Views from the Summit: White Working Class Appalachian Males and Their Perceptions of Academic Success

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This dissertation proposal titled
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Abstract

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Views from the Summit: White Working Class Appalachian Males and Their Perceptions of Academic Success

This research study explored how White working class Appalachian males who have completed, or who were within one term of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia perceived academic success. It examined their definitions of academic success, the perceptions they held regarding their own past and present academic successes, as well as their views regarding factors from their lived experience that they felt contributed to their program of study completion. Using qualitative methodology, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight participants. It was designed to reflect the tenets of Appreciative Inquiry.

While reflecting the changes within White working class identity formation in response to the deindustrialization of the economy, the findings of this study present two contradictions with the research literature. The first is that these men were found to define academic success from a working class perspective. This demonstrated their adherence to working class cultural capital while successfully completing a postsecondary program of study. This implies they did not need to abandon their working class cultural capital in lieu of new cultural capital in order to be successful at the college level. Furthermore, the factors from their lived experience that participants named as contributing to their program of study completion were factors that have previously been identified in research literature as factors that commonly present as barriers to
postsecondary success for working class students. However, the participants in this study indicated these factors presented as positive influences that assisted in facilitating their academic success. Additionally, the perceptions of past and present academic success held by participants were noted as those that 1) reflect the development of/presence of positive psychological capital within these individuals and 2) demonstrate the educational experiences of these men represent the working class identity in transition.
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“Gratitude is when memory is stored in the heart and not in the mind.” (Lionel Hampton)

Completing this work of study has been a seven year journey and in that time many people have assisted me along the way.

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times. All my cousins: as one of the “babies,” the expectation to go to college had already been set by those who were older by the time I graduated high school (thanks for blazing the trail). And, my grandparents, who taught me the love of learning before I ever knew what formal education was ~ from them I learned how to harness the power of knowledge from reading and to pursue questions by learning more in order to formulate informed answers (how I wish they could have lived to see and use the internet of today!) As a native Appalachian, my family is very important to me, and I know that my success represents and reflects upon us all.

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You all will always have a special place in my heart. Thank you.
Dedication

“Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.” (Emily Brontë)

This work is lovingly dedicated to husband,

Bradley W. Alexander,

my soul mate, best friend and life partner ~

“always there, in all ways”
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Chapter 1-Introduction

There are many low-SES, low-income, first generation, and working class students who do manage to surmount the barriers and make decisions that result in persistence and attainment. As educators, we must learn from the successful students in order to minimize the obstacles and advocate for and assist students with their decisions all along the educational pipeline. (Walpole, 2007, p. 88)

Introduction

In response to the “changing national dialogue surrounding community and technical college education” (Community and Technical College System of West Virginia [CTCSWV], 2010, p. 2), the West Virginia Community and Technical College System’s 2010-2015 master plan Meeting the Challenge identifies student success as the first goal and producing more graduates as the top strategic priority.” Although access has been an issue in the past, this new master plan for the state of West Virginia’s community and technical college system features an emphasis on program of study completion, especially for those groups who tend to not finish postsecondary education. In order to reach a better understanding of what factors contribute to program of study completion, this research study examined how White working class Appalachian males who have completed, or who were within one term of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia perceived academic success. It also explored their definitions of academic success, the perceptions they held regarding their own past and present academic successes, as well as their views as to the aspects of their lives that they felt contributed to their academic achievements.
Just like West Virginia, the “Mountain State,” is home to the summit, or highest point, of the rugged Allegheny Mountains, it is also home to a high number of White working class men (Census 2010). However, statistics indicate that although many of these men attempt, only a few of these men actually do reach a postsecondary educational “summit”: that of program of study completion (CTCSW, 2010). Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding as to what these men perceived as aiding them in their program of study completion, and understand what they regarded as academic success, this study focused on White working class Appalachian men who have reached, or who were within one term of reaching, this postsecondary educational height.

Background

White working class Appalachian males and their perceptions of their academic experiences have not been well studied. Most research exploring academic success in the Appalachian area has focused on other groups, such as females or the working poor with generalities that did not include distinctions of gender or White race. However, academic success, especially related to postsecondary community college completion, for White working class Appalachian males, is in need of study. Despite being the predominant male social class group in the Appalachian area, this group is not well represented in postsecondary academic degree completion at the community college level. Therefore, this work sought to better understand the ways in which White working class Appalachian male community college students perceived academic success.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) contend that organizational structures found within schools function to replicate hierarchies found in society, “the organization and
functioning of the school system continuously and through multiple codes retranslate inequalities in social level into inequalities in academic level” (p. 158). Other scholars (Anyon, 1981; Bernstein, 1975; Finn, 1999; Willis, 1977) have illustrated through their work how educational structures, particularly with regard to postsecondary education, tend to favor dominant middle class cultural values and behaviors, thus creating a cultural challenge for working class students. Therefore, for the working class, the transition into the realm of higher education entails crossing a social class barrier for which they may not be culturally prepared to survive, as “certain cultures are privileged and others devalued by formal institutions like schools, and students’ cultural background operates as a form of currency that is exchanged for differential treatment within the context of the school” (Johnson, Hess, Larson & Wise, 2010, p. 7).

Additionally, to complicate the matter of inequality further, MacLeod (2009) points out that a process of naturalization is involved in educational settings that results in the blind acceptance of dominant class ideology without question by the more subordinate ones (p. 16). Because the working class did not historically attempt postsecondary education, the dominant ideological expectation for this group’s postsecondary academic success is therefore low.

Thus, for the working class, pursuit of postsecondary education poses several challenges. One challenge is the misalignment of cultural capital possessed by the working class student in relation to the middle class cultural capital expected and favored by postsecondary educational institutions. Cultural capital refers to the “broad array of linguistic competencies, manners, preferences, and orientations” (p.20) that an individual
possesses (Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Another is the acceptance of society in the lack of postsecondary academic pursuit and success for most members of this group; and thus, the subsequent unquestioning acceptance of failure and non-persistence by this group when postsecondary education is attempted. Therefore, understanding how successful White working class Appalachian male students define academic success, perceive their past and present academic successes, and what cultural aspects of their lived experiences they view as contributing to their academic achievement may contribute to the body of knowledge being utilized to aid the postsecondary pursuits of these individuals.

**Research Questions**

The aim of this research study was to explore the educational experiences of White working class Appalachian males who had completed, or who were within one term of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia. Since this study focused on the perceptions through which these men viewed their academic accomplishments and successes, the following research questions were used:

- What do White working class Appalachian males define as “academic success”?
- How do these men perceive their own past and present academic successes? And,
- What do these men view as factors from their lived experiences that positively contributed to their academic successes?

**Framing the Study**

Historically, working class males entered the workforce directly upon completion of secondary school, and did not engage in postsecondary educational pursuits (MacLeod,
However, many members of this demographic group are now engaging in community college education in an attempt to earn certificates or degrees in order to become more employable. As a result, the United States has experienced a 24.1 percent growth in full time enrollments at community colleges between fall 2007 and fall 2009, with workforce education being identified as a motivating factor in school attendance (American Association of Community Colleges, 2009).

Additionally, research by Watkins (2008) points out that advances in technology over the past thirty years have necessitated additional postsecondary training in many areas that were once considered trade fields and which previously only required the completion of high school or its equivalent. Watkins (2008) contends that because of this, educational programs such as vocational education, which provided a separate educational track for many working class high school students, and functioned as the ending of the formal academic process, are now becoming more academically focused, encouraging further postsecondary pursuits. This is because the future economy will need “smart workers habituated to the accelerating flood of technological development and, even more importantly, empowered by their educations to welcome innovation and change” (p. 7).

Yet, Watkins (2008) points out, for the working class, participation in postsecondary education means crossing a social class border. Finn (1999) argues that school success is often dependent on particular cultural and language characteristics that are those of the dominant group. Reay et al. (2005) also support this idea and further contend that this can
be especially problematic for working class individuals entering higher education as they possess what Bourdieu refers to as a different “cultural capital” (p. 21) that conflicts with the dominant, middle class cultural capital favored by institutions of higher education. Thus, Reay et al (2005) argues that the transition into higher education by the working class entails a transition into a different culture, one in which “working class students lack the necessary capitals to cope and respond successfully to the demands inherent in the transition to higher education” (p. 106). Walpole (2007) agrees, as she notes in her research, “these students must cope with a structure and a system that defines merit in ways that do not privilege them” (p. 15). Additionally, Finn (1999) contends that “border crossers are likely to be censured by their own as traitors and they are not likely to be fully accepted by the dominant group” (p.47).

Multiple scholars have focused their work on how aspects of class stratification present in educational systems play a role in the continued reproduction of the working class and how this stratification impacts student academic achievement (Anyon, 1980; Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005; Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Passerson, 1990; Da Silva, Huguley, Kaki, & Rao, 2007; Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Finn, 1999; Gorski, 2008; Howley, 2006; Lareau, 2003; MacLeod 2009; Powell, 2008; Walpole, 2007; Weis, 2004; Willis, 1977; Woodrum, 2004). Other scholars add to this body of work by illustrating how additional sociological and psychological aspects of working class culture also impact student academic achievement (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Bandura, 1994; Bradbury, 2008; Dolby & Dimitriadis, 2004; Fine, Weis, Addleston & Marusza, 1997; Gilbert & Kahl, 1993; hooks, 2000; Howley 2006; Kenway & Kraack,
The Deficit Perspective

As scholars have attempted to understand the working class and academic persistence, with academic persistence being the ability to complete a program of study, a deficit perspective has often been employed when evaluating educational settings and working class student success (Gorski, 2008). According to Gorski (2008), the deficit perspective defines students by their weaknesses rather than strengths and blames individual shortcomings rather than systemic conditions for educational failings. This is because a deficit perspective involves the valuation of one set of cultural behaviors and beliefs over another, therefore creating a culturally-based preference which results in placing the failure to achieve on the individual.

Payne (1995, 1996) argues that those in poverty need only to learn the particular “hidden rules” (1996, p. 18) of class to successfully overcome and transition from one class to another. Although her work acknowledges the middle class status quo present in educational settings, and is based upon acknowledged cultural differences between the middle and poor classes, it accentuates the values of the middle class, deeming them as more valuable and conducive to educational success. Thus, her work represents not only the idea that the individual’s culture is lacking when compared with that of the status quo, but that in order to be educationally successful, with success being defined from a middle class perspective, the individual must learn and choose to exhibit a new set of thoughts and behaviors. With such a model, the failure to academically achieve can then be placed
on the individual, as it is the individual who resists the new choices and rejects the adoption of the new thoughts and behaviors.

Interestingly, in Payne’s (1995, 1996) work, the working class appears to be either merged with the poor, or the middle class, depending on which group of behaviors an individual displays. Payne’s (1996) categories of class only include poverty, middle class, and wealth (p. 59). However, scholars such as Shipler (2005) are not surprised by this exclusion of those who work, yet live at times on the edge of poverty. Shipler (2005) states these working class individuals “blend into familiar landscapes and are therefore overlooked. They make up the invisible, silent America” (p. 11).

However, understanding what cultural aspects among the working class facilitate, drive and sustain academic success at the collegiate level is just as critical as knowing what hampers and prevents it. Therefore, this study used an appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperider, Whitney & Stravros, 2008; Reed, 2007) as it focused on the perceptions of academic success held by White working class Appalachian male students who had completed, or who were within one term of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia. Knowing how these students defined academic success, perceived their academic accomplishments, and the aspects of their lives they considered to be conducive to the facilitation and sustainment of that academic success may add a better understanding as to how these individuals successfully navigated the path to academic achievement.

**Statement of the Problem**

Ten years ago, Horn, Peter and Rooney (2002) concluded:
Despite . . . enrollment opportunities . . . gaining access to postsecondary education does not necessarily lead to obtaining a degree or certificate. In fact, as the diversity of the undergraduate population broadens, it is possible that the rate of leaving postsecondary education without a degree will increase. Accommodating an undergraduate population that carries a substantial risk of attrition will be a continuing challenge to postsecondary institutions. (p. xi)

As these authors predicted almost a decade ago, increased enrollment has been coupled with increased concerns of attrition. Today, with the national enrollment surge experienced by community colleges across the United States, at the forefront of concern is attrition. According the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2009) particular factors such as workforce training, cost savings, increased public awareness and partnerships, and increased structural capacity have all been identified as contributing to the increase in enrollment figures. Increased open enrollment practices of community colleges also provide a means of college access to many students who traditionally would not have pursued higher levels of academic education due to issues related to academic readiness and costs (Johnson McPhail, 2009). Additionally, community colleges have been identified as one of the first choices of military veterans who desire to use their military educational benefits (Sewall, 2010). Nationally, fall enrollment figures for 2009 at community colleges indicate that enrollments for credit bearing courses increased 11.4% in just one year alone, with an increase in full-time enrollment of 24% seen within the last two years (AACC, 2009).
Nunez and Curraco-Alamin (1998) found that among those gravitating towards community colleges in order to pursue postsecondary education are many first generation college students. According to Walpole (2007), first generation college status is often used synonymously with working class status. This is because education for the working class historically concluded at the high school level, although some members may possess a trade or specialized vocational skill (Kendell, 2005; Willis, 1977). However, data shows that nationally, only 15.9% of community college students who began a program of study at a two year postsecondary public institution in 2003-04 attained a certificate or associate degree by 2006 (US Department of Education, 2006a).

Studies examining barriers to access, retention of students and persistence of students defined as those most at risk for attrition have reached a similar conclusion: the higher the risk status, the less likely the student is to persist to program completion (Bradbury, 2008; Longwell-Grice, 2002; Powell, 2008; Terenzini, 2001; Tinto, 2006). Horn et al. (2002) identified various types and levels of risk associated with postsecondary attrition. Risk factors included: delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, financial independence, having dependents, single parenthood, lacking a high school diploma, and working full-time while attending school. Their analysis of student persistence shows that nearly half of all students who are considered to be at risk due to at least three of these identifiable socioeconomic conditions leave school before program completion. Like Horn et al., Longwell-Grice (2002) also addresses the academic, social and cultural adjustments necessary for college persistence and contends that working class status negatively affects the ability of these students to succeed.
Among working class students, academic under preparedness and the lack of knowledge of how to transition from high school to college create a situation of extreme high risk to academic success and persistence, especially for those who have been vocationally tracked during high school (Venezia & Kirst, 2005). For those from less affluent public school districts, inadequate academic college readiness results in an insurmountable achievement gap (Unnever, Kerckhoff & Robinson, 2000). Current educational data (US Department of Education, 2000) indicates that over half of first generation students require developmental coursework in English, reading and/or mathematics, and these students are also one and a half times more likely to repeat a required course due to failure when compared to their academically prepared/college prep tracked peers. These conditions extend the time and increase the financial commitments required to complete postsecondary education.

In addition to academic preparedness issues, the working class also faces sociological barriers. For whom college attendance may mean relocation from home, aspirations for college is sometimes nonexistent or nonrealistic due to attachment to place (Howley, 2006). Like attachment to place, the value system present in the postsecondary educational atmosphere often conflicts with those beliefs of the working class culture, thus creating a conflict of home, family and belongingness (Powell, 2008; Tinto, 1975; Toomey, ND; Woodrum, 2004, 2009). For those who do attempt to integrate into higher education, the lack of networking and support systems among working class students have also been noted as posing sociological barriers as these individuals attempt the pursuit of higher education (Longwell-Grice, 2002). This sociological barrier has been
noted at all levels of higher education. Many academics from working class backgrounds have also noted sociological barriers to successful integration into higher levels of education as well (Dews & Laws, 1995; Finn, 1999; hooks, 2000).

Additionally, working class students also tend to be much more focused on the economic advantage that postsecondary education can provide (Reay et al., 2005). However, such a strong focus can lead to making degree choices solely based on economic advantage, or economic situations. This behavior can result in degree choice constriction, and thus, in turn, lead to a lack of motivation or desire to persist to program completion (Reay et al., 2005).

**Significance**

Although postsecondary participation by working class individuals is a national issue, I chose to focus my study on White working class Appalachian males who had completed or who were within one term of completing a program of study at a community and technical college in the state of West Virginia. West Virginia, the only state wholly enclosed within the Appalachian region (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2010) and containing one of the highest concentrations of Whiteness and poverty in the United States, is primarily rural and exhibits many of the social situations that contribute to lower levels of educational attainment (Baumann, 2006; Rank, 2005; US Census, 2010). However, although postsecondary access has been an issue in the past, recent research on West Virginia (ARC, 2010) and the similar demographic area of neighboring southeastern Appalachian Ohio (Bradbury, 2008; Powell, 2008) indicate that even with access barriers removed, many students from these areas still fail to persist in
postsecondary academic program completion. As can be seen in Figure 1, college completion rates for this area fall below that of the national average.

Figure 1. College completion rates of the Appalachian Region.
However, West Virginia is attempting to meet the postsecondary needs of its working class population more fully through the use of its community and technical college system. As a state, West Virginia recognizes “the mission of the community and technical colleges is different from that of the traditional four year colleges” (West Virginia Code §18B-3C-8 (3), 2004). In order to more fully support the mission of its community colleges and to clearly define and enhance the identity of these schools, the state extracted the community colleges from their existing four year sponsoring institutions, thus making its community and technical colleges completely separate entities. The intent of this action was “to create a statewide network of independently accredited community and technical colleges that focuses on technical education, workforce training, and lifelong learning for the Twenty-first century” (West Virginia Code §18B-3C-8 (2), 2004).

