbillies.

Umm, that we’re stupid (laughing). That we’re illiterate and dumb and we aren’t capable of going to college when we obviously can, and I just think that people don’t need to stereotype other people.

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Well, everyone thinks we’re hillbillies down here, and I think that’s ridiculous because I think there’s a lot of educated people around here, more than hillbillies. I just think that’s ridiculous.

Well, everybody thinks that we’re like a low class, um, everybody is. They’re mean, and, um, in *Wrong Turn* (a horror movie about inbred killers in West Virginia). They suspect that’s us. Well, it’s not. Southern West Virginia, Mingo County is probably some of the nicest people you’ll meet. Everybody knows everybody, and they just take you in like family.

People around here are dumb. All they do is work in the mines, you know. Uneducated hillbillies, pretty much. Like you see it really wasn’t West Virginia, but that thing on “60 Minutes” I think with the Mountain Dew and stuff…it’s just stuff. Like, I don’t understand those people why they make stuff like that, and it just makes…and then people like Jescoe White and that whole family does not make the area look good at all. You got stuff like that and people that’s all they see is the bad stuff around here. But I think like this Hatfield-McCoy trail and stuff, it kind of helps the area. Maybe people will see it in a different light.

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17 The student is referring to an ABC 20/20 special with Diane Sawyer called, “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains.” Many of the Appalachians families, including young children, featured in the documentary were shown to drink lots of Mountain Dew, which caused their teeth to rot.

18 Jesco White is a native West Virginian who was the subject of two PBS documentaries. He is a mountain dancer who has struggled to overcome drug and alcohol problems and lives in rural poverty in Boone County, West Virginia.
We’re welfare babies, you know, rednecks, trailer park, you know, hillbillies, gap teeth, bare foot, you know, uh drug heads, drunks, you know. We grow weed and um make our own moonshine, you know, just stuff like that. We’re mountain people you know.

More than one student articulated that, perhaps, it is these kinds of negative stereotypes that lead to low expectations for student educational success:

I think they’re judgmental overall, because most people are like, ‘Well, anybody from West Virginia’s just redneck and people that have the Christmas lights on all year round and stuff like that and just don’t really care about anything.’ When there’s really--I mean, all kinds of kids, like the majority of kids that I even graduated with, they really--you know, they strive to better themselves. And I just think it’s a rut that everybody else maybe gets ‘em stuck in instead of encouraging them, and they end up discouraged and so maybe that’s why we end up how we are, because we’re not expected to [succeed].

For some reason, a lot of schools in Mingo County get looked down upon for some reason, and you go to those classes and you feel like maybe this AP class isn’t as good as an AP class in Maryland or Washington or something like that; but, you know, the teachers talk to you know like, ‘This is a tough course and you’ve got to do it, and it’s the same everywhere….’ I got up here and I got to college and was like, ‘Well, it did help.’

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In this area our school system is not as great as we would like it to be, especially in the math and science department. I think that inhibits some people from going on. They feel like we didn’t have that kind of thing. We shouldn’t go to college. So the school system, it struggles, and I think that corresponds to how we feel about college.

As mentioned earlier, the West Virginia State Board of Education took over the Mingo County school system because of poor student performance and financial problems. (However, some county school board officials and residents sued the Board and said the purpose of the takeover was to force the county to consolidate schools.) Perhaps the takeover and the subsequent perceptions of the school system have had some unintended consequences of lowering students’ aspirations to attend college.

Several students mentioned being made fun of for their southern accents, even in other parts of the state. People with southern accents are perceived as being less intelligent than those without a southern accent. Is it possible that students are also treated differently in college? Students described being teased for their accents.

The stereotypes for West Virginia is everybody is a hick, everybody doesn’t wear shoes, we all have guns, I mean, I think that stuff should be changed, but I say ‘ain’t.’ My language isn’t the best. I mean, I talk with a funny accent, even more funnier than most of the people I know. But I don’t like that everybody calls us that because, I mean, you go to Ohio and people sound different down there. It’s just a few hours away. I mean, I don’t like it, but I don’t know how to change it [my accent].
Hmm, there’s always the true hick, you know, cowboy hat or the little straw hat with the big plaid shirts, you know, that sort of thing, and then there’s the uppity-do, people you could say that [look down on] the little people, so clean and sparkly and then there’s the average class, you know, we don’t dress like hicks, but we don’t have a whole lot of money. We’re just here. And that’s normally the ones, you know, who don’t really want for nothin’ but they don’t get every little thing. ‘Oh, look there’s a new car. Let’s go buy it’ kind of people. But I don’t think the stereotypes are as bad as other than the general states around us having the ‘hick’ aspects of it because when I got to Morgantown I actually had a girl from Pennsylvania tell me she couldn’t understand a word that I was sayin.’…And I said, ‘How do you don’t understand me?’ And she said, ‘Your accent’s like this (faking southern accent).’ And I said, ‘What are you talkin’ about?’ You know, I’m talking just like I am to you. And she’s like, ‘I’m just used to the city talk.’ And I just, when I talk to her, I try to accent what I can, and she seems not to be having trouble with it, but I can say (cell phone ringing)...oh, dear, people. She can say like, ‘Do you need this or that?’ I had to say ‘Seven’ the other day, and she mocked me, the way I said seven. I’m like, ‘How do you say seven?’ And she’s like, ‘The same way you do.’ And I said, ‘Well what makes it any different?’ So I think it’s just one of those intimidation, ‘We’re from the city. You’re from West Virginia.’ You know, that sort of thing, but other than that I don’t think it’s bad.
I have been picked at for my, uh, my language, the way I talk. I’ve been bad about, you know, some words like shoulder (pronounced shoulda), it’s shoulder (er) or words like, I’ve been bad about sayin’ ‘aw right’ instead of ‘all right.’ If I’m tired, they really pick up on it… See, I’m home almost every weekend, so I don’t never really escape it. I catch it a whole lot. My dad’s like ‘oil’ (pronounce ol), no it’s ‘oil’ (oyal). He says, ‘Oh, my bad oil.’ And the thing that I hate the worst is when somebody says ‘worser.’ I’m like ‘it’s worse. It’s not worser.’ They say ‘worser’ and I’m like. Or iron (arn). It’s iron. Well, they think, ‘Oh look at you.’ I’m like, ‘If you went to where I went and you got made fun of, you would learn to pronounce it right, too.’ And they’re like, they understand that.

If students are made fun of or teased for their accents, then they may begin to feel inadequate or not as smart as others. While this is more likely to impact students at four-year institutions, both community college students and four-year college students in the study said that they are teased about their accents although the four-year students are teased by college peers.

One day while walking I came across a group of neighborhood boys ranging in age from about 10 to 17. They asked what I was doing in the area. I said I was researching education in the county. One boy laughed and said, “We don’t have much of that here.” Another piped in defensively, “Yeah, we do.” So, West Virginians are not completely innocent in helping to end some of these stereotypes. Most of the students are upset that such stereotypes exist and are perpetuated by movies and television. However,
one can only wonder despite students’ belief that the negative stereotypes are just that, stereotypes, what impact might they have on students’ self-confidence and educational access.