According to the US Census (2010) and data from the National Center for Educational Statistics’ Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (NCES-IPEDS, 2008) all ten of West Virginia’s public community colleges are predominately White. Eight of the ten public community colleges that comprise the West Virginia Community and Technical College system have over one half of their students receiving Title IV financial aid, indicating that most students who attend West Virginia’s community colleges are financially disadvantaged enough to receive a need based federal Pell Grant. Another characteristic to note, as indicated by the NCES-IPEDS (2008), is that graduation rates for women are higher than for men at all but two of the public community and technical colleges located in West Virginia.
Women outpacing men in certificate and associate degree completion in the state of West Virginia is also similar to a trend found nationally. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics’ *Projection of Education Statistics to 2018* report (US Department of Education, 2009), this is a trend that is expected to continue:

Between 1993-94 and 2006-07, the number and proportion of degrees awarded to women rose at all levels. In 2006-2007, women earned the majority of associate’s, bachelor’s and master’s degrees, and 50 percent of doctor’s and first professional degrees. Between 2006-07 and 2018-19, continued increases are expected in the number of degrees awarded to women at all levels. (para.1)

Although predominately present in West Virginia, and the second largest group enrolled in West Virginia’s community and technical college system, the community college experience of White working class males is conspicuously absent in the literature. According to data from the National Center for Educational Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (NCES-IPEDS, 2007), retention, graduation, and program of study completion rates for this group at community and technical colleges in West Virginia continues to remain low. This is despite high school/college dual credit programs, such as the EDGE program, and high-school-to-college transition programs that are designed to transition students seamlessly into college level programs.

Therefore, the significance of this study is that it presents the perspectives of a group of White working class Appalachian males who have completed, or who were within one term of completion of a program of study at a community and technical college in West Virginia by giving voice to how they defined academic success, how they perceived their
past and present academic successes and the aspects of their lived experiences they perceived as contributing to that success. Its findings can be added to an area of research that has yet to be fully explored, and be added to the body of literature that currently exists. Furthermore, this study examined a group of men who are well represented demographically in this area, yet are not well represented in postsecondary program of study completion. Therefore, the perceptions of these men may also be of interest to other scholars who study such paradox.

**Methodology**

Participants selected for this study were males who had completed a community college program of study or who were within one term of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia. They were those who had been educated and raised in the Appalachian region, who were first generation college students, and who self-identified racially as White.

A case study approach, informed by Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperider, Whitney & Stravos, 2008; Reed, 2007) was employed in this research. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interview questions designed to obtain short narratives from the participants regarding their lived experiences and perceptions of academic success. Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out that “people construct their realities through narrating their stories” (p. 117). Thus, this approach is useful when “exploring issues of social change, causality, and social identity” (p. 118). Furthermore, participant narration “has a long tradition . . . of its power to elicit voice” (p. 118). Because this study sought to explore the perspective of the participant, collecting individual short narratives to use
for each case study ensured the voice of the participant was heard. Moreover, not only
was the voice of the participant heard, but that voice was articulated in a manner more
natural to the participant as “Appalachian story forms include personal narratives . . .”
(Edwards, Asbury & Cox, 2006, p. 154). Storytelling is also considered an “oral narrative
tradition commonly associated with Appalachia and its people” (Abramson & Haskell,
2006, p. 1225). Therefore, by allowing participants to provide short narratives of their
educational experiences, I strived to fully engage the cultural importance and honor the
cultural tradition of storytelling, as storytelling is a traditional component of Appalachian
culture (Abramson & Haskell, 2006; Edwards, Asbury & Cox, 2006; Jones, 1994).

Also used in this study was an appreciative perspective informed by Appreciative
Inquiry. I chose to use Appreciative Inquiry as a methodological guide because the
factors that helped, rather than those that did not, was the key focus of this research.
Avoiding the use of failure focused deficit models of study was especially important for
this particular demographic population. The Appalachian area has historically been the
target of many educational “reform” movements, many which utilized deficit models
(Williams, 2002). As Appalachian scholar Teets (2006) concludes in her analysis of the
history of education in Appalachia:

From the earliest settlement of the region, ideas about education and what was
appropriate for the people of the region came from experts outside the region rather
than from those within the region . . . educational institutions have focused on
curriculum and instructional strategies that have been insensitive to the cultural
context of the region (p. 132).
Even today, various educational practices within Appalachian school systems still tend to adopt deficit model platforms (Howley, Howley, Howley & Howley, 2006). However, use of an appreciative perspective revealed emergent themes from a positive perspective. In addition to examining student perspectives on an individual case basis, this study also identified common themes found across the individual cases studied.

**Delimitations**

1) The selected individuals for this study were White, working class, Appalachian males who had completed, or who were within one term of completion of a program of study at a community and technical college in West Virginia. Although the working class strata present in the area selected for study also included men of color, women, and non-native Appalachian individuals, they were not included in this study. This study chose to focus on those who identified as a White, working class Appalachian male, and who had completed, or who were within one term of completion, of a program of study at a community and technical college in West Virginia, as little research exists in the literature regarding these specific individuals.

2) This study focused on community and technical colleges located in the state of West Virginia, which is located in an area of the United States known as the Appalachian region. The Appalachian area is a vast area of over 205,000 geographic square miles and includes portions of twelve states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and fully includes one state: West Virginia (ARC, 2010). It contains both urban and rural areas, as well as multiple ethnicities and cultural perspectives, which have influenced the
culture of the area. This study represents only a small slice of this massive area, and just a portion of the overall culture that exists. It is therefore not intended to be generalizable to the whole Appalachian region, nor to the entire state of West Virginia.

**Limitations**

1) Participation required the willingness to participate as well as a commitment to participate, and behaviors that may or may not be associated with the academic success of those individuals who agreed to participate.

2) The use of narration in this study utilized a memory or recollection that was drawn from the lived experience of the participant. Meanings and significance assigned to memories and recollections were subject to the interpretation and presentation of the individual teller and may have evolved or changed over time.

3) My current position at a community and technical college located in West Virginia also posed a limitation. While conducting my research, I also functioned as a member of the faculty at an institution where some of these men had completed or were completing their programs of study. However, I interviewed only those with whom I have had no prior direct classroom contact, and with those whom I am not likely to encounter in the campus location where I work.

**Definitions**

1) *Appalachia* - The term “Appalachian America” was first used by Frost (1899) in the late nineteenth century and was used to describe the southern mountain region associated with the Appalachian Mountain chain (Shapiro, 1978, p. 119). Today, the Appalachian Regional Commission (2010) describes the area of Appalachia as:
a 205,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Forty-two percent of the Region's population is rural, compared with 20 percent of the national population.

The Region's economy, once highly dependent on mining, forestry, agriculture, chemical industries, and heavy industry, has become more diversified in recent times, and now includes a variety of manufacturing and service industries. In 1965, one in three Appalachians lived in poverty. In 2000, the Region's poverty rate was 13.6 percent. The number of Appalachian counties considered economically distressed was 223 in 1965; in fiscal year 2011 that number is 82.

These gains have transformed the Region from one of widespread poverty to one of economic contrasts: some communities have successfully diversified their economies, while others still require basic infrastructure such as roads and water and sewer systems. The contrasts are not surprising in light of the Region's size and diversity. The Region includes 420 counties in 13 states. It extends more than 1,000 miles, from southern New York to northeastern Mississippi, and is home to 24.8 million people. (para. 1-3)

2) Appalachian - For this study, an Appalachian is one who is either a native or a resident of the Appalachian area. Since this study is interested in exploring past as well as present educational experiences of the participants, and is contextualized by Appalachian
culture, participants were therefore limited to those who have been native raised and educated. Thus, for the purposes of this study, an Appalachian was defined as someone who was raised, and who completed primary and secondary school at schools located within the Appalachian region.

Also to note here is the interstate tuition reciprocity agreement that exists between some West Virginia community and technical colleges and adjoining Appalachian counties located in other states. Thus, the Appalachian participants in this study may have been from a state other than West Virginia, although they attend a community and technical college in West Virginia.

3) Appalachian Culture - Appalachian culture has been greatly influenced by the many ethnic groups who have settled in the region since the first White settlers entered the area in the late sixteenth century. Thus, many sub-regions were heavily influenced by the ethnic roots of those who settled there, impacting the beliefs, values, behaviors and ideologies of that particular area (Jackson, 2006). It is the culture of these sub-regions that outsiders often encountered and contributed to the whole area, not realizing the diversity that exists within the region (Couto, 2002). However, nestled within the variety of external ethnic trappings is a set of basic traits that Appalachian scholars associate with the area as a whole. For the purposes of this study, this set of basic traits, as identified by Jones (1994) will be used. These basic traits include: independence, self-reliance, neighborliness, familism, personalism, modesty, and patriotism.

4) Community College - West Virginia Code §18B-3C-8b defines community and technical colleges in West Virginia as institutions that provide the following:
career and technical education certificate, associate of applied science, and selected associate of science degree programs for students seeking immediate employment, individual entrepreneurship skills, occupational development, skill enhancement and career mobility. . . . transfer education associate of arts and associate of science degree programs for students whose educational goal is to transfer into a baccalaureate degree program with particular emphasis on reaching beyond traditional college-age students to unserved or underserved adult populations. . . . developmental/remedial education courses, tutorials, skills development labs, and other services for students who need to improve their skills in mathematics, English, reading, study skills, computers and other basic skill areas. . . . workforce development education contracted with business and industry to train or retrain employees. . . . continuing development assistance and education credit and noncredit courses for professional and self-development, certification and licensure, and literacy training. . . . community service workshops, lectures, seminars, clinics, concerts, theatrical performances and other noncredit activities to meet the cultural, civic and personal interests and needs of the community the institution serves. (sec b)

Based on this description, community and technical colleges will therefore be defined as community based institutions of postsecondary education that primarily offer one year certificate and two year associate degree programs of study, in addition to developmental/remedial education, continuing education and community education.
5) Cultural Capital - Cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu (1977) is “subtle modalities in the relationship to culture and language” (p. 82). Scholars Reay, David and Ball (2005) further explain Bourdieu’s definition by stating that cultural capital is the “broad array of linguistic competencies, manners, preferences, and orientations” (p. 20) that one possesses.

6) Persistence - For the purposes of this study, persistence was defined as the act of sustaining satisfactory academic performance over a length of time, coupled with the act of making satisfactory progress towards a selected program of study that ends in a certificate, associate degree, or transferable college credit (for those planning to transition to a four year degree program at the university level).

7) Psychological Capital - As defined by Luthans, Youself, Avolio (2007), Psychological Capital is a positive state of development characterized by an individual’s self-efficacy/confidence, optimism, hope and resiliency. It is viewed as “a higher order positive construct” (p. 4). In this study, the definition of psychological capital is the same as that of Luthans, et al.

8) White - According to Roediger (1999), in the United States, the term “White” is associated with race and usually used to refer to those of Anglo-European decent; however, what constitutes “Whiteness” actually emerged from a social construction. Therefore, White status in America is gained socially through group member identity. Because of this, participants in this study were those who self-identified as White.

9) Working Class - Because the United States is a capitalist culture driven by consumerism, economic success can bring a higher place on the social ladder when
economic/power models are used for stratification purposes (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; hooks, 2000). Many people use an economic model and place themselves in the middle class strata based solely on income or material possessions. However, blue collar labor and skilled trade professionals, and low level white collar professions are considered working class professions (Gilbert & Kahl, 1993). Although these professions may require skilled training, they did not historically require a college degree. Thus, for this study, an individual was considered working class if he was a first generation college student from a blue collar or low level white collar professional home.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided the background for this study and my research questions. I also framed the study, and discussed the geographic area that contextualized the study. Additionally, the significance and chosen methodology were outlined and presented. Finally, the delimitations, limitations and definitions were discussed.
Chapter 2 – Review of Literature

We don't need no education. We don't need no thought control. No dark sarcasm in the classroom. Teacher, leave them kids alone. Hey! Teacher! Leave them kids alone! All in all it's just another brick in the wall. All in all you're just another brick in the wall. (Waters, 1979)

Introduction

Since this study focused on the perceptions of White working class Appalachian males who had completed or who were within one term of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia, literature reviewed for this study focused on three main areas: social class, Whiteness, and Appalachia. As social constructs, class and race intersect with identity formation, help shape educational aspirations and outcomes, and have been considered aspects that impact overall life chances. In addition to looking at the intersection of social class and race, this study sought to look at these constructs within the context of the Appalachian male.

Therefore, the first part of this literature review examines social class, specifically what defines the working class in American society. Also reviewed with regard to social class are the issues of social class mobility, class crossing and class consciousness. Also in this part of the literature review, I present the theoretical framework for this study by exploring Bourdieu’s theory of social class reproduction and its relationship to education and educational opportunity within the context of the American public education system. Scholarly works reviewed for the theoretical framework portion of the literature review included those related to educational pursuit, educational attainment, and life chances in

The second part of the literature review explores literature related to working class identity formation and Whiteness. Since the participants of this study were White working class males, issues related to male identity formation and Whiteness were reviewed. In American culture working class identity formation has been historically linked to industrialization. Thus, in this part of the literature review, industrialization and deindustrialization and their impact on working class identity formation, especially that of males, are examined. In addition to class identity issues, distinctions within the context of Whiteness with regard to social class stratification are also reviewed (Duncan 1999; Frerie, 2007; Guess, 2006; Hartigan, 2005; Moss 2003; Owen, 2007; Roediger, 1999; Winders, 2007; Wray, 2006; Wray & Newitz, 1997).

Because this study is contextualized within the Appalachian region, the third and final part of the literature reviewed explores scholarly works related to Appalachia. Additionally, literature specific to the state of West Virginia, where this study was conducted, is also reviewed. Specific scholarly works examined include those related to what defines the Appalachian region geographically as well as culturally, the history of higher education in the Appalachian region, and current issues regarding postsecondary academic persistence. Specific literature reviewed related to the state of West Virginia includes its strong ties to industry and its current higher education program policies for its community and technical college system (Ambler, 1951; ARC, 2010; Bradbury, 2008;
Caudill, 1974; Census, 2010; Community and Technical College System of West Virginia, 2011; Drake, 2001; Duncan, 1999; Eller, 2008; Howley, 2006; Powell, 2008; Jackson, 2006; Jones, 1994; West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and Community and Technical College System, 2008; Williams, 2002; Wilson, Henry and Peterson, 1997; Woodrum, 2004; 2009, Wright, 2010).

**Social Class in the United States**

Exactly who comprises the working class in the United States is often a point of disagreement in the literature. Distinct class divisions are often unclear because of differing aspects used to define class. According to Walpole (2007):

> when scholars discuss the general concept of social class, it involves educational attainment, occupational status, and income, but also tends to expand discrete notions of economic and educational capital by including values, lifestyles and ideologies, which work in concert to shape an individual’s world view. (p. 3)

However, Lareau (2003) found in her research of family life and social class in American society that social class is often treated with a degree of ambivalence because of the common misconception that American society is a class-free society. As Lareau (2003) states, “American ideology that each individual is responsible for his or her life outcomes is the expressed belief of the vast majority of Americans, rich or poor” (p.7).

Also complicating ‘who’ belongs to ‘what’ social class in the United States is the lack of appropriate class self-identification. As Walpole (2007), who studied the postsecondary educational challenges faced by the working class also notes:
Americans generally define themselves as middle class because they typically know people who are both better off and worse off economically or more or less well educated. Furthermore, social class can be disguised, and people sometimes deliberately attempt to conceal their social class because they are ashamed or want to conform to the social class norms that surround them. (p. 4)

Yet, various definitions of who comprises the working class do exist: four which will be discussed in this literature review. Drawing from Marx, two of these definitions focus on where one relates to others in relation to economics and labor power (Brameld, 1965; Gilbert-Kahl, 1993; Zweig, 2000). The other two draw from Weber and use a combined variable system of lifestyle, economics and status (Fussell, 1983; Gilbert-Kahl, 1993). In addition to defining the working class, this section of the literature review will also explore literature related to social class mobility, and class crossing (Fussell, 1983; hooks, 2000; Lareau, 2003), and class consciousness (Brameld, 1965; Gilbert and Kahl, 1992; hooks, 2000, Zweig, 2000).

The Working Class Defined

Marx and Weber bring forth two historic foundations upon which social class can be defined in a capitalistic society. According to Gilbert and Kahl (1993), both Marx and Weber look at the relationship between social structure and economic processes in defining social class. However, Marx’ theory focuses on a two class system, comprising those who control the means of production and those who produce the labor. From this comes a conflict driven social class system based on economic power and control in which the controlling class becomes the socially privileged class. Only through class
conflict can social change occur. Yet, Weber makes a different distinction using both
class and status, and creates a theory of social stratification that is based on a market
driven system and forms of consumption (Gilbert & Kahl, 1993).

For Marx and Weber, class refers to groupings of people and is “defined by the
economic opportunities an individual has in the labor, commodity, and credit markets”
(Gilbert & Kahl, 1993, p.8). Thus social groups are created based on economic
similarities. However, Weber also includes the idea that within these economically
situated groups, status from which prestige derives, also evolves. In differentiating
between class and status groups, Weber writes:

With some over-simplification, one might thus say that ‘classes’ are stratified
according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas
‘status groups’ are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of
goods as represented by special ‘styles of life’ (Gilbert & Kahl, 1993, p. 9).