I despise hearing about ‘em [stereotypes], like that TV show that they showed last year or whatever…Children of the Mountains or whatever it was [a Dianne Sawyer news special on poverty in Eastern KY and southwestern WV]…Like everybody from West Virginia doesn’t have an education and has rotted teeth and don’t wear shoes. That junk is so pathetic. It gets on my nerves so bad. It’s ridiculous. Anybody who drove around would realize that not everybody’s like that. I mean, some people are, yeah, but they can’t help it, not all of ‘em anyway. And if you look hard enough you can find bad in any state…There’s always bad somewhere and they just try to pick on us.

However, some students say the negative stereotypes associated with the region only serve to motivate them to work hard to prove that those stereotypes are not accurate. The biggest one[stereotype] is being dumb hicks. That’s what you deal with everywhere. Um, it’s inspirational because you want to prove them wrong….It’s motivation, absolutely. If they call us hicks and stupid, you want to lecture them on the gravitational pull of the moon (laughing) or talk to them about physics and shut them up a little bit. That’s what bothers me the most about southern West Virginia because we’re all, we’re human beings like everybody else. There’s no need for stuff like that. It’s completely immature and it’s unresponsible and there’s no need for it, so that’s the biggest stereotype. Umm another one…let’s
see. Since we’re around here we’re obviously going to go to the coal mines just because we’re in this area and that’s something, it’s true; but you know you don’t. There’s some of us that will go that way and but there’s other of us that we don’t want that kind of lifestyle. And I think since my dad has worked in the coal mines, he has really pushed me to steer away.

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Umm, hillbillies. It’s so, I mean, I go to school here in West Virginia. This is West Virginia’s University, but I’ll open my mouth to talk, and I know I have a southern accent, like; I can’t get rid of it. And, I wouldn’t try to because I like it, but I’ll say something and people will be like, ‘Where are you from?’ ‘I’m from West Virginia. Where are you from?’ ‘New York.’ And they’ll be like, ‘Oh, well, you just sound like one of those rednecks.’ And I’m like, ‘You’re going to school in my state and you’re telling me that I don’t belong here.’ It’s like kids from out of state here don’t expect West Virginia kids to go to school. They legitimately don’t. They are surprised when they meet someone from West Virginia. They’ll be like, ‘Oh, I thought this was mostly an out of state school.’ No. They’re legitimately surprised that anyone from West Virginia could get an education, and they legitimately expect us to like be hicks. That’s totally just what they see, and they don’t really have respect for like the state of West Virginia. Like I don’t know if you’ve seen them but all these shirts that say like “West effing Virginia”. They’re awful. As a person from West Virginia, I wouldn’t wear it because I’m proud to be from West Virginia. And, I wouldn’t
wear a shirt that says “West effing Virginia” on it because it gives people, it just keeps the stereotype of hillbilly, redneck, uneducated, like, it keeps it going. But, people from out of state gladly wear them, and they’re the people who, when opposing football teams come here, will throw cups at people and like it gives outsiders a negative impression of the university because they assume because it says West Virginia on it that it’s me, personally, a West Virginian hillbilly who’s doing it. I’m not a hillbilly. I’m not, I mean, I don’t believe that I’m any less educated than anyone else, but it’s definitely true people think that about us.

Exposure to New Experiences

Two studies that examine rural students’ college experiences assume that rural students in college are exposed to different and, at times, conflicting values from the ones in their rural communities, again revealing the tensions faced by rural students in education (Dees, 2006; Whiting, 1999). When seniors in the current study were asked if any of their values or beliefs had been challenged since they were in college, the following responses were given:

Somewhat I suppose, not to a major degree, not to a major degree… (pause) well, last semester we talked about diversity in the leadership class. And the textbook talked about, obviously we talked about, when you talk about diversity you talk about religion, race, and that type of thing. One of the things that, uh, I don’t know if it was challenged exactly, but on certain social issues, uh, like sexual orientations, that type thing. And then another time in a political science class, we were having a, kind of like an election. And I was running as a democrat, but
I was running as a conservative democrat, and this other guy was running, not as a republican but as libertarian which he really didn’t know what a libertarian was (laughing). But it was, we actually went up to the 4th floor studio and filmed a debate, if that’s what you want to call it and the people in the class. It was like an open forum type thing. People would ask you questions, just off and you had no preparation or any of that, and one guy asked about what was my stance on gay marriage and that, so there was a debate there between that. Certain things in that regard. Has it been challenged to a point that I, uh, I thought about it. Has anything been forced? No. That’s the only thing I can think of. I don’t, the biggest things here that I’ve seen is education, education is talked about. Education is definitely tried here. They try to promote, obviously at a college, promote diversity but more as in cultural diversity. And you know they have Harmony, actually I think it’s a month they try to get different speakers in. Harmony Day. But even those type things are things that, uh, such as racial things, things like that. That has never, that just kind of builds upon what I already believed, you know.

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And when I came here, it’s like--I was exposed to so much more, and that’s been hard to explain to them [my parents]. It’s like, I have Jewish friends. I have atheist friends. I have other Christian friends. I have black friends. So I have all different ethnic groups and all this stuff, and I have gay friends. And that’s kind of hard to explain to them. It’s like, to me, it’s normal to me now because I’m
around it all the time. They’re not. So when they come up, it’s completely different. And it’s like--I can just imagine what it’s gonna be like when my brother comes here. He’s still got--2014 will be his--his--fourteen, fifteen will be his freshman year, and I’m like, I can just imagine what he’s gonna change in nine years. I see how much it’s changed since my freshman year, so….

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Challenged, yes. Like I said, I don’t--I’m not the drinker. I have a lot of friends--I have a certain friend who went wild our freshman year here. I met her here. We were from different schools. But she’s had alcohol poisoning. She smokes marijuana. Just--just stuff that she does. I mean, it’s like I--I don’t agree with any of it, but she has enough respect for me that she doesn’t do it around me. And she’s actually starting to change her values to where she’s laying off of it and not doing it as much. And--and as often and it’s starting to cut out, but I didn’t--I was a good kid in high school. I had friends that weren’t, but of course, my freshman year here, I tried alcohol for the first time. I didn’t like it. I guess that--I was peer pressured into it, so I mean that was, but I chose not to. I--I didn’t enjoy it. I was like, this is stupid. What am I getting out of this? Nothing. So I could--that and then even on band trips, there’s a lot of stuff that goes on…We won’t go into--there’s probably stuff that goes on, and that’s another hard one to explain to my mother. That’s another story.