Brameld (1965) notes that although Marxism focuses on a two class system, a middle
level of class does exist. This middle layer functions mainly as does the lower class, as
producers, rather than controllers of labor, although it may mistakenly perceive itself as
being more like the upper level class (p. 106). The working class, which is the labor
force, is placed at the mid to lower levels.

Drawing from a Marxist perspective, Zweig (2000) also focuses on power relations
in defining class. According to Zweig, “class is determined not by income and lifestyle
but by relative standing in power relations at work and in the larger society” (p. 41).
Additionally, Zweig (2000) notes that social class standing often functions as a barrier to
upward mobility that is often viewed as easily achievable in American society. Like Marx, he contends that the primary culprit is the capitalistic society that exists, as there must be a working class in any capitalistic society. Thus, not everyone can be mobile (p. 43). Zweig's class divisions are similar to that of Marxist theorists in that the majority is still comprised of those that labor, or whose function it is to provide, rather than control, the labor force (p. 40).

Like Weber, Fussell (1983) and Gilbert and Kahl (1993) use a multiple variable system of economic, status and political power, with what Fussell (1983) terms “extra emphasis on status” (p. 24) to define membership within certain social classes. Fussell (1983) argues there are nine social classes in the United States. With regard to occupation, he contends “the degree of supervision…is often a more eloquent class indicator than mere income” (p. 48). However, in addition to economic and political standing, Fussell emphasizes the importance of other social aspects such as style and taste (p. 27). The Gilbert-Kahl model (Gilbert & Kahl, 1993) also uses a blend of economic, status and political variables in creating class distinctions. In this model, economic variables are those that are related to economic wealth such as occupation and income. Status variables are those associated with prestige, association and socialization. Political variables are those associated with power, and class consciousness. According to the Gilbert-Kahl model, these variables create a six layer division in American social class: upper class, upper-middle class, middle class, the working class, the working poor, and the poor/homeless (pp. 308-309). In this model, the working class, which has about thirty percent of the US population as members, is that which usually possesses semi-skills and
can be found in service trade industries. Gilbert and Kahl (1993) point out that education for the working class usually concludes at the high school level, but the possession of a trade skill often makes members of this class a desirable employee (pp. 314-315).

Social Mobility and Class Crossing

Many scholars (Fussell, 1983; Gilbert and Kahl, 1993; hooks, 2000; Lareau, 2003) note the difficulty in crossing class lines. Weber viewed an individual’s future possibilities, or what he termed “life chances,” as being contingent upon class membership (Gilbert & Kahl, 1993, p. 8). Weber integrated status into this by arguing the status order further complicates one’s life chances by functioning to regulate and restrict consumption as well as opportunities for that individual (p. 10).

Fussell (1983) points out “class distinctions in America are so complicated and subtle that foreign visitors often miss the nuances and sometimes even the existence of a class structure” (p. 17). Yet, Fussell (1983) argues the strict presence of these lines when he states, “I do wish the word *caste* were domesticated in the United States, because it nicely conveys the actual rigidity of class lines here.” (p. 24). Lareau (2003) also addressed the idea of social class fluidity in her research of working class families and life chances. Lareau (2003) writes, “one of the best predictors of whether a child will one day graduate from college is whether his or her parents are college graduates” (p. 8).

Like Lareau, Fussell (1983) contends that social mobility between classes is more difficult than previously conceived because the ideas and beliefs nurtured within an individual are often class related (p. 24). hooks (2000) further notes the traits of one class may have to be abandoned and a new set accepted when she regards the rigidity of the
class system she experienced while at college, stating “there was no place in academe for folks from working-class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind. That was the price of the ticket” (p. 36).

Class Consciousness

When economic models based on earnings are used to define class in a capitalistic society like the United States, the line between class divisions often becomes indistinguishable. hooks (2000) notes that heightened consumerism in the United States often makes class distinctions difficult. She argues that as the lower classes as well as the upper often own similar trappings associated with elevated status in material culture. hooks (2000) writes, “the well off and the poor are often united in capitalist culture by their shared obsession with consumption” (p. 46). Likewise, Zweig (2000) contends when class is attributed to income or lifestyle, high earning working class wage earners often identify as being middle class as they can afford the comfortable lifestyle most commonly associated with the middle class (p. 6). Yet, Zweig (2000) points out this can be dangerous to class consciousness because when consumerism based on an economic model is used to define class, the higher waged working class tends to disappear, as they become masked within the middle class strata. Additionally, this increased material consumption does not increase economic power exerted by the working class; thus, it only functions to weaken class identity and solidarity (Zweig, 2000, p. 49).

Gilbert and Kahl (1993) also note that both Marx and Weber emphasize the importance of class consciousness, or the awareness one has of his membership in a distinctive group; a characteristic that when missing, contributes to a loss of class identity
and solidarity. For Marx, only through class consciousness and solidarity can class conflict be successful in achieving positive social change for the oppressed (p. 7). Brameld (1965) also notes the importance of class identity and solidarity as being essential in achieving social change in a stratified society.

**Social Class Reproduction: A Theoretical Framework**

Lareau (2003) argues that through social reproduction social class aspects are embedded, reflected and maintained along a continuing, subsequent generational lineage. These cultural norms and values then become accepted as naturalistic due to the perpetual pattern of continued reinforcement that social reproduction creates. In this process some traits become more valued than others, depending on the social context which exists (p. 276).

In order to understand how social class systems are maintained and perpetuated over time, the work of French sociologist Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2007; Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994) and British sociologist Bernstein (Bernstein, 1975) will serve as the theoretical framework of this proposed study. The primary aspects of Bourdieu’s work this research will focus on is the role of cultural capital in social reproduction, and the way educational structures prefer and legitimize particular forms of cultural capital. Bernstein’s work will be used to specifically illustrate one type of cultural capital, that of language codification, its relationship to social class and its role in schooling.
**Bourdieu: Cultural Capital**

French sociologist Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction draws on the idea of cultural capital and the ways in which it is transferred and favored, particularly through educational systems. Reay (1998) writes, “Bourdieu writes extensively about the social reproductive nature of the educational system” (p. 57). Bourdieu’s theory rests on three concepts: capital, field and habitus. According to Bourdieu (2007), capital presents in three forms: economic, cultural and social. In defining these forms of capital he says:

Capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations (‘connections’), which is convertible, in certain conditions into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. (p. 84)

As for cultural capital, Bourdieu (2007) states cultural capital is “subtle modalities in the relationship to culture and language” (p. 82). It is this type of capital Bourdieu places at the heart of his theory as the idea of cultural capital, he states:

initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the i.e., the specific profits which children from different classes and class fractions can obtain
in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between classes and class fractions. (p. 84)

It is cultural capital Bourdieu sees as contributing to academic success or failure (Reay, et. al., 2005, p. 19). According to Reay et al. (2005) by cultural capital, Bourdieu means the “broad array of linguistic competences, manners, preferences and orientations” (p. 20) that a person inherits from his family. Bourdieu (2007) further explains cultural capital by contending that it exists in three forms: the embodied state, the objectified state and the institutionalized state (p. 84). According to Bourdieu (2007), cultural capital in the embodied state is that which is internal and was acquired over time from one’s family and the social status of that family. It is the disposition and sense of self that one inherits (p. 86). Cultural capital in the objectified state represents capital that is materialistic nature, such as art or items that are “transmissible in materiality” (p. 87). Cultural capital in the institutionalized state is that related to credentials or qualifications, most notably those of an academic nature. It is this form of cultural capital that can be converted into economic capital. However, Bourdieu (2007) notes that depending on the needs of the labor market, some qualifications “may turn out to be less profitable than was anticipated when they were made” (p. 88).

The other aspects of Bourdieu’s theory, field and habitus, function with capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu’s idea of field includes institutional structures in the public social arena such as schools, which he claims also function as a mode through which cultural capital can be transferred or affected. The field, as defined by Bourdieu, is a “structured social space based on the objective relations formed between those who
occupy it, and hence the configuration of positions they hold” (Grenfell, 2007, p. 55). As for habitus, it comprises the experiences in one’s social strata that are considered the norm, and are defined by Bourdieu (1977) as “internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class” (p. 83). Thus, it is “through the workings of the habitus that practice (agency) is linked with capital and field (structure)” (Reay, et al., 2005, p. 22). According to Grenfell (2007), from Bourdieu’s standpoint, everyone possesses cultural capital, but it is how valued that capital is within the context of the field that determines whether or not it is legitimized (p. 25).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1994) argue that in societies where academic credentials are valued and historically considered a middle class distinction, educational systems not only prefer and create privilege for those in possession of middle class cultural capital, but also legitimatize its transference. Bourdieu and Passeron (1994) write:

This privileged instrument of the bourgeois sociodicy which confers on the privileged the supreme privilege of not seeing themselves as privileged manages the more easily to convince the disinherited that they owe their scholastic and social destiny to their lack of gifts or merits, because in the matters of cultural absolute dispossession excludes awareness of being dispossessed. (p. 210)

Bourdieu's view that educational systems are agents for transference of capital that serve to maintain the current status quo is also apparent when he states public schooling is the “process through which a cultural arbitrary is historically reproduced ... the equivalent, in the cultural order, to the transmission of genetic capital in the biological
order” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994, p. 32). MacLeod (2009) also points out that to Bourdieu, the process of social order reproduction becomes naturalized and blindly accepted as the hidden nature of the dominant classes is accepted without question by the more subordinate ones (p. 16). Furthermore, Lareau (2003) notes Bourdieu’s work “suggests that inequality is a perpetual characteristic of social groups,” and thus for researchers it “provides a dynamic model of structural inequality; it enables researchers to capture ‘moments’ of cultural and social reproduction” (p. 277).

Bernstein: Linguistic Codes

Like Bourdieu, Bernstein’s (1975) work focuses on class cultural differences. However, Bernstein’s (1975) research centers on the linguistic differences found between the middle and working classes in Britain. He also examines how within the context of school, these language preferences result in educational disadvantages for the working class.

According to MacLeod (2009), Bernstein’s work is best understood when placed within Bourdieu’s framework of cultural capital and its transference. This is because “linguistic codes, which ultimately are rooted in the social division of labor, derive from the social class and linguistic roles within families” (MacLeod, 2009, p. 17). MacLeod (2009) also points out “Bourdieu paints an elegant theory with broad brushstrokes” whereas Bernstein “zeros in on one important link in the process of social reproduction, language patterns” (p. 16). Thus, Bernstein’s study illustrates Bourdieu’s theory, as it shows how different linguistic patterns found among children of different social classes function to impact educational outcomes.
In discussing his work, Bernstein (1975) makes a clear distinction between speech and language use, and the sociological connection between language use and class. He notes “speech is a message, language is a code… language is a set of rules to which all speech codes must comply, but which speech codes are generated is a function of the system of social relations” (p. 123). Thus, he argues that two distinctive types of language patterns exist and are based on class status. He concludes that the middle class uses formal language (p. 28) and the working class uses public language (p. 42).

In clarifying the differences, MacLeod (2009) points out how the differing syntactic and lexical constructions that emerged in Bernstein’s study manifest themselves:

Working class children generally grow up in homes where common circumstances, knowledge and values give rise to speech patterns in which meanings remain implicit and dependent of their context…middle class families, in contrast, use elaborated codes to express the unique perspective and experience of the speaker…meanings are less tied to a local relationship…and consequently are made linguistically explicit. (p. 17)

Because schools prefer the more elaborate, or formal, language already in use by the middle class, these differences in language place the working class at a disadvantage in educational settings (MacLeod, 2002, p. 17).

Bernstein (1975) further notes it is “important to consider that as a result of the close relationship between education and occupation a situation may soon be reached when the educational institutions legitimize social inequality by individualizing failure” (p. 38). MacLeod (2009) agrees as he points out, “like many of the mechanisms of social
reproduction, linguistic socialization is an invisible impediment that goes unacknowledged. Disadvantaged students blame themselves for failure, whereas wealthier pupils take their cultural capital for granted and accept full credit for their success (p. 18)”

Social Stratification in American Education

Bowles and Gintis were among the first to challenge the idea that schooling in America was democratic, and became, in essence, the “spokespersons for the reproduction theory of American education” (Willis, 1977, p. x). Later research by scholars like Anyon (1981) in the area of curricular, pedagogical and evaluative practices found in American schools and Finn (1999) whose research focused on language and literacy differences both support the idea that social class stratification does exist within the American school system and that American public education functions to replicate and maintain the current social class order through the use of particular mechanism embedded within the framework of education.

Bowles and Gintis: Inheriting Inequality

Using an economic perspective based on the capitalistic market, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that educational systems function to increase production while at the same time, depoliticize the working class (p. 11). In their initial study, Bowles and Gintis (1976) contend that schools were designed to replicate for students the social classes of their parents, and, as such, a distinction existed between working class and suburban schools. This distinction included the way in which schools socialized their students. Socialization found in working class schools included that which emphasized behavior
control and rule following, thus preparing students for social relations related to production. Whereas middle class schools allowed middle class students more individuality and freedom. Thus, at the time of their initial study, Bowles and Gintis (1976) concluded the differing socialization patterns present in schools “reflect the fact that educational objectives and expectations of administrators, teachers, and parents . . . differ for students of different social classes” (p. 132). Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) also claim at the time of this initial study, that American education “tailors the self-concepts, aspirations, and social class identifications of individuals to the requirements of the social division of labor” (p. 129).

In a follow up study, conducted twenty-five years later, Bowles and Gintis (2001) contend that little has changed since their initial study, with the exception of new and more precise data being added to their research that supports their initial findings (p. 2). With regarding to their initial study, conducted in the 1970s, they write, “we showed that parental economic status is passed on to children in part by means of unequal educational opportunity” (p. 2). With additional new data, they further contend that “the statistical claims of the book have held up remarkably well” (p. 2). Thus, Bowles and Gintis (2001) continue to argue that schools function to socialize students in a manner that replicates social hierarchies “by structuring social interactions and individual rewards to replicate the environment of the workplace” (p. 1).

**Anyon: Education that Fits their Station**

Like Bowles and Gintis, Anyon (1981) also concludes educational structures in America engage in practices that reflect class social stratification. Anyon’s work
examines schooling in the United States and how students of “different social class backgrounds are still likely to be exposed to qualitatively different types of educational knowledge” (p. 3). Focusing on five fifth grade classrooms in New Jersey, she notes distinct curricular, pedagogical and evaluative differences varying across lines of class, which ultimately impact student outcomes (p. 4). Anyon identifies the schools in her study as two working class schools, one middle class school, one affluent professional school and one executive elite school (p. 5).

The pedagogical practices Anyon (1981) found in these schools emphasized, or de-emphasized, particular behaviors and cognitive abilities. In working class schools, the delivery of schoolwork involved rote behavior and very little decision making. Teacher expectations revolved around following rules without questioning and having students perform as they were told, with very little explanation or student decision-making involved. Teacher control extended to the point of total control and dominance (pp. 6-12). In middle class schools choice was present although students’ expectations were still centered on correctness. Creativity was not encouraged, as acceptance of the status quo and following the rules of the establishment were predominant (pp. 12-17). In the affluent professional school, independence was fostered through teacher behaviors that included facilitating individuality through creativity (pp. 17-23). In the last of the schools Anyon studied, the executive elite school, a strong focus on the analytical mind precluded all else. The development of critical thinking and problem-solving was fostered by the teacher and the teacher lead without dominating the classroom (pp. 23-31).
Wait to school knowledge and of what it consists, Anyon (1981) found similar correlating differences between the teachers at each type of school (p. 38).

Working class teachers identified keeping students busy with learning the basics as being sufficient enough school knowledge (p. 7). Middle class teachers focused on school knowledge because it would be needed for high school and college preparation in order to guarantee later student success (p. 13). Affluent professional teachers wanted students to gain school knowledge through self-exploration, from their own experiences, and as a result, use it to be self-directed thinkers (p. 17). And, the executive elite teachers framed school knowledge within the context of thinking and reasoning correctly (p. 24). As with the teachers, the concept of knowledge also differed among the students at the various types of schools. When asked about school knowledge and of what they felt it consisted, working class students were confused and not able to answer the question spontaneously, as they had not been provided the answer beforehand (p. 10). Middle class students responded by indicating knowledge came from approved sources, such as text books or the teacher, but not from within themselves (p. 15). Affluent professional students defined school knowledge as the ability to think and reflect on what had been learned (p.20). And, the executive elite students focused their discussion of school knowledge on the ability to understand and explain already existing knowledge (p. 28).

Anyon (1981) also found differing emergent themes at each social level. At the working class level, she found resistance by the students, both overt and passive which at times was counterproductive to their successes (p. 11). Anyon claims this was propagated by the disconnect which the working class students viewed their acquired school
knowledge, only seeing it as a collection of isolated facts inapplicable and far removed from the real world in which they lived. From the middle class students, however, emerged a theme of possibility (p. 16). Anyon writes that middle class student attitudes regarded knowledge as being conceptual and possible of possession, and that if enough is acquired, it can lead to greater things. However, within the affluent profession school, Anyon notes she found emergent narcissism (p. 21). This she argues was due to the emphasis on self and individual creativity. But in the executive elite school, she found excellence, not only in the sense that each individual needed to strive to perfection, but that a level of superiority naturally came with being the best (p. 30).

After examining these differences, Anyon (1981) writes “by situating school knowledge in its particular social location, we can see how it may contribute to contradictory social processes of conservation and transformation. We see the schools reproducing the tensions and conflicts of the larger society” (p. 38).

**Self-Efficacy and Psychological Capital**

Differing instructional practices such as those explored by Anyon, have also been linked to psychological aspects, such as the development of academic self-efficacy (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1994) “is defined as people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (p.71). Schunk and Pajares (2002) point out that self-efficacy is drawn from social cognitive theory, “which postulates that human achievement depends on interactions between one’s behaviors, personal factors (e.g. thoughts, beliefs), and environmental conditions” (p.2). Thus one’s self-efficacy, or
the belief that one has for oneself, is drawn from multiple factors. Bandura, Barbaranelli and Caprara (1996) contend that self-efficacy is linked to academic success when they claim “a high sense of efficacy for self-regulated learning and academic mastery in children fosters scholastic achievement both directly and by raising academic aspirations” (p.1209). Schunk and Pajares (2002) also adhere to this idea by stating that their research supports the idea that self-efficacy is influential in academic achievement. For example, in the context of education, instructional practices affect self-efficacy, which in turn, “affects motivation and achievement in children and adolescents” (Schunk and Pajares, 2002, p.17). They also argue that “self-efficacy may predict persistence better at the higher grades” (p.19). Research focused on college students that was completed by Choi (2005) supports this idea.

Luthans, Youssef and Avolio (2007) look at self-efficacy and place it within the broader framework of psychological capital. Luthans et al. (2007) define psychological capital as:

an individual’s positive psychological state of development and is characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at a challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed and; (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success. (p.3)
The construct of psychological capital looks not only at who someone is, but who that person is capable of becoming. It “recognizes moving . . . from the actual self . . . to the possible self” (p.21). Within an educational context, the autonomy and relatedness that a student perceives function to contribute to the development of academic self-efficacy, which correlates highly to academic achievement and success (Schunk & Pajares, 2002, p.7-13).

For the working class students in Anyon’s study, Anyon (1981) illustrates how autonomy and relatedness were lacking not only in instructional practice, but also in the evaluative process. Thus, the instructional and evaluative processes experienced by working class students in working class schools could impact the level of self-efficacy these students develop.

**Finn: Teach Them to be Literate with Attitude**

Like Anyon (1981), Finn (1999) focuses his work on class differences found within school structures. However, Finn (1999) centers his examination specifically on the ways in which language and literacy are used within the public school arena. Finn (1999) claims class based language mechanisms within the American public school system function to produce two types of educational experiences for students: either a “domesticating” or an “empowering” educational experience (p. 93). Finn (1999) writes that domesticating education “leads to functional literacy, literacy that makes a person productive and dependable” (p. x) whereas empowering educational leads to “powerful literacy” (p. x) through which “people can become conscious of injustice and inequity
and through disciplined, focused and strategic action, they can bring about change” (p. xi).

According to Finn (1999), domesticating education is used to produce a compliant worker who does not question authority, thus this form of education is much like what Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Anyon (1981) found in working class schools, where knowledge is dispensed, memorized and repeated back without the encouragement of questioning or critical thinking by the students. However, liberating or empowering education is intended to produce leaders, and so creativity, critical thinking and self-expression are not only encouraged, but expected from students (Finn, 1999, pp. 198 - 199).

Finn (1999) argues that within the structure of schooling, four possible levels of literacy exist: performative, functional, informational, and powerful. At the performative level, words can be sounded out and simple spoken sentences recorded in writing. At the functional level, average literacy demands in everyday life can be met, such as the need to read directions or fill out forms. At the informational level, information can be read and absorbed, and demands of school work, such as essay writing or research reporting can be met. However, at the powerful level, creativity, reasoning, analysis and synthesis are capabilities that are present (p. 124). Finn (1999) contends achievements of these educational levels of literacy are contingent on social class and one’s social class often dictates the level at which one’s progression stops. He points out:

the children of the working class learn to read and write in classrooms whose discourse mirrors that of their own communities, but they do not make progress
toward informational and powerful literacy. Their progress ends with functional or perhaps informational literacy, which is, of course, the literacy of their homes and communities. (p. 126)

Although Finn (1999) argues for the teaching of school discourse and powerful literacy to the working class, he cautions, “they do not need to be forced to concede that school discourse is right and their discourse is wrong” (p. 205). Rather, Finn (1999) argues, it is through this ability in which equity and social justice can be pursued. He writes, “nothing short of dialogue, conscientization and explicitly teaching school discourse and powerful literacy will give all students a chance at an empowering, liberating education…” (p. 190). Finn advocates these actions, as they are what Freire (2007) speaks of when discussing the solution of how to providing a liberating education.

**Liberating Education**

Freire (2007) contends that educational structures function to domesticate students and turn them into “beings for others” (p. 74). Freire (2007) argues that in order to liberate these students, inclusion within the already existing structure of the school is not enough. What is needed is the transformation of the structure itself so that these students can become “beings for themselves” (p. 74). Freire (2007) further claims that “education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by the educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (p. 78). Freire (2007) contends that the use of critical consciousness, which would question this indoctrination, is avoided due to the fear of losing what is perceived as freedom. As a result, Freire (2007) points out those dominated continue to
allow themselves to be oppressed as “they confuse freedom with the maintenance of the status quo. . .” (p. 36).

**Working Class Identity Formation**

Weis (1990) defines identity as “a sense of self in relation to others” (p. 3). As for identity formation, she says, it is the “processes through which people, either individually or collectively, come to see themselves in relation to others” (p. 3).

For the working class, identity has historically been closely linked to the labor they produced (MacLeod, 2002; Willis, 1977). However, as Freie (2007) points out, what it means to be working class in the United States has changed a great deal. Mass consumerism, greater availability of college level education, lack of a cohesive class identity and racial and religious politics all combine to create a new working class identity for today’s youth (p. 1).

Therefore, this part of the literature review will concentrate on industrialization and deindustrialization, and the impact this economic shift has on the identity formation of working class males. Early studies (Simon, Gagnon, and Buff, 1971; Willis, 1977) will be used to illustrate how during strong industrial time working class identity is closely tied to the labor produced and how educational systems contribute to the production of the labor force needed for industry. More recent studies (Dolby and Dimitriadas, 2004; Kenway and Kraack 2004; Freie, 2007; Weis, 1990, 2004) will be used to illustrate how deindustrialization impacts identity formation in working class males in that the labor previously used from which to draw identity, no longer readily exists.
Industrialization and Working Class Identity Formation

An early study conducted by Simon, Gagnon and Buff (1971) claims that working class schools in the United States in the 1970s primarily served the purpose of providing workers of production for a capitalistic state. At the time of the study, Simon, et al. (1971) placed the working class as the group between the poverty line and those who expected their children to go to college. Additionally, they used neighborhood residence and lifestyle choices in their definition of class. Yet, in describing the schools of this population, Simon et al. (1971) conclude:

Schools in the working class areas can only be described as undramatic disaster areas. . . . At no point does the school extend itself to create a commitment to achievement (of any sort, without even suggesting occupational) that was not originally encouraged by the parents . . . classrooms quickly divide themselves into the interested and conforming front, the invisible middle, and the obstreperous rear . . . those already motivated through parental desire are the proto-mobiles, those in the middle either finish high school or become the dropouts through lack of interest, and those in the rear are the push outs (p. 20).

Differences in attrition rates for boys at the time of Simon et al.’s (1971) research was strongest at the mid-adolescence level, with boys dropping out early to enter the workforce or military. At this point in time, the sole purpose of the working class school was to provide occupational training certification. Intellectual pursuits were not appreciated, nor considered needed for a successful life, by most. Subdivisions noted as existing within the youth culture at working class schools were: the working class
collegiate, who aspired to go to college; the working class underground “hippies” who practiced various forms of resistance; the very visual “greasers” who were most notably spotted standing on street corners, and the “family oriented” who aspired to the same levels and conditions of their parents. Parents were noted as being “passive accomplices” (p. 20), deferring to the authority of the school.

Simon et al.’s (1971) work focuses on the ideological differences of each group and how these differences impact educational attainments. As the college bound boys moved on to colleges, the greaser boys and the family oriented boys moved out into the work place. When Simon, et al. (1971) wrote about this study in the 1970s, outcomes for the hippie/underground group were not known, nor could they be projected as that subculture had just emerged (p. 24). Additionally, Simon, et al (1971) found school performance was reflected in these predetermined outcomes, resulting in the collegiate students having higher levels of cooperation, and the greaser boy students and family oriented students having much indifference or only vocationally related interests in school (p. 24). Work motivation stemmed from consumerism and the power and independence that having money brings. For the working class youth in this study, part-time jobs in high school preceded full time jobs. However, these early jobs often began a life of consumerism that required any work, rather than a self-selected career or preferred occupational pursuits (p. 28). Thus, within this population “the search for security and/or career is projected into the future or left largely undefined” (p. 29). Yet, the authors conclude:

The very intact families and social relationships that continue to operate successfully are among the elements that make the working class so resistant to change as a class.
Its’ very capacity to remain culturally intact isolates a large section of the society within these provincial value systems. (p. 33)

However, Simon, et al. (1971) did point out that because of the nature of the jobs at this level, security was often affected by industrial demands and fluctuation (p. 29).

Willis’ (1977) classic study of working class young men, who he called “the lads”, in Britain in the 1970s not only highlights how capitalistic labor power ideologies are socially reproduced, but also show how labor power and its manual expression assists in the masculine identity formation for this particular group (p. 3). The working class schools, Willis (1977) notes, replicated the power construct present in the work place, as the schools emphasized teacher/student domination, much like that found in a boss/worker relationship. This included a level of highly organized structuring of the school, from bell time enforcement to the authoritative teaching pedagogy implemented (p. 68). Coupled with the patriarchal male domination he found in the working class culture, the male identity that evolved was one similar to the fathers' social status and the realm in which they resided: that of shop floor culture (p. 3). Willis also found a degree of oppositional behavior towards the school that he notes as being a form of resistance (p. 126).

In the early 1980s, MacLeod (2009) conducted a study in the United States of young working class men and their educational aspirations, similar to that of Willis’. MacLeod (2009) contends that “several decades of quantitative sociological research have demonstrated that the social class into which one is born has a massive influence on where one will end up...” (p. 4). Like the working class young men in Willis’ study,
MacLeod (2009) found the White working class young men in his study also had leveled aspirations, and viewed the possibilities of upward mobility as very remote (p. 115). Another similarity shared between Willis’ “lads” and MacLeod’s young men was the emphasis placed on masculinity. However, where Willis (1977) found educational rejection due to the disconnect his young men felt between what was being taught at school and the manual labor jobs they would eventually fill, the young men in MacLeod’s (2009) study had “no systemic bias toward manual work; their depressed aspirations result from a look into the future that sees stagnation at the bottom of the occupational structure as almost inevitable” (MacLeod, 2009, p. 124). Unlike Willis’ young men, who had factory jobs waiting, MacLeod’s young men had nowhere to go due the declining industry. MacLeod (2009) contends leveled aspirations for the working class are detrimental to chances for social mobility when he writes, “working class individuals develop depressed aspirations that mirror their actual chances for social advancement, and then these stunted aspirations effectively seal the social immobility and continued subjugation of the working class” (p. 140). Thus he concludes, “leveled aspirations are a powerful mechanism by which class inequality is reproduced from one generation to the next” (p. 5).

**The Disestablishment of Working Class Identity Formation**

Dolby and Dimitriadis (2004) revisited Willis' (1977) study to determine the effects of declining industry on the working class. At the time of Willis’ (1977) study, the unemployment rate was lower than the British national average, and in most cases, employment in the foundries and steel mills still had a favorable outlook (p. 18).
However, in the years following the study, an economic downturn resulted in de-industrialization. Among the findings by Dolby and Dimitriadis (2004), Mac and Ghaill's follow up of Willis’ study indicates de-industrialization created “a crisis in White working class forms of masculinity” (p. 33). As a result, this emergent uncertainty brought forth exaggerated concepts of male heterosexuality. Without a work identity, White working class males still relied on an outdated association with manual waged labor. Worse than before, the new behavior was used as a way to “celebrate alternative sources of gender power” (p. 33), serving the role previously held by manual labor, as the main source of their male identity.

Kenway and Kraack (2004) also explored the issue of emergent masculinity in the working class male culture of Victoria, Australia. Primarily working class, intergenerational employment was common for the area. However, due to privatization and restructuring of its largest employer, a significant job loss occurred. Kenway and Kraack (2004) note “the local working class has been disrupted and the industrial foundations of worker's identities have been lost” (p. 100). Yet, they conclude despite de-industrialism of the town, “the values associated with traditional hegemonic working class masculinity have proved very difficult to dislodge” (p. 102).

However, Weis (2004) found a new emergent form of White working class male identity when she revisited her study of White working class Americans within the context of a de-industrializing economy. Weis (2004) initially studied a particular group of White working class youth in the early 1980s and then revisited them again approximately fifteen years later (p. xv). Like Willis (1977), she found the young men in
her initial study exhibiting similar forms of male masculinity and sexism. However, Weis (1990) states that in her initial study, she found a differing attitude towards education and schooling than that found by Willis (1977). Weis (1990) found working class parents “want their children to have social mobility and express this in highly individualistic terms . . . they value education highly” (p. 152). At the time of her initial study, Weis argues, “the struggles in post-industrial or programmed society are, then, very different from those that are characteristic of industrial society, and it is not clear how the traditional working class relates to these struggles” (p. 10).

Reflecting on her initial study, Weis (2004) notes “not a single boy interviewed in the initial Freeway study expressed the possibility of being a generalized wage laborer” (p. 29). Unlike the young men in Willis’ (1977) study who exhibited resistance, Weis (2004) found the young White working class male students in her study to be quietly compliant regarding school work (p. 35). Yet, she notes, despite this compliancy, they were not actively engaged in their school work, even when completing it:

this disengagement coexisted with a more positive valuation of education than previous studies uncovered among white working class youth, particularly males. The more positive valuation plays itself out, however, largely in terms of student participation in the maintenance of the appearance of order and a willingness to ‘hand something in’ . . . . In accepting this, teachers obviously participate in and even affirm the negotiated form of the ‘established’ educational paradigm (p. 35). This behavior, also noted by Willis (1977) and Anyon (1981) is what Finn (1999) calls the “make believe school” paradigm. He points out this model is often adopted
when working class schools cannot offer students useful knowledge (p.59). As a result, Finn contends these schools “reward students for their docility and obedience rather than initiative and assertiveness” (p. 59).

Fifteen years later, when Weis (2004) revisited her study, she found that half of the men she interviewed had attempted some form of postsecondary education, although less than one half had actually completed their intended program of study (p. 114). She also notes those who fared better and had settled lives had “tended to move off the space of hegemonically constructed white masculinity – that masculinity which emerged in relation to the old industrial economy” (p. 90). Furthermore, Weis (2004) notes “at the heart of the remaking of the White working class lies the reconstruction of male/female relations and, most important in light of young men’s high school desires, the rearticulation of appropriate and valued adult working-class masculinity” (p. 91). According to Weis (2004), these men “challenge, through their day to day lives, traditional gendered boundaries and definitions deeply etched in prior working class hegemonic masculinity and working class family life . . . ” (p.93). In other words, Weis found among these men a general acceptance of a new set of attitudes and behaviors related to traditional male and female roles and expectations. Most notably, these new attitudes and behaviors featured less gendered roles within families.

Freie (2007), like Weis (2004), also discovered a change in attitude by working class families with regard to education. Freie’s (2007) study focuses on the identity formation of the White working class in a de-industrialized area of the northeastern United States. In her study, Freie (2007) points out, “all but one of the boys who spoke with me
envisioned attending college after high school” (p. 52). Additionally, she says, “they acknowledge, at least in words, the value of education to prepare them for future jobs and also to provide them with a life experience” (p. 52). However, Freie points out that most parents do not have a familiarity with the processes related to college, which places these students at a disadvantage when negotiating their postsecondary aspirations (p. 106). Like Weis, Freie (2007) found traditional gender roles being reworked, and the males articulating the need for postsecondary education (p. 111). Yet, Freie notes “these students are not for the most part pursuing the ‘college experience’ that includes living on campus, participating in student life, and finding themselves” (p. 113). Most, she points out, also have convoluted ideas regarding postsecondary participation in areas of tuition costs and time commitment and articulate that they will pay expenses by working their way through, or that they will work as well as take on full course loads (p. 113). However, Freie (2007) also argues this lack of understanding may actually be an advantage, as these students tend to select less challenging colleges to attend, therefore positioning themselves for an experience they may be better able to survive (p. 114). Noting these changes in identity formation of White working class youth, Freie (2007) concludes her study by writing:

Situated in a changing economy, we have seen this group reposition itself over the past two decades. This repositioning means more than simply attending college: it means developing new ways to think about occupations, class and gender roles both inside and outside the home. It has significant political consequences as the working class, poised between the middle-class and the poor, attempts to redefine itself
culturally as a middle-class group while fighting the declining value of a college credential, the tight job market . . . and confronting changing domestic roles. (p. 112)

The Working Class and Education

Past scholars note working class students usually completed their formal education at the high school level (MacLeod, 2009; Willis, 1977). However, recent research (Weis 1990; 2004; Freie, 2007) indicates that many working class youth are now gravitating towards college participation. This part of the literature review will examine current literature that explores how this change has impacted vocational education (Elkind 1998; Sax, 2007; Watkins, 2008) and how it has posed new issues for the working class youth participating in postsecondary pursuits (Reay, David and Ball, 2005; Walpole, 2007).