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But, it’s just—yeah, I’ve been—I’ve been challenged, but it’s safe. I guess I’m
more open to things… I’m—I’m more open to different beliefs now, but morals
and all that stuff, I don’t think they’ve changed too much. [Inaudible]. I’m not
saying to completely change [inaudible] to adapt to different surroundings, I
think. Like not—I mean, you still have your morals, but it’s like—and drinking.
I’m not gonna not hang out with you. Well, if I did that, how many friends am I
gonna have on campus?

Well, uh, religion thing. I always believed in creationism. Now I sort of tweak it
a little bit. I believe that God created everything, but I believe we did evolve. I
believe that God created, you know, this stuff and it started and it evolved to what
we are today, but I don’t believe, sometimes it’s hard for me to believe that we
were straight from creationism....There’s evidence to support that. Geologists
have found and archaeologists have found things that just, these new species
(snaps) just popped out of air, so I mean it’s still out there.

Does attachment to family and place again come into play? Are students worried
that they may no longer “fit” in back home? This is likely to be more of a concern for
those students who are attending four-year colleges, given the greater diversity at those
institutions. Even a community college student admitted that her values are less likely to
be challenged than those students attending a four-year university.

I wouldn’t say challenged, but I mean, I grew up I guess you could say, ‘Don’t lie.
Don’t cheat. Don’t steal,’ you know that stuff. ‘Don’t drink. Don’t do drugs.’
All that stuff. And it’s not challenged me personally because I have those values, and I stick to those values, but I see everybody else and I’m like, ‘What are you doing?’ I mean not so much here at Southern cause there’s not a whole lot that goes on here because everybody goes home. But I mean just going down to Marshall last weekend, like other friends, not my two best friends cause they believe a lot like I do, but other friends that I have down there I was like, ‘What are you doing? You’re crazy. You shouldn’t be doin’ that.’ But, I really don’t think my stuff’s been challenged. I think most thing is, is you have to be into yourself. You know what I mean? You have to stick to it yourself.

When asked if he had changed any of his values or beliefs, one community college student replied, “I don’t think so, no. Stayin’ strong (laughing).” Four-year college students more than the community college students were likely to say that their values or beliefs had been challenged. The greater diversity at the four-year institutions may account for this difference. Four-year students, for example, talk about meeting students from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds or ones who are gay and lesbian. Also, recall that four-year students believed that leaving home is necessary for individual growth; so, perhaps, these students were more open to learning about other beliefs and values.
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

Introduction

I hate to say it about my own boy but, at one time, I was a little bit ashamed of him. He wasn’t like the other kids. He was always sickly. If you looked at him hard, he would cry. Even after he got over that rheumatic fever or whatever you call it, he sat around and read instead of playing with the other kids.

Charlie, his brother, even though he’s younger, can do twice as much work as Will can. That Charlie takes after me, I guess. He loves hounds and horses. He’s always doing something either here on the place or over at the sawmill. He likes outdoors. I don’t guess he’s read a book since he quit school. He’s bright enough, mind you, but he thinks different from Will. I guess Will takes after his Ma a bit. She always liked book learnin’.

If someone has told me twenty years ago I would have had a boy up there at the University I would have figured he was some sort of cripple being sent there for treatment. I don’t know how Will got the idea to go. Maybe his teachers or my Aunt Caroline put it in his head. She was all the time sending him books while he was sick. I guess she’s been to a lot of colleges and I don’t have no argument with that. After all, she’s a woman and she never did like farming. Will’s a lot like her. He’s always talking about things being beautiful but then he seems down in the dumps a lot, too.

I believe a body can think too much. Maybe I’m all wet, I don’t know, but it seems like a body can get latched on to education like some sort of drug and the more they get the more they want. I thought Will would get enough going to college. Then it was medical school. I thought sure he wouldn’t make it but he did, and made good grades, too.

When I saw Will was going to make it I thought to myself he’d come back and set up an office near here and get him a farm beside mine. You know, doctors make a lot of money. He could have had a farm bigger than the old home place here or, better still, he and Charlie and me could have it together what with the money from Will’s doctoring, Charlie’s hustle, and my experience. We could have really had something. But that don’t seem to be the way it’s going to be.

Will’s now interested in psychiatry, whatever that is. Instead of going into practice, he’s in another training program, of all things, and they don’t pay him what he could make working in a sawmill. All of the schooling and he don’t make as much as the boys that quit in the seventh grade.

I don’t know how it will all come out. I guess I don’t have any choice but to wait and see (Spradlin, 1978, p. 65-66).

In this short autobiographical story by Dr. Wilford Spradlin, who grew up on a farm in rural Appalachia, several relevant themes pertaining to educational opportunities and college access and success of rural youth emerge. The strong attachment of rural
individuals to family and place; pressures from family members to stay in the area and students’ decisions to leave, stay, or return; the influence of family legacies or traditions on students; the lure of making money in local industry and foregoing college (mining or timber in Mingo County or in this story sawmills); different opportunities and expectations based on gender; and the inextricable link between the rural community and school. These themes are found throughout the current study. Unlike Spradlin’s story, however, the students in this research were, for the most part, strongly encouraged by their parents (both mothers and fathers) to go to college. Nevertheless, internal struggles, and in a few instances external ones, existed among students because of the strong attachment to family.

In his seminal work on rural young people, *Elmtown Youth*, Hollingshead recognized the important and inextricable link between culture/community and rural youth behavior (1949). He wrote, “When we talked with Elmtowners, during the first weeks of our residence there, about the behavior of high school pupils, person after person said, in effect, ‘You have to know this town or you cannot understand these high school kids.’ This recurring emphasis on the relationship between the community’s institutions, family, wealth, ‘politics,’ history, and ‘the way these kids act’ was backed by specific details in instance after instance” (p. 8). Likewise, the impact of rural culture and community on rural students’ college access and success cannot be ignored. This study sought to illuminate the link between local, rural culture and college access and success among rural, low-SES students.
As stated at the outset of this manuscript, much of the college access and success literature on low-SES or first-generation students looks at these students as a whole or at urban, low-SES students. Rural students are not often discussed or studied. However, that is not to say that the broader access and success literature cannot provide insights into rural, low-SES students. Some college-going behaviors often associated with low-SES students as a whole were found in this study. For example, low-income students are more likely to attend public institutions, particularly two-year colleges. This is certainly the case among low-SES students in Mingo County. However, staying close to home was cited more often than cost as the reason for this. Additionally, several students in my sample talked about their families being averse to taking out loans for college, which is common among low-SES families. Students in my study overwhelmingly viewed higher education as a means of getting a good job, a view that is pervasive among low-SES students whether urban, rural, or suburban. Some of the access literature suggests low-SES students lack social and cultural capital. In the present study, students had access to social and cultural capital because of family support. Social and cultural capital are often context specific. While the larger access literature is helpful, I still believe that by examining context, in this case rural culture, we are better able to understand the behavior of rural students.