Vocational Education: Skills for Trades

For many working class youth, vocational tracking during high school functioned to provide them a particular skill with which they could find employment, as “the origins of vocational education had to do with the means for preparing a working class to meet the needs of an industrial economy” (Watkins, 2008, pp. 46-47). However, Sax (2007) highlights the devaluation of vocational education over the past three decades when he states:

Vocational education lost whatever prestige it had, and came to be viewed in some quarters very nearly as a dumping ground for the mildly retarded. Principals and superintendents began to see classes in auto mechanics and welding as expensive
diversions from the schools’ core mission of ensuring that every student would go to college. (Sax, 2007, p. 123)

Research by Elkind (1998) further supports how skilled trade positions have become devalued as a college for all mentality has become embedded in the current educational system:

There is little social support for what had been called the forgotten half, the 50% of high school students who do not go on to college. We are so focused upon the academics that we do not value the skills and abilities of those people whom we rely upon in our everyday lives: the plumbers, electricians, carpenters, painters and auto mechanics, not to mention the service people in stores, restaurants, and offices . . . in our society, high school students who are not on the academic track may feel they are second rate citizens and if they are in a vocational school, may be called, derusively, ‘vokies.’ (p. 170)

Watkins (2008) also discusses the changes that have occurred in vocational education over the past thirty years as the United States has become less industrialized. In response to the changing economics, Watkins (2008) writes, “massive economic changes on the horizon meant that the educational system as a whole would require the same kind of comprehensive overhaul that had marked the early twentieth century, only this time in the service of postindustrial labor requirements” (p. 7). One major change Watkins (2008) notes is the future expected demand of better trained workers, who will need some form of postsecondary training. Thus, Watkins (2008) writes, “vocational education went from cooling out expectations to heating up expectations” (p. 3). Additionally, according
to Watkins (2008), this shift has not only affected the educational aspirations of the working class, but also their identity formation. He argues:

"Educationally, the making of a working class had been located in a separate identified secondary school vocational track and strongly linked with the cooling-out process. With the heating up of expectations in contrast, the primary location of class formation moves to a much more heterogeneous and shifting ensemble of post-secondary programs and institutions that connects four-year undergraduate program with community colleges, distance learning, continuing education, certificate programs, tech schools, and online universities. The 'voc ed' of the past was immediately identifiable by its separate track status in secondary school. As the 'voc ed' of the present, however, this complex of post-secondary education represents a more complicated ensemble of relations (p. 4).

Watkins (2008) further argues that “class formation continues to be crucial even in these new conditions” because class formation has its roots in vocational training which is now undergoing many changes (p. 8).

Collins (1971) also addresses the need for postsecondary education for the working class in what he argues is the “functional and conflict theories of educational stratification” (p.1002). Collins (1971) contends that two possibilities exist with regard to this need: a functional theory, in which additional educational is needed in order to keep up with the demands of an advanced industrialized society, and a conflict theory, in which the need for higher or more advanced education is actually the result of dominant
status groups attempting to monopolize the jobs market by demanding their own cultural standard.

**College Education: Challenges to Climbing Higher**

Research by Reay et al. (2005) in Great Britain notes several challenges faced by working class students as they attempt to address the changes as noted by Watkins (2008) and transition into postsecondary education. Much like vocational students in the United States, the students in Reay et al.’s (2005) study sought a college degree in order to position themselves more favorably within the workforce due to shifting economics. However, Reay et al. (2005) note class inequalities in areas of material, practical and psychological foundations necessary for success in postsecondary education. Most notably, being able to cope and respond were part of those characteristics listed as being needed for student success, but were often lacking in the working class student (p. 106). The researchers also found the working class students were limited by choice, the need to stay partially employed, a lack of belongingness, and the demand of class transition. Reay et al. (2005) point out that for the working class student, two noted transitions had to occur: one in to higher education and one in to a higher social class. However, the transition into a higher social class often functioned as a barrier as students often lacked the cultural capital necessary to transition up (p. 96).

Reay et al. (2005) placed their study within a Bourdieuan framework, and noted, “working class acquiescence . . . is the product of opportunities and constraints framing the individual’s earlier life experiences” (p. 24). However, they also point out, “there are different working class fractions with differing priorities in relation to risk, challenge and
fitting in” (p. 83). Yet, these authors argue the similarity of choice constriction in some form, was shared by all the working class students studied. For some, this restriction presents itself in the form of self-exclusion, or rather, “finding out what you cannot have” then making choices based on what remains (p. 85). According to Reay et al. (2005), constriction presents itself in the forms of university choice, with location often being the deciding factor (p. 86), and with degree choice, with cost and completion of degree time factored in, dictating options (p. 87).

Like Reay et al. (2005), Walpole’s (2007) examination of first-generation, working-class American students’ access, experience, and outcomes of college attendance draws from Bourdieu's theory on social reproduction, and looks to see what contributes to the retention and attrition rates of this particular demographic of student. Walpole (2007) suggests that an identifying term for these students be “economically and educationally challenged (EEO) students” (p. 82), as both characteristics were present in the findings. Walpole (2007) found these students have less rigorous high school academics, have less information regarding college admissions culture, apply less frequently to college, attend less selective institutions, have less time to study due to work obligations, are less persistent and are less likely to graduate (p. 81).

Walpole (2007) maintains that “whatever the reasons, research has consistently found that low-SES students are less likely to aspire to, apply to, be prepared for, or enroll in postsecondary education than higher SES students” (p. 31). This may in part because, “these students are less likely than their peers to view college as a realistic option and are more likely to see employment options as more comfortable” (p.31). In
addition to examining issues of cultural capital, Walpole (2007) also paid close attention to the role of habitus, noting that habitus not only functions to lower aspirations of these students, but also functions to create self-defeating resistance (p. 23). However, due to the transposable nature of habitus, Walpole (2007) writes, “a low-SES student can adopt new values, or habitus elements, as a result of novel experiences, historical changes in the material environment, or exposure to another individual’s habitus, which are possible in the college environment” (p. 23).

These studies indicate that for working class students attempting postsecondary education, multiple challenges exist. These students may suffer from choice constriction (Reay et al., 2005) brought on by academic under preparedness (Walpole, 2007), geographic proximity or outside work/family obligations (Reay et al., 2005). Socially, they may not have a sense of postsecondary belongingness (Longwell-Grice, 2002; Reay et al. 2005), or they may lack the skills needed to properly navigate necessary non-academic student support processes such as admission and financial aid (Longwell-Grice, 2002; Walpole, 2007). Due to these challenges, many working class students often fail to persist or finish their programs of study.

Another consideration with regard to challenges the working class face when attempting postsecondary education is that of “maximally maintained inequality.” “Maximally maintained inequality” is used to describe the realignment of the social structure in response to the working class’ advent into higher education (Raftery & Hout, 1993). Research of the Irish working class by Raftery and Hout (1993) found that although “class differences in educational attainment declined, class barriers were not
removed; they simply became less consequential because the educational system expanded to the point where it could afford to be less selective” (p. 41). As a result, the class order was maintained via an upward shift for all classes. Further study of this phenomenon by Hout (2004) also indicated that although educational opportunity may be expanded, the persistence of intergenerational educational inequality still exists. For example, although the working class may engage in postsecondary education, it instigates into action a shift that increases the expectations for all layers of the strata system, thus resulting in maintenance of the status quo.

**Whiteness**

Since this study focuses specifically on White working class males, literature reviewed also includes that related to Whiteness (Roediger, 1991; Wray, 2006; Wray & Newitz, 1997) and social class stratification within the social construction of Whiteness (Duncan 1999; Guess, 2006; Hartigan, 2005; Owen, 2007; Roediger, 1991; Winders, 2003; Wray, 2006; Wray & Newitz, 1997).

Roediger (1991) contends that historically, the term “White” often referred to the first white skinned Europeans to travel to America (p. 21) However, he argues the term actually evolved out of the free labor market, as do Wray and Newitz (1997) who write, “critics of whiteness understand race to be socially constructed, not a biological category (p. 3).

Roediger (1991) illustrates this by discussing how early nineteenth century White Irish American laborers wanted to be socially higher than the Blacks with whom they shared social status. Being of Celtic origin, the Irish were not considered White by the
mainstream Whites of Anglo-Saxon decent; the Irish were viewed as a separate and inferior race. However, by the mid-1800s, through the adoption of Black prejudice, Irish-Americans began to assimilate into White American culture, as they adopted the common ideology espoused by the dominant White Anglo-Saxon American: the idea that Blacks were inferior to Whites. Other ethnic groups entered mainstream American Whiteness using this route as well, and the racial divide between Black and White privileges widened (p. 150).

Supporting the idea that Whiteness is a social construct, Wray (2006) addresses the political and economic ties to that particular racial identity when he writes, “Whiteness is most often used as analytical shorthand to refer to the psychological and cultural advantages and the economic and political privileges of having white or light colored skin, where skin color is conceptualized as a marker of racial identity” (p. 5).

**Whiteness Studies**

Whiteness studies first emerged in the United States in the 1990s, and explored the issues of cultural, political and economic advantages based on racial domination. Owen (2007) addresses how the mechanisms of Whiteness function as a racial oppressor. He also identifies the central functional properties of Whiteness, and how they lead to the reproduction of a racialized social system, through member self-identification, acceptance of superior social location, and the normalization of that particular racial group's culture. Owen (2007) contends if Whiteness is viewed as more than just a social identity, and examined as an actual structuring process within the social system itself, it can be challenged and resisted (p. 205).
To clarify as to why Whiteness should be studied, Guess (2006) writes, “the goal of whiteness studies is to reveal and to share new knowledge about a seemingly under-investigated social phenomena; namely the social construction of whiteness” (p. 653).

Understanding how the forces of racism work are critical, Guess (2006) indicates, for when practiced with intent, racism can cause structural consequences that clearly privilege one race over another, and when practiced by consequence, racism can manifest itself into, and be reflected, in areas such as educational opportunity, economic differences, and health care access (p. 652).

Guess (2006) points out in the United States a process of signification, domination, and legitimating succeeded in creating a privileged White racial status for those considered White. According to Guess:

the structuration of America's racialized society began first with the growing significance of whiteness . . . the second stage of this process is observed by domination of the social system by the white actors . . . the last dimension of the structuration of American race relations refers to the legitimating (normative rules). (p. 663)

Once this process was completed, White privilege existed in the United States.

**Boundary Theory and Whiteness**

Wray (2006) discusses the lowest strata of Whiteness: that of the poor White, with relationship to boundary theory in order to explain how social stratification and gender differences can create complexities within a single constructed group. Using boundary theory, Wray (2006) demonstrates how even within the realm of Whiteness, power
disparities do exist. Wray (2006) presents two types of boundaries that contribute to social organization: symbolic and social. He differentiates between the two by pointing out that symbolic boundaries are cognitive in that they are collective, mental representations, which, when popularized, and coupled with power, can result in laws, and then these laws, in turn, become social boundaries. For example, ethnicity divides humankind into categories on the basis of ethnic origin. When this happens, the symbolic boundary becomes a social boundary when racial laws, such as the prohibition of interracial marriage, are enacted (p. 9). Unlike symbolic boundaries, social boundaries become embedded not in cognitive, but in collective practices. This means that social boundaries become naturally accepted, giving them a greater degree of power and authority, while at the same time innocently appearing to be part of the natural order. Wray (2006) points out these boundaries are not static, and historically have proven to be quite fluid. It is this historical significance in which he explores the social disparities within the single confines of whiteness, focusing his discussion on the evolutionary path of poor Whites in the United States and how they have been marginalized (p. 14).

Hartigan (2005) also addresses the issue of White poverty within the context of White racial analysis when he writes, “the power and problem of whiteness as a subject of cultural critique lies in the treatment of white racial identity as a uniform social construct and a coherent, historically determined ideology of dominance” (p. 26). Hartigan (2005) argues although Whiteness is associated with domination and hegemonic behavior, there exists an internal class disparity that affects levels of dominance and social power within that order. For the lower classes of Whiteness, in particularly those
who are poor, domination is questionable (p. 2). Hartigan (2005) illustrates how particular contexts and locations affect White racial dominance (p. 15). He stipulates that in the past:

class identities operate as a cultural continuum; whatever basis they draw from a relation to the means of production, they are, too, animated as a chain of signifiers and their connotations, defined in difference from other positions in the social order. (p. 51)

Hartigan (2005) also writes:

the ranges of conditions in the ‘social bottom’ of whiteness and the variety of cultural objectifications used to interpret the significance of the stratum, such as ‘redneck’ and ‘hillbilly,’ are critical for comprehending how racial discourses in this country have developed and continue today. (p. 25)

**White Otherness in the United States**

White poverty in the United States predates the birth of the nation itself. As early as the mid-eighteenth century, affluent Whites were making the distinction between themselves and those of the poorer, manual labor classes. Documentation as early as 1728 supported the idea that wealthy men perceived lower status Whites as a distinctively inferior group (Wray, 2006, p. 22). Use and development of derogatory names during the early nineteenth century to identify this lower social order within the larger framework of Whiteness clearly reveals the evolution of stratified layers within the collective of Whiteness based on social class order (Hartigan, 2005, p. 149). As a result, this bottom layer of White stratification became “Othered.”
The idea of “The Other” was first introduced by Said (1978) in the postcolonial work, *Orientalism*. In this work, Said (1978) specifically illustrated how western culture misrepresented eastern culture through a process of exaggerated stereotyping and overgeneralization. According to Moosavinia, Niazi and Ghaforian (2011), this process as explored by Said is one “in which the Self [dominant group] is privileged and has upper hand to define, reconstruct the passive, silent and weak Other” (p.103). Thus the dominant culture creates the way in which the less dominant culture is viewed, focusing on negative and derogatory presentations that accentuate the weaknesses of the less dominant groups. Wray and Newitz (1997) point out how this process occurred within the White race in the United States and how poor Whites became the recipients of a “classed and racialized identity degraded by dominant whiteness” (p. 5). As a result, the poor Whites in the United States were “Othered” by members of their own race.

Winders’ (2003) analysis of travel diaries written in the late nineteenth century supports this idea. Winders’ (2003) analysis indicates that poor Whites during the post-Civil War era were described harshly as being horrific in appearance, worthless and the cause of their own misfortune. Concluding her analysis, Winders (2003) writes “a class distinction between good and bad whites is produced as middle class white Americans separate their own racial identity from that of the bad (and poor) whites” (p. 57). This was because “poor white Southerners directly challenged, through their mere existence, unspoken connections between a white identity and economic privilege” (p. 57). In a modern study of the Appalachian area, Duncan (1999) notes that within the poverty-stricken mining community she studied, the White working poor were marginalized by
the White middle class who lived in the area. She observed the White middle class “did not want their children to associate with poor kids, and they deliberately maintained a two-class system” (p. 194).

Wray and Newitz (1997) also write of how the construction of Whiteness varies across lines of class and how these constructions can also vary with regard to place and time, often creating power disparities and fluctuating levels of privilege (p. 4). Furthermore, they contend, “there is a growing need for developing our understanding of how the construction of whiteness varies across lines of class, gender, and sexuality and how these constructions vary according to the politics of place and region” (p. 4).

An example of how Whiteness can vary across class lines is illustrated by the hillbilly stereotype often associated with the Appalachian area. Williams (2002) points out in the Appalachian region of the United States, two poor White stereotypes emerged in the early twentieth century; that of the “stalwart mountaineer” which held a positive connotation, and that of the “ignorant and impoverished hillbilly” which held a negative one (p. 199). Williams (2002) claims these were the product primarily of local color writers who, through their writings, were “successful in fixing the representation of mountain people in the American mind” (p. 198). As a result, the “hillbilly,” usually featured as illiterate and/or ignorant has become a well-known stereotype that represents White Appalachian culture (p. 198). As for those of the Appalachian area, Shapiro (1978a) writes that inclusion within this group has been viewed “as an undesirable condition . . . . in need of remedial action,” (p. 60) partly due to cultural misrepresentations by local color writers and misperceptions drawn by outside visitors to
the area (Williams, 2002). Thus, those residing in the area have historically been “othered” due to misrepresentation and overgeneralization of the area.

**Appalachia**

Since this proposed study is geographically set in an area known as Appalachia, literature reviewed also includes that related to Appalachian culture and history (Drake, 2001; Eller, 2008; Jackson, 2006; Jones, 1994; Williams, 2002; Wilson, Henry and Peterson, 1997; Woodrum 2004; 2009) as well as the historical relationship between the Appalachian area and formal education (Ambler, 1951; ARC, 2010; Bradbury, 2008; Caudill, 1974; Howley, 2006; Powell, 2008; Whisnant, 1983; Williams, 2002).

**Defining Appalachia**

Ergood and Kuhre (1983) point out that with so much geographic and socio-economic diversity present within the region, defining what is “Appalachian” based on common set of characteristics is difficult. They note although the area is named for the Appalachian Mountains, the actual topography of Appalachia varies, from steep mountains with deep valleys to gently rolling hills. Furthermore, much of the area is economically dominated by the coal industry; however, some areas, although indirectly impacted by the coal industry are not solely economically dependent on it. Additionally, the differences between rural and urban areas in job opportunities, lifestyle, and educational attainment also tend to vary throughout the region (p. 6). As for the population, although primarily populated by those of Anglo-Saxon heritage, the area is also home to those of Native American and Black descent as well as two well-known mixed race ethnic groups, the Melungeons of Tennessee and the Guineas of West
Virginia (Walls and Billings, 1983, p. 46). The area also has a history of being settled by waves of particular European ethnic groups, particularly throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most recently, large numbers of Spanish-speaking immigrants are settling in many areas of Appalachia, bringing with them a strong Latino influence (Williams, 2002).

However, despite much inner diversity, Ergood and Kuhre (1983) do offer a definition when they write,

the region can be defined in terms of its physical geographic features, its economic relationship to metropolitan America, its demographic characteristics, and the homogenous nature of its coal-based economy. It can also be defined in terms of certain shared indexes of low incomes, poor health, inadequate housing and substandard education. (p. 6)

The Appalachian Regional Commission (2009) physically defines the current geographic area as an area that covers over 205,000 square miles and follows the area along the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It touches 12 states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia; and includes the entire state of West Virginia.

However, Williams (2002) defines postmodern Appalachia as “a zone where diverse groups have interacted with one another and with a set of regional and sub-regional environments over time” (p. 12). He prefers to use this definition as “these interactions go further toward defining the region than a specific set of cultural or socioeconomic or
environmental markers” (p. 12). Most notably, he includes Pennsylvania because its industrialization and later, de-industrialization have markedly affected the area in its northern regions (p. 12).

**Whiteness and the Working Class in Appalachia**

According to Williams (2002), the first non-native American explorers entered the Appalachian region as early as the late sixteenth century in search of gold (p. 20). By the early nineteenth century, Spanish exploration had already touched the southern most regions, Germans and Irish had predominately migrated from Pennsylvania into Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas, and the English had extended their settlements into the middle of the region, pushing the Native Americans of the region southward (pp. 33-42). Williams (2002) points out the earliest non-native Americans to settle in the area were primarily the politically and religiously discontented of Western Europe searching for religious and political freedom (p. 31).

Although most of the first non-native settlers were primarily Scotch-Irish, English or German, large influxes of poor, White working class immigrants from Eastern Europe and Ireland entered the area during the industrial boom of coal mining, timbering and salt working of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Jackson, 2006, p. 28). Although Native Americans and African-Americans have always been present in the region, and the ethnic mix of the Whites present created a vast diversity within the region itself, the area from a racial perspective has historically been considered largely White (p. 32). Within that Whiteness, Eller (2008) points out that historically “the growing gap between mountain middle class and working class people . . . raised troubling questions
of about the direction of American culture and the equity of unregulated development” in the area (p. 222).

Today, the Appalachian region is predominately White, and predominantly working class and poor, having the highest concentration of White poverty in the United States present within its geographic area (ARC, 2009). Although the region significantly improved socioeconomically during the latter part of the twentieth century, and continues to improve today, a gap still exists with the rest of the nation in areas related to income, health, job security and education (Eller, 2008, p. 221).

**Appalachian Culture**

According to Woodrum (2004), Appalachians differ from mainstream America in language, history, and traditions; the geographic isolation of the area that lasted, for some areas, well into the twentieth century is thought to have contributed to this. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, outside misrepresentations and negative perceptions of the area, with regard to education and tradition, have often resulted in misconceptions. Billings (1999) contends “the persistent belief in Appalachian distinctiveness thus results from a persistent way of writing about the mountain region rather than from the region’s actual past” (p. 12).

Appalachian scholar Williams (2002) addresses this issue and notes that early outside perceptions about the area were often influenced by negative presentations of information regarding the area. For example, in 1900, the literacy rate in Clay County, Kentucky was 84 percent for men and 70 percent for women. Williams (2002) writes, “an illiteracy rate of 16 and 30 percent could be seen as alarming or hopeful, a glass half empty or half full”
(p. 202). For outsiders critically viewing the area and interpreting these rates Williams (2002) points out the perspective was one of “empty,” thus promoting an educational missionary movement that brought the settlement school movement to the area in the early twentieth century.

Brosi (2006) also argues that stereotypes brought to life by local color writers and visitors to the area in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally portrayed Appalachians in a negative manner, and the general culture as a subculture that lags behind mainstream America (p. 201). Like Brosi, Abramson & Campbell (2006) also note these misconceptions when they write:

long before Appalachia was thought of as a distinct place or particular concept of it was codified by the federal government, inhabitants of the mountain region began to acquire an identity based on sweeping negative concepts … to many Americans the very word Appalachian connotes isolation, poverty, backwardness, and peculiarity… this durable construct presents Appalachia as an isolated internal colony predominately inhabited by clannish, violence-prone Anglo-Saxon poor relations of the American family who were left behind. (p. 239)

However, in addition to the native Americans originally present in the area, the waves of various ethnic groups that settled the Appalachian area at various times during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created multiple sub regions. Thus, due to the multiple ethnicities of the immigrants who settled the area, a large variety of beliefs, values, behaviors and ideologies exist within the area today (Jackson, 2006). Couto (2002) claims it is the culture of these sub regions that outsiders often encounter and
contribute to the whole area, not realizing the amount of diversity that exists within the region.

However, although diversity exists within the region, at the core of these various external trappings can be found a basic set of traits. Ergood (1983), after compiling traits noted from the studies of twenty Appalachian scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, describes the inhabitants as “independent, kin-involved people whose lives are closely bound to their physical environment, whose activities are traditional, and whose beliefs are fatalistic and religiously fundamentalist” (p. 39). Additionally, Appalachian writer Jones (1994) defines traditional Appalachian values as: “individualism, self-reliance and pride; religion; familism; love of place; neighborliness; traditionalism; personalism; humility and modesty; sense of beauty; sense of humor; sense of solidarity; and a strong sense of patriotism” (pp.13-138).

These traits, especially love of place and familism have been of particular interest to scholars (Bradbury, 2008; Howley, 2006; Powell, 2008; Woodrum 2004; 2009; Wright, 2010) who have studied the Appalachian area, especially in the area of educational attainment. According to Jones (1994), “Appalachian people are family centered…” (p. 75), and with regard to sense of place, he writes “it makes it hard for us to leave…and when we do, we long to return” (p. 99).

Woodrum (2004) studied how culturally inspired values of Southeastern Ohio Appalachians families influenced their views and perceptions of education and school participation. Woodrum (2004) contends that working class Appalachians place a greater value on community, allegiance to place and interrelationships, or what he terms
“gemeinschaft” values, rather than on competition and social mobility, or what he terms “gesellschaft” values. In his research, he found non-Appalachian Ohioans and teachers embraced “gesellschaft” values. And, although he writes, “the middle class Appalachians (families and teachers alike) adhere to the cultural values of the local community (gemeinschaft), even as they endorse “economically” the values of social mobility and competition (gesellschaft)” (p. 8), he points out “Appalachian families, however, both middle and working class, tend to place a greater emphasis on the value of interrelationships, their sense of community and their attachment to “our home” (p.8). Like Woodrum, Wright (2010) found in her study of Appalachian community college students in Eastern Kentucky a strong attachment to place. Furthermore, Wright contends this attachment heavily influences the career decisions of Appalachian students. She notes, “students’ relationship to place influenced the “what’s” and “why’s” of their postsecondary trajectories” (p. 163). This is because she found students often “. . . problematized and resolved place-base attachments and whether or not such applications allowed them to stay in the region . . .” (p. 163). Thus, many Appalachian students consciously selected post educational pursuits that would allow them to stay in their home areas, as they did not wish to leave their home area.

Culturally, another aspect the Appalachian area is also noted for its tradition of storytelling (Thompson and Moser, 2006). Storytelling provides not only a means of oral communication and entertainment, but also functions to strengthen the social bond between the teller and the listener (p. 153). Ross (2006) contends Appalachian storytelling traditions are derived from the multiple ethnicities of those who settled the
region, in addition to that of the native peoples. She notes, “In some four-generation Appalachian households at the onset of the twenty-first century, family stories were wedded to the land in the Indian way” (p. 1268). Furthermore, she claims, “this kind of oral education is life defining” (p. 1268). She argues that because of this oral tradition, storytelling has become an internalized aspect of Appalachian culture, as it “set the parameters of the world so that ever after people there and then would think in story form” (p. 1268).

Originally viewed as a quaint part of the Appalachian culture, Appalachian storytelling has now gained national recognition due to a revival movement celebrating it as a form of folk art (Williams, 2002). Although considered a professional performance art, storytelling in the Appalachian region is also seen as an everyday, natural part of home life as well as casually integrated into that of school and work by ordinary people. Thompson and Moser (2006) claim, “today, storytelling and related sayings may be the most common (and unconscious) form of traditional folklore still engaged in by regular folks in their daily lives” (p. 154).

**Appalachian Education and Deficit Labeling**

Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Appalachia’s high illiteracy rates and unsophisticated ways became culturally defining traits due to deficit thinking perpetuated by outside reformers who assessed the area based on their own cultural standards (Williams, 2002).

An early example of deficit thinking applied to the area is illustrated in a statement made by an early Appalachian educational reformer. Whisnant (1983) notes that in 1898,
early reformer George Vincent surmised after participating in a settlement school initiative the group he was a member of “had heard so many stories of the ignorance of the mountaineers that we were somewhat disappointed by their familiarity with a good many things we had expected them not to know” (as cited in Drake, 2001, p. 17).

Frost (1899) also addresses this issue of perception when he discusses the surprising resourcefulness of the native population, as noted by early outsiders who expected to find only ignorance. Frost writes “the latent ability of these people often shows itself in other lines, and is sometimes accidently discovered” (p. 7). Williams (2002) notes how mainstream cultural values were placed upon the Appalachian people in an effort to correct deficits found when outsiders used their own perspectives for viewing the area. He claims “the inculcation of middle-class norms along with a smattering of liberal learning was an extension of efforts begun by northern missionaries and educators at the turn of the century” (p. 329). Branscome (1983) also addresses this, with regard to outside educational influences, when he writes:

They continue to and intensify a channeling process begun by the earliest elementary teacher in areas such as Appalachia to send the culturally different student – ashamed of his background and ill-equipped to meet the needs of his region - into middle class society outside the region or out of productive society entirely. (p.282)

Thus, he argues:
For the black, Indian, Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, or Appalachian, the American educational process has been inadequate, and it has systemically devalued and attempted to destroy their cultural uniqueness. (p. 282)

However, Wilson, Henry and Peterson (1997) contend meaning and perception are culturally contextualized. After a ten year longitudinal study of White Appalachian rural youth and life satisfaction, Wilson et al. (1997) concludes, “life satisfaction of low-income, rural youth seemed to be influenced more extensively by personal meanings shaped within a particular cultural context rather than by traditional objective measures of life circumstance” (p. 443). They found the Appalachian youth in their study benefited from the “long histories of extended family ties, obligations and loyalty to and support from their homeplace” (p. 456) as “close proximity to one’s childhood home, which corresponds with a person’s aspirations, may enhance the perceived quality of life by providing psychological and material support in response to everyday stressors…as well as support in response to more serious crisis” (p. 456). Additionally, they argue, with regard to their study, “this study simply recognizes the existence of alternate pathways to life satisfaction which differ from the American ‘mainstream view’ that personal well-being is predominately a function of objective circumstances” (p. 457).

Howley (2006) argues that deficit thinking by those outside of the region still exists today. She addresses the idea of deficit thinking when she examines attachment to place and educational aspiration among Appalachian students. Of her findings, she claims that “rural children seek higher education within the context of their families’ commitment to place, which ultimately may mediate aspirations given that jobs requiring postgraduate
education in rural communities are rare” (p. 76). Because of this she argues,
“Commitment to place is a significant influence on rural families, mediating their job
choices. Such decisions . . . likely have implications for rural children’s own attachment
to place as well as for their educational and occupational plans” (p. 73). Furthermore, she
contends:

claims that rural children aspire to less education than do non-rural youth often
presume that economic mobility is the preeminent pursuit for social actors.
Education being the primary means to economic and social opportunities, lower
aspirations are often cast as a deficiency. . . Planning to remain in one’s local
community, however, may also be an important and decent aspiration, one that
education researchers should consider. (p. 66)

Thus, according to Howley (2006), lower aspirations which result in allowing one to
remain in the local community were preferred by these students, rather than higher
aspirations which would necessitate relocation from home. However, the selection of a
lower aspiration is often viewed by outside educational researchers as being a deficit.

**Appalachian Higher Education**

Despite its perceived educational backwardness, the Appalachian region has a long
history of formal higher education. Drake (2001) notes this when he writes:

The school in Appalachia has been part of the region’s story from the time of first
settlement in the mid-eighteenth century. The region’s first college, Augusta
Academy in Lexington, Virginia – the parent institution of what became Washington
and Lee University – was founded in 1749. And, as Scotch-Irish settlers moved into
East Tennessee, the Presbyterian “log cabin college” system spread with them.… Presbyterianism led in the early formation of colleges, but soon the Methodists, Baptists, and the Disciples joined in the formation of institutions of higher learning in the region. By 1850, there were at least twelve denominational colleges in Appalachia . . . . After the Civil War . . . five major state-supported universities within the region. . . . And the state supported normal school movement located nineteen other institutions within the region by 1910 . . . . Meanwhile, denominational and private colleges also proliferated throughout the region. Thus there has been a strong college and university presence in the region from a very early date. (p. 228)

As for today in the area, DeYoung, Glover and Herzog (2006) write:

Higher education in the Appalachian region includes a rich variety of institutions from the past and present that have had a significant impact . . . . Throughout the region, colleges and universities often evolved from normal schools and teachers’ colleges. Land-grant colleges have also played an important role in the region, and many that began as products of the Land Grant College Act of 1862 continue to the present as institutions important to the region. (p. 1520)

Reeves (2006) writes at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the area had 24 four-year universities, 48 universities, 2 technical colleges and 84 two-year colleges (p.1546). He also notes that “approximately one-third of all public higher education students” (p. 1546) enroll at the two-year colleges.
Persistence Issues

However, in November 2008, the Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education released the latest findings of a follow-up report to its 1992 report, *Appalachian Access and Success Study*. According to this report, Appalachian students still face barriers when attempting post-secondary education. This third report, of five, is just a piece of the study, *Access and Success – Appalachian Ohio: College Access, Retention, Postsecondary, and Completion*. Since 1992 this data has been gathered in an effort to identify key factors impacting the access and degree completion rates of Ohio Appalachian youth. Results of the report indicate educational preparation and funding are key issues that still serve as barriers to success for Appalachian students (Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education [OACHE], 2008).

Bradbury (2008) also studied the effects of college life on first generation Appalachian college students, and followed students through their first term. She found that for first year Appalachian students, barriers aside from the standard ones of financial and academic origins also included not feeling a sense of belonging; participants in the study indicated they often felt torn between two worlds. Socially, loyalty to the family unit took priority over school work. On the academic side, Bradbury (2008) found first generation students unprepared in meeting coursework expectations and demands. Many did not know how to read and study for exams and some did not read assignments at all, yet believed they were still doing well, displaying inaccurate perceptions of their own progress. Financial issues were also a concern and resulted for many in the engagement of part time jobs that conflicted or competed with their school work. Being first
generation students, many had no one to assist them in navigating college culture, and so, were less knowledgeable about the workings of the university system. Although the students studied displayed enthusiasm, Bradbury (2008) notes that overall, they were ill-equip to deal with the social, academic and financial demands of college, thus making their transition into college life much more difficult.

Like Bradbury, Powell (2008) found sociological factors impacting success when he examined the perceptions of Appalachian students had about postsecondary education. Powell’s intent was to understand factors that could possibly be contributing to or maintaining the educational gap between Appalachian students and the rest of those in the United States. Powell interviewed students attending two different schools, both located in the Ohio Appalachian area. Like Bradbury, Powell (2008) notes that the educational disadvantage experienced by Ohio Appalachian students is not only economically rooted, but is also affected by social, educational and structural inequalities. Thus Powell (2008) argues that even with adequate funding, these students still often failed to persist.

**West Virginia**

Although the Appalachian area touches thirteen states, West Virginia is the only state wholly enclosed within that designated region of the United States (ARC, 2010). Today, West Virginia’s population is 94.4% white, and its poverty rate is 17.4% (Census, 2010). Its high school graduation rate of young adults, ages 18-24, of 35.5% is slightly higher than the national average of 32.5%. The rate of postsecondary pursuit among this group, 47%, is only slightly lower than that of the national average of 50.4%. However, this rate
includes not only those who complete a program, but also those who attempt, yet do not complete postsecondary education. A more realistic figure of those who persist to completion is perhaps found among those who are 25 or older. College completion for this group is only at 22.8%, much less than the national average of 34.8% (Census, 2010).