Research Conclusions

The importance of family in the rural culture studied cannot be understated. As discussed in Chapter Five, the impact of this attachment to family was evident in students’ college access and success stories. The study revealed the familism often
associated with Appalachia and its impact on college-going. Parents, siblings, and extended family provided support and encouragement necessary for students’ high educational aspirations, their college-going, and their persistence. Nevertheless, attachment to family makes it difficult for students to leave. In fact, some family members encouraged students to stay in the local area. Many of the community college students discussed the desire to remain close to home as a primary reason for choosing the community college. Meanwhile, four-year students talked about leaving home as a necessary step for personal growth. Many of the four-year students had not considered doing anything else except attending college while some of the community college students had. According to many students, their parents always expected them to go to college.

Additionally, cultural legacies, traditions, and norms are likely to influence rural students’ college-going and persistence. In this study, the legacy of foregoing college and going to work in the coal mines or other blue collar jobs was especially prevalent among rural families. Traditional gender norms persist as well and are perpetuated by the lack of economic opportunities in the region. In particular, women do not have the opportunity to work in the mines, one of the few well-paying jobs in the area that does not require a college diploma. Perceived opportunities for males and females differ. Males can forego college and go into the mines, while women can forego college and get married and start a family. Those who go to college, particularly students who want to stay in or return to the region choose fields that will allow them to do so, such as nursing, healthcare, or education—also often viewed by students as feminine fields.
Leaving, returning, or staying is a decision that is made more difficult for rural students given the strong attachment to family, place, and community, yet the lack of economic opportunity in the rural area weighs heavily in the decision as well. Those students who were unsure if they would stay or return to the area often said it depended on where they could find a job. Students received mixed messages about staying and leaving. This no doubt leads to students holding conflicting views about whether to remain or leave. While all the students in this study were first-generation, their families’ income statuses varied as evident by Pell eligibility. The students would likely fall into low-income or middle-income categories. Although the sample was not selected to examine differences between low and middle-income students’ preferences for staying or leaving, it is interesting to note that no such patterns were found. That is some of the Pell students planned to return or stay in the area as did some non-Pell students.

In addition to family’s vital role in the success of rural students so, too, are the roles of rural high schools, the communities, and peers. Encouragingly, all the students interviewed discussed how college-going was promoted at their high school. However, several students admitted that this support was more likely focused on students who worked hard in school or were higher achieving students. Students more involved in school and community life were more likely to be exposed to the social capital that leads to college access and success. However, this involvement and interactions with peers among the students in this research were coupled with parental support and supervision, which Elder and Conger (2000) and Lareau (2003) said is essential to meaningful, positive experiences. Peer influence remained rather positive. Students were, however,
influenced by their peers in decisions about where to go to college, and for many students, particularly the community college ones, high school peers remained important people in their lives. Four-year college students also discussed how high school classmates attending the same institution made their transitions from high school to college and leaving home easier.

Future Studies

Given the general lack of research on rural students, a need for more research on this overlooked population is in order. The existing research tends to be quantitative in nature. More qualitative studies like the current study are necessary to determine how cultural differences impact rural students’ college-going and persistence. We know that rural students are less likely to attend college and complete a college degree. Now we must determine why this is the case.

All the students in this study were white. Although West Virginia is approximately 95% white, examining the experiences of racial minorities is also necessary. In many rural areas immigration is on the rise, particularly Latinos (Carr and Kefalas, 2009). Therefore, a similar type of study including more racial groups is in order. Additionally, comparing and contrasting the experiences of rural, urban, and suburban low-income students would provide further insight into cultural differences and their impact on college access and success.

Few patterns emerged when examining social class differences among the students. Perhaps, the only difference found was that more of the non-Pell students had not considered doing anything besides going to college after high school. It is likely
because of the small sample and, perhaps, because all students in the sample were first-generation college students that many differences did not materialize. Additionally, the sample was chosen based on first-generation status rather than income status. (Typically a correlation between parental education levels and income levels exist.) However, the large body of college access and success literature reveals that socio-economic status clearly matters. Therefore, further research on rural students and socio-economic status is necessary. Many of the students’ parents displayed the characteristics of middle-class parents described by Lareau (2003). In rural areas with high poverty levels is social stratification more blurred?

Given the importance of family to rural students, a future qualitative study that included interviews with parents and family members is a logical next step to better understand parental support and family attachment and influence. Moreover, this research focused on successful students. Much could be learned by interviewing those rural students who did not make it to college to learn of the barriers that they faced or their reasons for not attending college.

I interviewed students at specific points in their college careers (as freshmen in their first semester and seniors in their final year of college), and I asked them to reflect upon earlier times. For instance, I asked them questions about who encouraged them to go to college. Instead of relying on students reflecting on experiences, a longitudinal study which would follow rural, low-SES students from high school (or earlier) through college could capture students at every stage: forming educational aspirations, choosing a college, persisting in college. Such a study would capture their perceptions during these
crucial moments. I would surmise, for example, that students who say they had not considered doing anything besides college are more likely to complete their college degree. This could be one piece of a longitudinal study that follows students from a young age to college completion or failure to complete their degree.

Policy and Practical Implications

The policy and practical implications of this study cut across multiple levels—local, institutional, state, and federal. Given the role of schools in rural communities and the influence they have on students, K-20 initiatives need to be expanded. Partnerships between rural schools and institutions of higher education could lead to greater access. Often admissions officers do not travel to rural areas to recruit (with the exception of local community colleges and other regional institutions). Colleges need to find effective, creative ways to reach out to rural students (web, emails, through teachers, alums). When West Virginia GEAR UP high school seniors were asked about how important various forms of media were in providing information to students about college, students most frequently cited college websites, traditional college brochures, and direct mail as being important (WVHEPC & CTCS, 2010).

Low-SES students often aim low when it comes to institutional selectivity and could go to more selective institutions (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). It was my impression that this was the case with several of the students in my sample. Four-year students are more likely to finish college than two-year students (Astin & Oseguera, 2004). Thus, encouraging qualified students to enroll in four-year institutions and more selective institutions is something that rural high schools and college access programs
should focus on. Coupled with this encouragement must come education about financial aid availability and options since “sticker shock” over college tuition is more likely to impact low-SES students and their families.

Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) concluded that the best time to influence educational aspirations of students is between the eighth and ninth grades. An environmental scan of college access programs in the state of Virginia revealed that most access programs in that state focused on high school students (Alleman, Stimpson, & Holly, 2009). It is likely that the same is true of West Virginia access programs.\(^{19}\) However, a noted exception in West Virginia is the GEAR UP program that begins working with students in the eighth grade. In its third year of existence in the state, the program is already showing promising results in the counties that it serves.

“When we focus on the likelihood that students realize their [educational] aspirations, we find that parental income plays a significant role, but in the early stages of the college decision-making process, parental encouragement and support along with good grades, are more important than family income. Thus, what parents do and say are more important than family wealth in the development of educational plans and aspirations.” (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999, p. 26). This was certainly true of the students in this study. Thus, the importance of involving parents or replicating the support of parents and families in schools and support programs is essential. Preliminary results of an environmental scan of access programs in West Virginia, show that fewer access organizations provide programming for parents. The need to include parents and

\(^{19}\) An environmental scan of access programs in West Virginia is currently underway by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission.
other family members is clear given their influence on students’ college-going decisions and behaviors.