**West Virginia Industry**

Although rich in natural resources, the state is historically known for its coal production during the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries (Williams, 2002). However, as early as 1910, the demand for the bituminous coal present in the region declined due to advances in alternate fuel usage, the creation of more efficient technology, and the popularity of conservation movements. Economically, this left the area in crisis for much of the twentieth century (p. 253).

Over the past thirty years, West Virginia has also seen a shift in its industrial sector. During the 1980s, service producing jobs replaced goods producing jobs in many rural areas of America (Duncan, 1999, p. 17). Williams (2002) also notes that Western coal became cheaper to obtain due to strip mining, becoming the preference of Midwestern utility companies. Then, in the 1990s, the high sulfur coal mine industry in West Virginia was affected by the Clean Air Act of 1990. Thus, the shift in industry, the economic preference for more easily accessible western coal, and the politics brought forth as a result of more eco-friendly practices has resulted in a decline in this particular sector of industry in West Virginia. In 1945, the state workforce included 150,000 coal miners; by 1999, there were just over 17,000 (p. 345).
According to Duncan (1999) the area was not only impacted economically, but also socially, by the coal industry. She argues that a two class system emerged in areas dominated by the coal industry, such as in southern West Virginia. Duncan (1999) noted historically this two class system featured a distinct line between management and labor, with a very wide gap in between. As a result, the operators and owners of the mines controlled the community with the labor faction firmly under their control: the middle class was virtually non-existent (p. 13). Duncan (1999) also notes that by the mid-twentieth century, after decades of labor solidarity struggle, miners finally won better wages and better conditions through the United Mine Workers of America and Bituminous Coal Operators Association. However, with the advent of modern technology, the need for workers was lessened, thus job numbers declined as a result (p. 16).

West Virginia Higher Education

Like that found throughout the Appalachian area, higher education has always existed in West Virginia. In the days before the Civil War, the area of present day West Virginia offered various types of academies and seminaries that catered to the more affluent middle classes (Ambler, 1951, p. 66). Yet, formal education itself suffered from what Ambler (1951) referred to as “arrested development” in the area of western Virginia, which today is West Virginia (p. 111). In the western areas, support for educational pursuits leaned heavily in favor of primary rather than secondary education (p. 127). As a result, prior to the Civil War, on a national scale, only about 1.5% of those
attending colleges in Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio were from present day West Virginia as “the region was not college minded” (p. 128).

Today, according to the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission [WVHEPC] (2008), West Virginia has twenty-one state supported entities of higher education, ten of which are state community and technical colleges (see Appendix B). Although West Virginia’s four year universities all adhere to academic admission requirements (WVHEPC, 2008), all ten state community and technical colleges practice enrollment policies that are “consistent with the ‘open admissions’ philosophy of the comprehensive community college” (WVCCTC Title §135-23-4, 2011). Therefore, in West Virginia, “admission to community and technical colleges is open to any person age eighteen or older and able to benefit from study at the community college level” (WVCCTC Title §135-23-3, 2011).

**West Virginia Community and Technical College System**

West Virginia’s ten community and technical colleges are predominately White, as reflected by the state’s overall ethnic diversity. Figures for 2007 also indicate that all but two institutions have higher numbers of women participating, with an overall enrollment ratio of 1:1.5, and completion rate of associate degrees of 1:1.8. Additionally, at all but two institutions, over half of the students enrolled receive Federal Pell (Title IV) grants (National Center for Educational Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System [NCES-IPEDS], 2008).

Since 2000, a seamless curriculum initiative has been implemented in West Virginia with the goal that it will “provide transition from one education level to another without
duplication” (Community and Technical College System of West Virginia [CTCSWV], 2011b). The EDGE program is one example of this initiative. A student participating in the EDGE program can earn up to a year of coursework that will count towards an associate’s degree, thus, many students in vocational and technical high schools elect to participate in this type of program. The Community and Technical College System of West Virginia (CTCSWV, 2011b) recently released its Target 2010 six-year strategic plan, with five goals designed to make access easier and increase enrollment in order to produce a stronger workforce for West Virginia (CTCSWV, 2011a). Additionally, special merit based funding known as the PROMISE Scholarship currently is available to West Virginia residents who meet certain academic requirements (College Foundation of West Virginia, 2009).

Enrollment at West Virginia’s ten community and technical colleges has increased from 23% in 1970 to 28% in 2006. As can been seen in Table 1, six of the ten institutions reported improved completion rates from 2004-2008, with four reporting a decrease (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and Community Technical College System [WVHEPC & CTCS], 2008).
Table 1

*WV Career Technical & Associate Degree Completion, Percent of Change 2004-2008*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community &amp; Technical College</th>
<th>Career Technical &amp; Associate Degree Completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percent of change 2004-2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Ridge</td>
<td>-2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgemont</td>
<td>-8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern WV</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanawha Valley</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountwest</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New River</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierpont</td>
<td>-26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern WV</td>
<td>-24.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WV Northern</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WVU at Parkersburg</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Data taken from National Center for Educational Statistics IPEDS Data Center

Yet, few students finish a one year certificate or two year technical degree program within three years. Graduation rates within 150% of the normal time to program completion range from 7-27%, with most schools reporting between 10-14% for the 2007 year (see Appendix A). Women were also reported as having higher rates of successful
program completion within the 150% normal time to program completion time period (NCES-IPEDS, 2008).

Large numbers of students do not enter the community and technical college prepared for college level work, extending the normal range of time necessary for program completion. The number of students needing a non-credit bearing developmental course increased during the 2007-2008 year, with 39.3% needing developmental reading, 43.9% needing developmental writing, and 50.8% needing developmental mathematics (WVHEPC & CTCS, 2008). All ten West Virginia community and technical colleges offer coursework in developmental mathematics and English. Because these courses serve as preparatory for college level work, they do not count towards the graduation requirement, therefore, the need to complete one or more results in the need for additional coursework. This thus results in an extended time needed for coursework completion.

Summary

In this literature review, I have reviewed the following literature streams: social class in the United States, social class reproduction, social stratification in American education, working class identity formation, the working class and education, Whiteness, Appalachia, and West Virginia. In examining the literature, I have explored scholarly works that discuss the stratification of social class, the theoretical framework of social class reproduction and the role educational systems play in replicating social class systems. I have also reviewed scholarly works related to the Appalachian context of this proposed study, with regard to Whiteness, education and West Virginia locality.
Chapter 3 – Methodology

“AI [Appreciative Inquiry] concentrates on exploring ideas that people have about what is valuable . . .” (Reed, 2001, p.2).

Introduction

This qualitative study examined perceptions of academic success held by White working class Appalachian males who had successfully completed or who were within one term of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia. Explored in this study were the participants’ perceptions of their educational success and the aspects of their lived experiences they felt had been conducive to their academic success. Through this research study, I attempted to answer the following research questions:

- What do White, working class Appalachian males define as “academic success”?
- How do these men perceive their own past and present academic successes? And,
- What do these men view as factors from their lived experiences that positively contributed to their academic success?

Participants selected for this study were White, working class Appalachian male students who had completed or who were within one term of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia.

Existing academic scholarship regarding the White working class includes literature that examines working class identity formation and issues related to the working class and education (Anyon, 1981; Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005; Bernstein, 1975; Da Silva et al., 2007; Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Finn 1999; Fine et al., 1997; Freie, 2007; Lareau,
Additional research has also addressed sociological issues that often impact educational attainment and pursuits of working class individuals (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Dolby & Dimitriadis, 2004; Fine et al., 1997; Kenway & Kraack, 2004; Reay et al., 2005; Zweig, 2000).

Related studies also explore White identity formation, Appalachian culture and the educational pursuits of Appalachian individuals (Bradbury 2008; Freie, 2007; Howley 2006; Powell 2008; Woodrum, 2004), yet few have specifically addressed how the White working class male of Appalachia views academic success. Considering the low level of postsecondary completion associated with this particular group, these gathered perceptions from those who were successful in the postsecondary arena may add insight to present literature that exists which explores the working class and their transition into higher education.

The primary purpose of this work was to better understand the participants’ perceptions of success and academic accomplishment. In keeping with this stated purpose, this study therefore sought to obtain the voice of the participants through the use of a case study approach and through Appreciative Inquiry.

**Theoretical Orientation: Case Study and Appreciative Inquiry**

For this research, I used a case study approach and an appreciative perspective informed by Appreciative Inquiry (AI). I chose a case study orientation as “case study research involves the study of an issue explore through one or more cases within a bounded system” (Creswell, 2007, p.73). This study was a collective case study in that I
used “multiple case studies to illustrate the issue” (p.74). Each individual participant was considered an individual case. According to Reed (2007) AI complements case study methodology noting that both case study methodology and AI explores phenomena that occur within a bounded context (p.60).

Participants in this study were those who were distinct in their demographic group for having achieved a particular level of postsecondary academic completion. This selection aligned with what Creswell (2007) states, in that:

one needs to find one or more individuals to study, individuals who are accessible, willing to provide information, and distinctive for their accomplishments and ordinariness or who shed light on a specific phenomenon or issue being explored. (p. 119)

Data was collected through the use of semi structured interview prompts that were used to elicit short narrative answers from the participants. Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out that personal narratives result in participant constructed meaning. Thus this method is important to scholarship as it is “particularly useful for giving . . . an insider’s view of a culture” (p. 115). By allowing participants to “construct their realities through narrating their stories” (Marshall & Rossman, 2002, p. 117), the voice of the participant may be heard (Marshall & Rossman, 2002, p. 118). This was the goal of this research. Additionally, since personal narrative is a storytelling form that is also considered part of Appalachian culture and is viewed as one of the most common forms of traditional folklore still practiced daily today (Thompson & Moser, 2006, p. 154) data collected in
the form of personal narratives also afforded a more culturally attuned form of participation since participants were all native Appalachians.

**Appreciative Inquiry**

As a native Appalachian researcher, my hope was that through the use of an appreciative perspective based on the tenets of Appreciative Inquiry, a more positive light could illuminate a geographic area that historically has been viewed through a negative lens, especially with regard to the educational attainment of its people (Ambler, 1951; Edwards et al., 2006; Teets, 2006; Williams, 2002). I also hoped that through the use of an appreciative and strengths-based perspective, the individual participants would feel empowered through their participation in this project.

As a research methodology, Appreciative Inquiry is used traditionally as a vehicle in organizational improvement. As an orientation, it is used to “systemically and deliberately ‘appreciate’ everything of value, then use the positive analysis to speculate on the potentials and possibilities for the future” (Cooperider et al., 2008, p. xxvii). Patton (2002) points out Appreciative Inquiry “is grounded in qualitative understandings . . . that includes a dialogue process among participants” (p. 181). It also focuses on accomplishments rather than on failures (Reed, 2007, p. 38). Additionally, Appreciative Inquiry informs scholarship by providing a pragmatic view as it focuses on the participant’s constructed meanings and interpretations (Reed, 2001, p. 65).

According to Patton (2002), Appreciative Inquiry integrates inquiry and action (p. 182). Patton (2002) writes, “the qualitative questioning and thematic analysis processes constitute a form of intervention by the very nature of the questions asked and the assets-
oriented framework used to guide analysis” (p. 182). Reed (2007) also contends that the use of Appreciative Inquiry affords participants a chance to concentrate and examine what is valuable to them, therefore stimulating thought as to how what is perceived as valuable may be facilitated into success building. Thus, through the use of an appreciative perspective guided by Appreciative Inquiry, the “emphasis is firmly on appreciating the activities and people, rather than on concentrating on their problems” (p. 2). Appreciating positive influences may then lead to an awareness through which the participants can understand and draw from in creating future success (Cooperider et al., 2008, p. 3). Therefore, although this study did include discussions of the hurdles encountered along the way, the focus of this study was not on the barriers faced, but rather on how the participants successfully navigated through the educational pipeline, and either circumvented or overcame any obstacles in their paths.

**Procedures**

Patton (2002) states that “qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples . . . selected purposefully” (p. 230). He also writes, “purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 230). Creswell (2007) further supports this idea, when he writes purposeful sampling “means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125).
This study features two layers of sampling. For site selection, I used stratified sampling and for participant selection, I used criterion sampling. According to Creswell (2007): 

researchers can sample at the site level, as the even level or process level, and at the participant level. In a good plan for a qualitative study, one or more of these levels might be present and they need to be identified. (p. 126)

Of the ten public community and technical colleges located in the state of West Virginia (see Appendix B), I purposely selected four from which to recruit participants for this study through the use of stratified sampling. I created my list of four community and technical colleges by using the table *WV Community & Technical College 2007 Graduation Rates* (see Appendix A). From this table, I selected two community and technical colleges with high percentages of male completers and two community and technical colleges with the low percentages of male completers recorded. In doing so, I created what Patton (2002) describes as a purposeful stratified sample. According to Patton (2002), such a sample may “capture major variations” (p. 240).

After selecting four colleges for this study, I then viewed the website directory for each of these four schools. Using the website directory, I created a list of the first five program coordinators of certificate and/or associate degree programs listed for each school (see Appendix C). I used this list of program coordinators to recruit potential participants for this study.

Because this study focused on White working class Appalachian males who had experienced academic success by successfully completing or who were within one term
of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia, the type of purposeful sampling used to generate participants was therefore criterion referenced. Creswell (2007) writes “criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 128).

Participants

The participants in this study were White working class Appalachian males who had completed or who were within one term of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia. Two participants from each of four different community and technical colleges was be used, for a total of eight participants. Participation in this study was voluntary. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

To recruit participants, I used the following protocol:

For each community and technical college on the Proposed Study Contact List (see Appendix C):

- I emailed the first program coordinator listed, informed him/her about the proposed study and ask him/her the best way to contact potential participants from that program of study
- I emailed the informed consent form, with a description of the study and my contact information to the program coordinator as part of the initial contact email
- For those who did not response within two days to the initial email, I made one follow-up telephone call, and if there was still no response, I moved on to the next program coordinator on the list
I continued to contact program coordinators regarding potential participants, contacting potential participants in the way suggested by the program coordinators, until I had a pool of three to five potential participants from each community and technical college.

The potential participants were then contacted by email or telephone, provided with a detailed summary of the research project, informed of how confidentiality would be assured, and had the informed consent process explained.

Potential participants were asked to agree to a one-on-one interview, lasting forty-five minutes to one hour, and to a second follow-up contact, through email, mail or telephone call, for member checking, to be held no later than one year after the initial interview.

Potential participants were then asked if they would like to participate in the study, and when interest was expressed, each was scheduled for a one-on-one meeting with the researcher at a location of his choice. Potential participants were also informed of their ability to reconsider their participation and withdraw from the study at any time.

Potential participants were contacted until at least two interviews per school had been conducted.

**Informed Consent**

At the beginning of the scheduled meeting, prior to beginning the interview, I reviewed the research project with the participant, and presented the informed consent form when I meet with each at a location of his choosing (see Appendix D). Glesne...
(2006) writes that the purpose of informed consent is to inform the participants their participation is voluntary, to inform participants of anything that might affect their well-being, and to inform the participants of their ability to discontinue participation at any time during the study (p. 132). Therefore, when I presented the informed consent form, I informed the participant of his voluntary status, discussed with him questions he may have had regarding aspects of the study that may have affected his well-being, and informed him of his ability to decline participation, or withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. I then asked him to sign the informed consent form, and provided him with a copy.

Confidentiality

Included on the “consent to participate” form was a statement informing participants only my dissertation committee and I would have access to the materials and data used in this study. Glesne (2006) addresses confidentiality when she writes, “researchers must consciously consider and protect the rights of participants to privacy” (p. 138). Thus, to further protect the identity of the participants, each was assigned a pseudonym, and the master list of pseudonym assigned names was kept in a locked and password protected file, separate from all other data. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Digital audio files were also kept in a locked and password protected file. Hardcopies of transcribed interviews contained only the participants’ assigned pseudonym. Recordings, transcriptions and all information requiring confidentiality were kept and stored at all times in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office or home. All files kept in computer files were password protected at all times.
Benefits to the Participants

This study focused on positive experiences and used Appreciative Inquiry. Students participating in this study may have found, through self-reflection and self-analysis, a greater sense of self-satisfaction in what they have accomplished. It is also the hope of the researcher that participants used this self-satisfaction to develop a deeper appreciation of their own accomplishments.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

Data collected for this study occurred during semi-structured in depth interviews that lasted forty-five minutes to one hour and were conducted at a location chosen by the participant. Each interview was conducted individually. The data consisted of information obtained from a demographic questionnaire each participant was asked to complete and from their responses to semi-structured interview prompts collected during the interview.

In order to focus the interview discussion, the participant was asked to complete a demographic information sheet then an interview schedule with focusing questions was reviewed (see Appendices E and F). According to Patton (2002), interview prompts can be beneficial by maximizing the information gathered when dealing with a limited time frame. Prompts that focus the discussion can also provide a degree of consistency when more than one individual is being interviewed, while at the same time offering a degree of freedom and flexibility for response within the context of the topic to be explored (p. 343). Since this study employed an appreciative perspective based on Appreciative
Inquiry, it included prompts (see Appendix F) that focused on “not just about what is being appreciated but also about what helped it to happen and possibilities for the future” (Reed, 2007, p. 72).