Access programs and higher education institutions that serve rural students need to find ways to include students’ families. As discussed earlier students often feel as if they have to choose between family and higher education, particularly if attending a four-year institution away from home. Many low-income, rural students are the first in their family to attend college, so both students and parents often do not know what to expect of the college experience. By educating both students and families of what to expect in college (from the kinds of classes to dorm life to study habits), both would likely feel more comfortable about students making the transition from high school to college. One student in the current study mentioned how her grandmother felt much more at ease about the student attending the four-year college away from home after the grandmother had visited the campus. College access programs might include parents on college visits. Periodically institutions could find ways to inform families about campus activities and, while upholding FERPA stipulations, to update them on their student’s progress and successes.

The cultural importance of family in rural life should be carefully considered when creating and reforming programs and policies intended to encourage the college access and success of rural students. Given the strong attachment to family and place, distance learning and high quality educational opportunities that allow students to remain in their communities would likely increase college-going rates among rural students who prefer not to leave home and community. Some of the community colleges and four
year colleges seem to understand students’ dilemma and provide opportunities that allow students to stay home and earn a bachelor’s degree by taking classes at the local community college. Additionally, expanding dual enrollment curricula would allow students to earn college credits at their local high schools.

Another problem is the lack of public transportation in most rural areas. This challenge must be met if low-income students are to access classes required to be delivered at specific locations. One institution has addressed this problem by subsidizing a bus service to keep costs low for students. This service links communities in the rural county where the institution is based.

These efforts would also be useful in countering the rural brain drain that is happening in many small, rural towns across America. Of course, in order for students to remain in the area even after completing college, economic opportunities need to be expanded. With greater human capital, which is severely lacking in many rural communities, come greater opportunities to attract new industries and technology (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; WV Higher Ed. Future Plan).

A lack of college-educated role models is also a problem in rural areas. Many students in the current study had trouble thinking of someone they knew with a college degree. Creating mentor programs for rural youth is essential. Such programs would introduce students to individuals with college degrees. Moreover, for students who lack strong parental support, which is an essential factor in college access and success for rural students, these programs would provide some of the support necessary for student success. Programs such as the National College Advisory Corps, which places recent
college graduates into low-income high schools and community colleges to work, need to be replicated on smaller scales in rural areas. Americorps and VISTA volunteers could also serve as college-educated role models in rural areas. However, in order for college access programs in rural areas to be successful they must go beyond working with only students. Instead, they should involve many sectors of the rural community—schools, families, local/regional businesses, churches, and community groups.

Expanding rural students’ social and cultural capital is of utmost importance. Students in this study had greater access to social capital because of their involvement in school and community activities. However, exposure to elite cultural capital was lacking or at the very least mixed among the group of students interviewed. Social capital seemed especially key to the success of the students interviewed. Again mentoring programs could provide greater access to social capital. Mandatory school-wide involvement in access programs or community service would also expose all students to social capital opportunities. (Many private schools require their students to complete a certain number of community service hours each year.)

Making a smoother transition from rural community to college life could ease students’ anxieties about leaving home. Many universities are instituting “University 100” classes, particularly for low-SES and first-generation freshmen, to provide them with tools and skills necessary for college success. However, these kinds of cultural and social capital enhancements useful for navigating college also need to be introduced to students much earlier during their education.
Another way to make rural students more comfortable is through peer programs like the Posse Foundation. Many of the students in this study talked about how having high school classmates attend the same college made the students’ transition to college life easier. The Posse Foundation works with students from urban high schools. They bring groups of peers together to college campuses with the idea that peer support is necessary to college success. A similar type program for rural students is in order, given rural students’ reliance on peers. Additionally, sending rural students to colleges together in peer groups might ease the transition from home and small town community to college life. One college senior interviewed, who is part of a leadership program for students from Mingo County and other parts of West Virginia, stressed the importance of the program and his peers in his college success and continued enrollment. He said there were times when he was ready to drop out, but he stuck with it not only because of his parents’ support but also because of the support of his fellow leadership program participants whom he had known for years. His parents also credited the other students in the leadership program in preventing their son from dropping out of college. With the exception of one student who left college after one day on campus, this particular leadership program has had one hundred percent retention. Mentor programs pairing freshmen with upperclassman from the same high school or at least county or state could provide peer support that many students would find beneficial.

Theoretical and Philosophical Discussion

Access to economic, cultural, and social capital are often cited as the recipe for success for college access and success. In this study, social capital seemed particularly
important. Social capital was transformed into cultural capital, and a culture of college-going developed. The rural students talked little of the kinds of cultural capital often related to college-going. While some discussed reading, more students said they did not read very often nor did they go to libraries or museums much. In rural communities, such as the ones in this study, which are geographically isolated, access to the kinds of cultural capital typically associated with college-going is limited. However, rural schools certainly are one source of cultural capital. They may have more impact in reproducing the value of cultural capital given their central roles in rural communities. Unlike James Coleman’s (1988) transformation of cultural capital into social capital, in this study social capital was transformed into cultural capital and, in turn, college access and success. Social capital was the impetus.

Coleman:

Rural Communities:

Recall, Bourdieu’s explanation of cultural capital acknowledges that cultural capital is subjective and reinforced by power, therefore, perpetuating social inequalities. The “cultural training” that many of these rural students received at home may have differed from that privileged by higher education institutions and higher SES families or families where college-going is a tradition. Bourdieu recognized that context matters
when it comes to cultural capital. Researchers using the concepts of social and cultural capital need to recognize this as well. This recognition may help to eradicate the labeling of rural communities and students as being “deficient,” found throughout rural literature. Focusing only on the cultural and social deficiencies of rural students and communities not only weakens our understanding of rural students and culture, but also overlooks how the capital valued by rural communities and students can be transformed or used to strengthen the capital necessary for gaining access to higher education. Bourdieu correctly emphasized that groups could transform one kind of capital into another. Such was the case among the students and families in this study who transformed social capital into cultural capital.

Socio-cultural theory, which allows for an examination of culture and social structure, is an appropriate and flexible theory that fully explores context. Future studies that seek to understand the link between rural culture and rural student access and success would find it useful. John Dewey’s conception of the interrelatedness of the individual and society echoes some of the concepts behind socio-cultural theory. Dewey stressed that psychology could not focus only on the individual; instead, it had to recognize how the individual is culturally, historically, and institutionally situated (Wertsch, 1991).

Often, though, the emphasis remains narrow, stressing education’s impact only on the individual and ignoring the individual’s cultural, historical, and institutional context. In many rural, lower SES communities the belief that higher education is a private good is now preached from the pulpits of the local schools to students and parents alike. The following formula is recited daily in most rural
schools (and in many schools for that matter): College = a better, higher paying job and success. This was certainly found in the current research. This implies a rather individualistic view of what higher education can accomplish. What does this view of education mean for college access and success of these rural individuals and their communities? As discussed earlier, for many rural students, going to college likely means they will leave their communities and not return or as Joel Hektner (1995) aptly titled his article on rural students’ aspirations, “When moving up implies moving out…” (p. 3). Education is viewed as a way out of rural communities, many of which have declining job opportunities and economies. As Corbett (2007) suggested, rural youth and citizens view education primarily in this manner while ignoring its possibilities for resolving rural community problems. Thus, the private good view of education is reinforced over the public good view.

Because rural schools promote mobilization, modernization and individualism, there is conflict between schools and the communities. Students are often forced to “resist” the community values, which emphasize, for example, the importance of locale and the public good rather than the private good. Students are conflicted. This conflict might, in turn, lower the educational aspirations of rural youth.

Schools are central to the community. Vidich and Bensman’s (1968) description of the rural school in their influential work *Small Town in Mass Society* remains relevant today. “Most of the major social, cultural and athletic events of the community take place within its halls” (p. 171). What are the implications of individualism and its
reinforcement in rural schools? Paul Theobald warned, “When a society openly embraces political, economic, and education theory that hinges on an individualistic and anthropocentric conception of human nature, community disintegration is logical and predictable” (Theobald, 1997, p. 66 as cited in Corbett, 2007, p. 21). Are rural schools and policymakers unknowingly contributing to the decline of their own communities by perpetuating resolute individualism? Michael Corbett asked, “Could it be that rural resistance to formal education can be understood as recognition that one’s social capital is localized and of little value in the face of the placeless and individualistic mobility ideology of liberal schooling?” (p. 29).

Pittman, McGinty, and Gerstl-Pepin (1999) raised another valid concern: “Tying a student’s achievement (knowledge and skills) to an economic outcome (competing in the global economy) places economic considerations in a position to dominate educational decision-making” (p. 19). We must think of a way to reframe the “either/or” choice given to rural students (the individual student and higher education or their rural community). Otherwise, as discussed above, the implications could be detrimental to the college access and success of rural low SES youth and to their rural communities. In fact, in Maltzan’s dissertation she suggests that the rural students most likely to persist in college were those who were best able to integrate their rural culture with their college culture because “rural” is part of their identity or self (2006). In other words, these students successfully negotiated around this “either/or” decision.

By turning to John Dewey’s ideas of the individual and community (society) and their interconnectedness, we may begin to resolve the tension between the
private and public, the rural school and the rural community, the rural student and his/her rural community. In 1908, Lyberty Hyde Bailey, a Cornell professor who headed Theodore Roosevelt’s Commission on Country Life, suggested that rural schools adopt Dewey’s pragmatic pedagogy in order to counteract rural migration to urban areas (Theobald, 1992). By 1920 the Country Life movement had slowed as industrialization and capitalism strengthened. However, one hundred years after Bailey’s suggestion, once again rural educators and policymakers should look to Dewey’s educational philosophies. Higher education can no longer simply be viewed as either a private or a public good. Instead, we must acknowledge that the two are interdependent.

Dewey acknowledged “the pecuniary culture characteristic” that has come to dominate our society and the resulting “individualism to conform to the practices of a pecuniary culture” (1931, p. 21). It is important to emphasize that Dewey did not condemn capitalism. Instead, he recognized that it is inevitable and has its benefits. However, he did lament how individualism remains unchanged and becomes even more prevalent as capitalism grows. He would likely be disappointed but not be surprised at how higher education has become primarily a private good in the eyes of the general population. Nor would he be shocked by the close link that has developed between education and the economy. Even when higher education is deemed a public good, it is usually in terms of the economy rather than democracy.

Additionally, Dewey recognized that “associations…more and more define the opportunities, the choices and the actions of individuals” (1931, p. 37). Dewey,
no doubt, could have predicted that education and the school would have much impact on college access and success for students. Dewey even went so far as to say how the rise in corporateness and individualism has made rural areas “stagnant” (1931, p. 57). In fact, he lamented that “corporateness has gone so far as to detach individuals from their old local ties and allegiances but not far enough to give them a new centre and order of life” (1931, p. 59). The tensions and cognitive dissonance faced by many rural students as they navigate the secondary and postsecondary education systems seem to epitomize Dewey’s argument.

Dewey recognized that the individual and society are inextricably linked or interdependent. He wrote, “I believe that the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass” (1897, p. 104). Therefore, education’s goal is for individual self-realization that is tied to the good of society, i.e., tapping the potential of individuals for the service of society. In today’s schools, individualism seems more rampant than ever. This heightened individualism is particularly confusing for rural youth since their communities promote social values. Dewey clearly recognized the schools’ role in promoting individualism when he wrote, “The schools of America have furthered the present social drift and chaos by their emphasis upon an economic form of success which is intrinsically pecuniary and egoistic” (1934, p. 127). However, he was sympathetic to educators and parents and does not place the blame entirely on
their shoulders. “Each generation is inclined to educate its young so as to get along in the present world instead of with a view to the proper end of education: the promotion of the best possible realization of humanity as humanity. Parents educate their children so that they may get on…” (1916, p. 117). Thus, should we be surprised that the educational aspirations of rural low SES students center on work and career or that rural educators, parents, and students have come to value individualistic beliefs over community-oriented ones? Individualism ignores the social aspect of an individual. Thus, when education policies support the self-realization of some and not others, society as a whole loses. The link between individual self-realization and social good is an important one.

In Dewey’s essay, *My Pedagogic Creed*, he described what the values and roles of schools should be. He writes:

[T]he school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends. [E]ducation, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living. [T]he school must represent present life—life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground. [T]he school, as an institution, should simplify existing social
life…[T]he school life should grow gradually out of the home life (1897, p. 105).

Rural schools, paradoxically, are at one and the same time the unifying centers of rural communities and the vehicles that remove the individual from the community. By reinforcing individualistic goals that have very little to do with the community, rural schools lean more toward becoming the latter. They often fail in teaching the student to “use his own powers for social ends.” Instead, as described earlier, home and community values are skewed, made to seem backwards and unprogressive. Success is often defined as moving up and out. Dewey would agree that the goals are entirely too focused on “future living.” Dewey argued, “[M]uch of present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life” (1897, p. 105). Community values must be brought into rural schools.

Additionally, in many rural schools rarely does “school life grow out of home life.” Dewey emphasized the importance of bringing experience into the educative process, but in rural schools this has become more difficult to achieve because of the tensions between school values that center on the individual and community values that focus on the society. Many rural researchers agree that rural schools often model themselves after suburban and urban schools, failing to consider the context of rural communities. Dewey contended, “only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself” (1897, p. 103). Damico (1978) cautioned how
it is easy to oversimplify Dewey’s educational pragmatism. Many wrongly assume this pragmatism disregards the theoretical and is purely focused on the individual. However, Damico asserted that it involves both theory and practice and the adjustment of the individual to the environment and vice versa (1978). Dewey even admonished those who rely entirely on student experience and interest to guide classroom activity. If a student’s education is not situated into the social context with which he or she is familiar, then the student fails to understand his or her true potential within society. By bringing experience into schools, students can begin to see how the individual is placed in society. They can learn how to make sense of their experiences, which facilitates continual growth for both the individual and society.

Growth is the ideal of education. “[E]ducation must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing” (Dewey, 1897, p. 107). The idea of growth provides hope for a better democracy and encourages students to participate in the change. Dewey contended that education is the “fundamental method of social progress and reform [and] the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction” (Dewey, 1897, p. 109). In this statement, Dewey again recognized the interdependency of the individual and society and the crucial function of education. Education provides individuals with the tools and know-how to continually improve themselves (self-realization) and, in turn, society. Cornell West echoed Dewey’s thought about the
importance of society and individuals always evolving when he wrote that prophetic
thinkers must always be mindful of “the notion that history is incomplete, that the
world is unfinished, that the future is open-ended and that what we think and what
we do can make a difference” (West, 1993, p. 193).

As mentioned earlier, West Virginia’s higher education goals are closely
linked to economic ones in hopes of improving the state’s economy through
education. West Virginia’s higher education master plan boldly states, “The state’s
higher education system must be actively involved in creating high skill/wage jobs
and a positive economic climate” (p. 7). Although it certainly makes sense to tie
education to the economy, policymakers should not entirely ignore non-economic,
educational public policy goals. In fact, Pittman, Mcginty, and Gerstl-Pepi (1999)
found, especially in rural and low-income states, policy assumptions that
educational attainment will lead to economic improvement were not necessarily
valid suppositions. They convincingly argued that when policymakers assert that
education will lead to economic improvement, two inappropriate, yet considerable,
burdens are placed upon education: “(a) that the purpose of education is to serve
economic ends, and (b) that formal education drives the economy rather than the
reverse” (p.20). Dewey in 1931 warned of how individualism tied to the “pecuniary
culture” would lead to “the conflicts in which aims and standards are confused
beyond recognition” (p. 21). This seems to be the case, as education is repeatedly
held responsible for the state of the economy in rural areas. Another study
concluded that as high school expenditures increased so did the out-migration of rural youth.

Clearly, these results should not support efforts to decrease or stall spending on rural schools, many of which are already under funded, lack advanced curriculum and other educational programs, and have lower teacher salaries than urban and suburban schools. Instead, the results support the idea that community development should become a priority in educational policy, especially in rural and low-income areas. In fact, Pittman et al. (1999) mentioned, although very briefly, Dewey and his educational goal of creating self-realized citizens. While it is sensible for wanting to improve education to, in turn, improve rural economies, the primary aims of education should not be overlooked or become secondary.

We also need to reframe the purpose of rural schools. They are not just providing a “way out” for rural youth but providing community development for the rural surrounding area. Currently, according to much of the rural research, the social value has largely been ignored. And in its stead, as Dewey rightly predicted, exists “an exacerbated acceleration of the activities that increase private advantage and power” (1931, p. 53). Perhaps by introducing more of the social into rural schools, the conflict, the choice between the private and the public, faced by many rural students will diminish. Wendell Berry, famed conservationist and author who the New York Times called the “prophet of rural America,” also called for incorporating rural knowledge and concerns into rural schools in order to preserve rural society (Theobald, 1992).
Paul Theobald and Jim Curtiss called for putting “community ahead of profit” in education by “us[ing] schools as a source of community renewal rather than a cause of community disintegration” (2000, page numbers not provided). They called for a community-based curriculum and looked to Dewey’s pedagogical beliefs to build such a curriculum:

Constructivist educators contend that the background knowledge, previous experiences, and fundamental world view of students profoundly affect their interpretation of subject matter in the school curriculum. It is logical to conclude then that a rich foundation of experiences and knowledge within a cohesive community is crucial to an adequate education. In addition, children learn and construct meaning about the important social values and mores of the community. [7] From a constructivist point of view, early experience in a community is important to the developing child in two ways: it helps the child acquire concepts for future academic learning, and it provides the actual content of social and character education. Community is thus potentially the teacher and the topic (Theobald & Curtiss, 2000, page numbers not provided).

Like Dewey, Theobald and Curtiss believed that only by bringing the community into schools will children learn to make sense of their experiences. A community-based curriculum does not rely on non-relevant, future goals; instead, it privileges experiences and interactions between individuals and their local communities (echoes the idea that valued cultural and social capital is subjective and contextual). They argued that today’s moves toward national standards, assessments, and centralization counter community-
based learning. Although they argued against national standards, Theobald and Curtiss believed that students educated within a community-based curriculum can meet such standards.

Theobald and Curtis provided successful examples of rural schools inserting community into their curriculum. Some of these illustrations centered on improving rural, local economies. For example, a high school business class in rural Howard, South Dakota (population 900), after much study in close connection with the community, found that many of the citizens in their town spent much of their income in more distant cities. After the studies were published in the local papers, many local residents began to change their spending habits, and by the end of the summer the county auditor concluded that the students had “engineered a $6 to $7 million infusion into Howard's economy” (p. not given). Another example provided revealed how discussion about community and individual values can be introduced into the curriculum. In the small town of Elkhorn, Nebraska second graders created a “model community” using the traditions, customs, and “democratic decision-making processes” they saw in their own small-town community. When at one point a toy car went missing, the class had a discussion about individual rights and obligations to others (Theobald & Curtiss, 2000). No longer should individualistic values be privileged over community ones. Instead, the inextricable link between the two is emphasized in community-based curriculum.

By reintroducing a local context into rural education, learning becomes more relevant for rural students and “more powerful in providing youth with an
understanding of who they are and what their place is in the world” (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995, abstract). No longer would rural students be faced with existing tensions between private and public. Nor, would educators and policymakers emphasize one over the other. If we adhere to Dewey’s vision of a pragmatic education, the tension between rural schools and communities would be resolved. No longer would collectivistic and individualistic battles play out in the rural communities of the United States. Instead, rural youth would be free from the confusion created by such a false dichotomy. Lastly, as we move away from the view of higher education as merely a private good, we move towards greater access and success for rural low SES students.

These tensions are not easily resolved. Their pervasiveness in rural culture is immense. The rural culture, through the institutions of family and community, creates paradoxes and ambiguities as those described throughout this manuscript. How culture affects students’ behavior is, indeed, riddled with complexity. Incorporating Dewey’s ideas is one attempt to begin to resolve these paradoxes. Reforming rural education is certainly challenging, but such measures are necessary if we hope to revitalize rural areas, particularly high poverty regions, and increase college access and success of these region’s students.
APPENDICES

Appendix A: U.S. Maps of Rural and Non-Rural Poverty and Low-Education Areas

Persistent Poverty Counties, 1970-2000

Persistently poor counties—20 percent or more residents were poor as measured by each of the last four censuses, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Source: Economic Research Service, USDA.
Low-education Counties, 2000

Low-education counties—25 percent or more of residents 25-64 years old had neither a high school diploma nor GED in 2000.

Source: Economic Research Service, USDA.
Appendix B: USDA Website Nine Definitions of Rural

1. Three rural definitions based on Census Places (rural areas are those outside Places with a population 1) greater than or equal to 2,500; 2) greater than or equal to 10,000; or 3) greater than or equal to 50,000)

2. Three rural definitions based on Census Urban Areas (rural areas are those outside Census Urban Areas with a population 1) greater than or equal to 2,5000; 2) greater than or equal to 10,000; or 3) greater than or equal to 50,000)

3. Rural definitions based on Office of Management and Budget (OMB) metro counties (rural: Nonmetro county; urban: OMB metro county)

4. Rural definition based on Economic Research Service Rural-Urban Commuting Areas (RUCA) (Rural: RUCA tracts with codes 4-10; Urban: RUCA tracts with codes 1-3)

5. The USDA Business and Industry ineligible locations are Census Places greater than 50,000 people and their adjacent and contiguous Urbanized Areas
Appendix C: Percent of College-Going Population by Type of Institution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2006-07 Grads</th>
<th>WV 4-yr. public</th>
<th>WV 2-yr. public</th>
<th>WV independent coll./univ.</th>
<th>WV proprietary institutions</th>
<th>TOTAL in WV institutions</th>
<th>Out-of-state coll./univ.</th>
<th>TOTAL enrolled in higher ed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mingo</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of County college-going population by type of institution</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>94.3%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendix D: College Enrollment by High School and Type of Institution

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<th>2006-07 Grads</th>
<th>WV 4-yr. public</th>
<th>WV 2-yr. public</th>
<th>WV independent coll./univ.</th>
<th>WV proprietary institutions</th>
<th>TOTAL in WV institutions</th>
<th>Out-of-state coll./univ.</th>
<th>TOTAL enrolled in higher ed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MINGO</strong></td>
<td>265</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burch</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gilbert</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.4</td>
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<td>2.6</td>
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<td>82</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Williamson</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Omega Bible Academy</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Christian School</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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Appendix E: Student Interview Protocol (Freshmen):
College Access

Where did you grow up in Mingo County? How long have you lived there? Which high school did you attend?
Where do you currently live? (with your parents?)
What was it like growing up in a small town? Advantages (what do you like about it)?
Disadvantages (what don’t you like about it)?
What do you think about the job opportunities in Mingo County?
Do you think you need a college degree to get a good job? Do you need one to be considered “successful?” How would you define “being successful?” For whom is your being successful important?
In Mingo County and southern West Virginia, do you think residents have different expectations of what women and men should do? Education? Work? Marriage? Do you yourself have different expectations?
Why did you decide to go to college? Why did you choose XXXX institution? (admissions and advertising? Friends?)
Did you apply for financial aid? What kind of aid do you have?
Did you consider doing other things besides college? If so, what?
If you had not gone to college, what would you be doing now?
What are your friends doing?
Do you still spend time with your high school friends? How often?
Why do you think some of your high school classmates did not go to college? What do they think about college?
Do you think all of your high school classmates had the opportunity to go to college? Why or why not?
Who encouraged you to go to college? Why did they think you should go to college?

“Are there any adults who are not your relatives who you can talk to about your problems or worries? Who are they?” (Elder & Conger, 2000, p. 264).
Did your parents encourage you to go to college? Why did they want you to attend or not?
Were you discouraged by anyone or encouraged to do something else? If so, why do you think the person discouraged you or urged you to do something else?
Who helped you apply for college and financial aid?
In general, was going to college encouraged in your high school? By whom? If not, what were students encouraged to do after high school?
What kinds of activities were you involved in during high school? Did you work?
How well did you do in high school? Academically? Other ways such as involvement in activities, sports, etc.?
How do you think you’ll do in college? Why?
Growing up did you know many people with college degrees? Who were they? How did you know they had a college degree?
What are your parents’ educational backgrounds? Mother? Father?
    Did they grow up here?
What are their occupations?
What about your siblings? How many? What are they doing?
Are (or were) your parent(s) involved in community and/or school organizations? Did you participate in activities with your parent(s)?
    Church? Volunteering?
Did you go to church growing up? Is religion important to you and your family? Why or why not?
Do you plan to live in Mingo County when you finish college? Why or why not?
What do you plan to do after college? Career? Family?
What, if anything, might prevent you from finishing college?
There are a lot of stereotypes about southern West Virginia and its people. What are some that come to mind? What do you think about these stereotypes?
Appendix F: Student Interview Protocol (Final Year in College)

Are you planning to graduate in the spring? (Congratulations.)

Where did you grow up in Mingo County? How long did you live there? Which high school did you attend?

What was it like growing up in a small town? Advantages (What did you like about it?)? Disadvantages (What did you not like about it?)?

What do you think about the job opportunities in Mingo County?

Where do you currently live? (With your parents?)

How often do you see your family? Your high school friends?

What are most of your good friends from high school doing? What do they think of college?

Do you think you need a college degree to get a good job? Do you need one to be considered “successful?”

In Mingo County and southern West Virginia, do you think residents have different expectations of what women and men should do? Education? Work? Marriage? Do you yourself have different expectations?

Why and when did you decide to go to college? Why did you choose XXXX institution? Have you attended another college?

Did you consider doing other things besides college? If so, what?

If you had not gone to college, what would you be doing now?

What has been your favorite aspect of college? Least favorite?

What have been some of your struggles in college? (specific examples? A class? Working and school?)

Who has been most supportive during your college career? How have they supported you?

“Are there any adults who are not your relatives whom you can talk to about your problems or worries? Who are they?” (Elder & Conger, 2000, p. 264).

Did your parents encourage you to attend college? Why did they want you to attend or not?

What kinds of activities have you been involved in during college?

Have you worked? If so, where and how many hours per week?

Please describe for me your typical weekend activities.

What kind of financial aid do you have? If you have loans, how do you plan to repay them? Has your family helped you pay for college?
Growing up did you know many people with college degrees? Who were they?
What are your parents’ educational backgrounds? Mother? Father?

   Did they grow up here?
What are their occupations?
Are (or were) they involved in community organizations?
Did you go to church growing up? Is religion important to you and your family? Why or why not?
Have you had friends drop out of college? Why do you think they dropped out?
What has enabled you to succeed in college?
What are your plans after college? Career? Family?

   Would you like to move back to (or stay in) Mingo County? Why or why not?
Are there values and beliefs you learned growing up that have been challenged in college? What are they and why? Have you changed any of your values/beliefs?
There are a lot of stereotypes about southern West Virginia and its people. What are some that come to mind? What do you think about these stereotypes?
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