The interview prompts were structured and intended to elicit personal narratives about lived experiences that aligned with the Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny principals of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008, p. 34). According to Cooperrider et al. (2008), Appreciative Inquiry begins with a look at the past with the Discovery Phase. In this phase, questions related to the participant’s past academic successes were asked. In the next phase of Appreciative Inquiry, the future is addressed with the Dream Phase. In this phase, the participant was asked to envision his future and asked about his hopes for the future, with regard to his current academic status. In the third phase of Appreciative Inquiry, the present is examined with the Design Phase. During this phase, the participant was asked to project how future success could be achieved by students who attend school. And in the final phase of Appreciative Inquiry, the Destiny Phase, sustaining and nurturing the future is discussed. In this final phase, the participant was asked what he had learned about himself and his academic success that could help him in the future (pp. 43-48).

Thus, during the interview for this study, participants were asked to share stories featuring meaningful aspects of their lived experiences which they felt had contributed to or influenced their own self-defined academic success. Various levels of educational experience and positive influences throughout the participants’ lives were explored. Participants were asked to reflect upon the past and make projections for the future
regarding their academic success. Challenges and struggles were also addressed, but only within the context of how these were successfully navigated or confronted.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

With regard to analysis and interpretation, Patton (2002) contends, “A design specifies the unit or units of analysis to be studied” (p. 228). He also states, “often individual people . . . are the unit of analysis” (p. 228). Therefore, for this research study, each individual participant was treated as a single case and each case was considered an individual unit of analysis. Thus, in this study, each individual case was organized, coded and evaluated for emergent themes. Then, each individual case was compared in cross-case analysis in order to discover any overall emergent themes or variations among the cases.

According to Creswell (2007) “the data collected in a narrative study needs to be analyzed for the story they have to tell, a chronology of unfolding events, and turning points or epiphanies” (p. 155). However, with this type of data collection comes what Glesne (2006) terms “fat data” (p. 151) that requires “methodical organization” (p. 151). In order to organize and keep track of data in this research study, I used coding schemes and analytic files that helped me to store and organize my own thoughts and those of my research subjects (p. 149). I began by organizing my analytic files by generic categories that included the interview transcripts, demographic questionnaire, and my field notes. As my analysis progressed, I added additional files that were more specific, such as those related to the analysis of data, my analytic thoughts regarding relative connections made
with the literature, and data and notable quotes from the participants which I felt illustrated specific themes.

Patton (2002) states that “developing some manageable classification or coding scheme is the first step of analysis” (p. 463). Thus, I used open coding to develop categories by re-listening to and reading over the verbatim transcripts of the interviews, looking for patterns and allowing single concepts or central ideas that were present in the data to emerge. After categories were developed, I used axial coding to generate themes. The qualitative data analysis software known as Weft QDA (Fenton, n.d.) was used to help organize and manage the data. Cross case analysis was then used to check for similarities and differences among the cases. After analysis, the data was interpreted. According to Patton (2002):

Interpretation, by definition, involves going beyond the descriptive data.

Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world. (p. 480)

However, Patton (2002) cautions against the temptation to make linear causal analysis that lead to simplistic statements of cause and effect in interpreting the data, and reminds that only through a holistic approach can the complexities of reality be genuinely presented (p. 481). Therefore, I looked at the data, as Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest:
Evaluating the data for their usefulness [so that I may] determine how useful the data segments drawn on to support the emerging story are in illuminating the questions being explored and how they are central to the story that is unfolding . . .” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 162).

In interpreting the data, I viewed themes and patterns present in each of the participant narratives to see how they gave insight to the stated research questions of this research study and the literature reviewed. Then I wrote an interpretation of the overall cross case analysis.

**Credibility**

In order to strengthen the credibility of my research, I used rich description, member checking, negative case analysis, and reflexivity. In qualitative research these strategies are used to ensure credibility and validity (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). I used thick description in gathering, analyzing and reporting my findings. Patton (2002) states, “thick, rich description provides the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting” (p. 437). Glesne (2006) further notes how immersion into the context of the study through the use of rich description strengthens validity (p. 37). Patton (2002) also writes how “thick evaluation descriptions take those who need to use the evaluation findings into the experience” (p. 438). Member checking was also employed. Creswell (2007) states, “in member checking, the researcher solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (p. 209). Glesne (2006) further defines member checking as reviewing with the participants’ drafts of the final report analysis in
In order to ensure accuracy of representation (p. 38). I reviewed my findings with each of the participants in order to ensure their perspectives were accurately depicted.

Also during this study, I was mindful of the emergence or presence of any negative or disconfirming cases and included and analyzed any that emerged. Creswell (2007) contends negative case analysis functions as a validation strategy because the contradictory findings found within these cases can be used to further develop the working hypothesis, expanding its perimeters so all cases are considered, with none being eliminated (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Patton (2002) also points out that while confirming cases add richness and depth to a study, disconfirming cases function in the same way, adding validity to the study by acting as “exceptions” (p. 239). And finally, I used reflexivity in order to be aware of my own bias and positionality. Glesne (2006) describes reflexivity as “the ways of monitoring and using subjectivity during the interview process” (p.125). Patton (2002) further addresses reflexivity by offering a reflexive triangulation through which:

reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports. (p. 65)

Thus, when being reflexive, the researcher maintains distinctions between self, those being studied, and those who are receive information regarding those studied (Patton, 2002, p. 66). According to Patton (2002), the use of voice can be used to display this subjectivity. Therefore, I demonstrated my reflexivity by employing first person and
writing in an active voice to convey my self-awareness when describing my research and its findings.

**The Researcher: An “Insider”**

I chose to do my research in my own Appalachian native area, on a demographic population of which I do share some aspects. I would describe myself as a White, working class native born Appalachian who became a first generation college student. In these aspects – race, class, place of origin, and first generation postsecondary participation status, I am similar to those who participated in this study. However, I did not attend a two year community college prior to university attendance, nor am I a male. In these aspects: college-type experience and gender, I am not similar to those who participated in this study.

As a native Appalachian, I conducted what Glesne (2006) refers to as “backyard research” (p. 31). Glesne (2006) points out this type of research offers advantages, such as easy access and already established rapport (p. 31). As a researcher, I feel my “insider” status offered a distinct advantage. Appalachia has a long history of being described through the eyes of “outsiders,” often resulting in many misconception and misleading descriptions about the area (Abramson & Haskell, 2006; Billings, 1999; Drake, 2001; Edwards et al., 2006; Williams, 2002). As an “insider,” I recognize and understand preconceived negative misrepresentations and stereotypes associated with the Appalachian people. Additionally, my participation in advanced higher education has afforded me various theoretical perspectives on working class ideology, and Appalachian culture which the typical “insider” has little, if any awareness. Thus, through depth of
understanding and conscious awareness, I was able to maintain sight of my positionality and I conducted this research with the needed degree of neutrality necessary.

Summary

In this section, I have explained the methodological approach for my research study. I discussed the plan’s theoretical orientation, explaining how it utilized both Appreciative Inquiry and a case study approach. I also explained how in my role as researcher, I used this type of methodology to give voice to the participants regarding their views on academic success. I also outlined my method of participant selection, and indicated I used a qualitative data analysis program to organize and manage the data collected. I also included how the data is represented as individual descriptive case studies.
Chapter 4 – Findings: Voices From the Summit

The economic downturn has produced two new realities for West Virginia community and technical colleges: higher student enrollment and flat state funding to support the delivery of education and training programs. Additionally, West Virginia’s community and technical colleges face the continuing challenge of serving a population of students for whom life – unemployment, other financial issues and family obligations – often gets in the way of completing a program of study. West Virginia’s community and technical colleges must find a way to serve all students, regardless of their life circumstances, so they can earn credentials that will allow them to better themselves in today’s marketplace.” (CTCSWV, 2010, p.2)

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of academic success held by White working class Appalachian males who have completed, or who were within one term of completing a program of study at one of ten community and technical colleges in West Virginia. This study explored the definitions of academic success held by the participants, their perceptions regarding their own past and present academic successes, and their views as to what aspects of their lived experiences they felt had contributed to their academic achievements. This study involved eight participants and four different community and technical colleges in the state of West Virginia. It also utilized an appreciative inquiry approach.

Data for this research project was gathered primarily through individual semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant. According to Marshall and
Rossman (2006), interviews as a data collection strategy, “capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants’ own words” (p. 55.). Furthermore, Marshall and Rossman support the use of interviews when “the purpose of the study is to uncover and describe the participant’s perspectives on events” (p. 102). Therefore, using semi-structured interviews as a data collection method supported the main goal of this research: that of capturing the participant’s perspective. In presenting my findings in this chapter, I have used quotes and summarized findings from the semi-structured interviews that I conducted to give voice to the participants.

Data was also collected through the use of a demographic questionnaire which participants were asked to complete at the beginning of their scheduled interviews. The questionnaire asked the occupational and academic history of the participant and his family, and allowed this information to be presented in a comprehensive, yet concise manner. I reviewed the questionnaire with each participant at the start of the interview; it functioned to provide talking points for beginning the interview. In addition, since participants self-selected for this study, the questionnaire also served as a screening device to ensure participants did fit the criteria of the study.

After conducting each semi-structured interview, I had each transcribed and then began to code the data, using open coding to develop categories and axial coding to generate themes. Coding, according to Patton (2002), “is the first step of analysis” (p. 462) and is used to divide the data into meaningful smaller units. Thus, I sought what Patton terms “recurring regularities in the data” (p. 465) by listening to and reading over the verbatim transcripts of each interview. Since “purpose guides analysis” (Patton, 2002,
p. 434) and because an interview guide can function to provide a “preliminary descriptive analytic framework for analysis” (Patton, 2002, p. 440) I sought patterns in the data and coded them, using open coding to develop initial categories, keeping in mind the research questions I sought to answer. At the same time, I remained aware of ideas that might be significant and relevant, but were outside the immediate focus of my research questions.

Once patterns in the data were identified, I then used axial coding to generate my themes. Patton (2002) distinguishes a pattern from a theme when he writes, “The term pattern usually refers to a descriptive finding . . . while a theme takes a more categorical or topical form” (p. 453). Therefore, after identifying the patterns present in the data, I created categorical themes for the patterns I found. At this point, I worked as Patton instructs “back and forth between the data and the classification system to verify the meaningfulness and accuracy of the categories and the placement of the data in the categories” (p. 466). These steps of analysis are what Creswell (2007) states “are the core elements of qualitative data analysis” (p. 148) and constitute content analysis.

With regard to content analysis, Patton writes, “content analysis is used to refer to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meaning” (p. 453). After using content analysis to identify the patterns and themes found in each participant’s narrative, I then looked across all narratives and the initial themes to organize key findings and themes across all participants. By completing these steps, I was able to manage and make sense of the great quantity of data I had gathered.
In order to manage and organize my data, I used Weft QDA, a qualitative data program. According to Patton (2002) programs such as Weft QDA can be used to assist the researcher in “data storage, coding, retrieval, comparing and linking.” After reviewing my findings and determining key patterns, I organized the patterns by theme. Then I arranged these themes by the research question I felt the theme would assist in answering. Some themes were found to be discrete while others were found to overlap within the framework of the research questions. However, this serves only to illustrate the complexity and interrelationships that exists between the findings. I then used the research questions as organizers for presenting my findings via the themes that emerged from the data.

The emergent themes organized by each Research Question are as follows:

1. For Research Question One, “What do White, working class Appalachian males define as “academic success?””, emergent themes were: practical use of skills, doing one’s personal best, and degree obtainment/completion.

2. For Research Question Two, “How do these men perceive their own past and present academic successes?”, emergent themes were: public recognition & personal pride, overcoming learning obstacles, high school survival, degree completion and love of learning.

3. For Research Question Three, “What do these men view as factors from their lived experiences that positively contributed to their academic successes?”, emergent themes were: job security & economics, family support, self-reliance, and military service.
In addition to the themes that are organized by the Research Questions listed above, other themes emerged from the data that do not fit neatly under one of the Research Questions include: Love of Learning, Spousal Interdependence, Altered Expectations, Persistence and Appalachian Cultural Values.

In this chapter, I present a brief profile of each participant and the findings of my research. In addition to the participant profiles and the research questions presented with their corresponding themes, I have also included a section on additional findings that include findings that emerged that spoke to themes beyond the original research questions.

**Participant Profiles**

The findings obtained in this study were derived from semi-structured interviews held with each participant. Eight men participated in this study and contributed to the findings included in this chapter. These men represented a varied age range of early twenties to mid-forties, and varied programs of study. In order to present background information for each participant, I have provided a brief profile of each participant.

**Silas**

In his early forties, Silas has been married twenty-two years to his high school sweetheart. Silas and his wife have three teenage children. Also a minister, Silas serves as the pastor of a non-denominational Christian church. Following high school, Silas enlisted and spent two years in the US Navy. He then entered the workforce, where he spent twelve years in industry. After the plant where he had worked for over a decade
closed, Silas came to college. Still currently a student, Silas only has one term left before he completes his associate’s degree in business.

**Peter**

Twenty-three years old, Peter is single, with no children. Peter immediately attended college following high school graduation. Peter has now successfully completed an associate’s degree (2009) in liberal arts/transfer studies, closely followed by a bachelor’s degree in history/political science (2012). This past spring when Peter completed his bachelor’s degree, he became the first of his sixty-three cousins to earn a four-year degree. Within a week of completing the bachelor’s degree, Peter enrolled in an online master’s degree program for administrative leadership. He feels having this degree will allow him to remain in his home area and climb up the administrative ladder of the agency for which he is currently employed.

**Paul**

In his early forties, Paul is currently married and has five children who are still in school. Paul and his wife have been married for fifteen years. Paul’s associate degree completion involved two different community colleges and was interrupted by a four year leave of absence while Paul worked as a youth minister. Having recently completed his Board of Governor’s associate’s degree in information technology, Paul is now enrolled in an online bachelor’s degree program in public administration and is currently employed as a computer “help desk” network systems manager.
Ethan

Currently in his late thirties, Ethan was married for twelve years but is now divorced. He and his ex-wife share custody of their three school-aged children. Ethan served for three years in the US Army before being medically discharged due to a chronic health condition. After his military service, he worked for twelve years in industry. He originally entered college planning to further his education in his current field; however, after the company for which he worked dissolved, Ethan decided to change his major and pursue a childhood dream. Currently a criminal justice student, Ethan will graduate at the end of his next term. Ethan plans to pursue a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice after he completes his associate’s degree.

Dan

Now in his early thirties, Dan was married for five years, and is now divorced. His two young children live with their mother several states away. Dan served in the US Army as a ranger for five years before being medically discharged due to injuries sustained while in combat. After being discharged, Dan worked for a trucking company for three years. Tired of needing to work long hours and overtime to make ends meet, Dan decided to enroll in college and pursue a degree in a field that would be less physically demanding. Dan is currently a student and will finish his program of study in pre-engineering at the end of his next term. Dan plans to pursue a bachelor’s degree in engineering immediately after receiving his associate’s degree.
Ben

In his early thirties, Ben is currently married. He and his wife have been married three years and have no children. After working a variety of jobs for one year following high school graduation, Ben enrolled at his local community college. Following the completion of his associate’s degree in network systems, Ben immediately pursued and completed a bachelor’s degree in computer forensics. Ben has considered continuing his education by completing a master’s degree in computer forensics, and is aware of a program of study he would like to complete. He is currently employed as a network systems operator.

John

John, in his mid-forties, has been married to his high school sweetheart for over twenty years. They have three teenaged children. Immediately following high school graduation, John attended his local community college and completed his associate’s degree in an allied health field. After working for many years in his field, John returned to school and completed a bachelor’s so that he could advance in his field. Recently, in conjunction with a work requirement, John returned once again to school and completed a master’s degree in leadership and administration. John’s future plans include earning his PhD.

David

Currently in his mid-forties, David has been married for almost two years. He has a step-child from this relationship as well as an adult child from a previous relationship. However, he and the adult child are estranged. He also has an ex-wife from another
relationship, and they are also estranged. After a seventeen year career in the US Army, David was medically discharged. After being discharged, David enrolled in his local community college and completed a transfer studies associate’s degree. Knowing that the job he desired required a master’s degree, David pursued a bachelor’s and then a master’s degree. For both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees, David took advantage of the military articulation agreement offered by the college that he attended and used military transfer credits to design a degree that would fulfill requirements for a Board of Regents bachelor’s degree. He has no plans for seeking additional formal education. David is currently employed as a liaison for veterans.

**Themes Found**

In presenting my themes, I have organized them under the Research Question according to the one to which they most relate. By doing this, I have used the Research Questions in order to focus the data more fully.

**Research Question One: What Do White, Working Class Appalachian Males Define as “Academic Success”?”**

All eight participants were asked to define and discuss “academic success.” From their answers, three overall themes emerged. These themes were: practical use of skills, doing one’s personal best and degree obtainment/goal completion.

**Practical Use of Skills**

The practical application on the job or in daily life of the skills and knowledge learned via formal education was a dominant theme in the definitions of academic success provided by the respondents. Recognition for doing well, such receiving good
grades or being on the dean’s list was appreciated, and pride was often mentioned when participants reflected on how they felt about achieving these types of measures. However, for the respondents, these accolades were secondary to the actual ability to use the knowledge and the skills learned on the job or in daily life. Ethan, Ben and Paul specifically addressed the application of skills and knowledge in everyday life, while Silas, Peter, Dan and David specifically addressed how the possession of skills and abilities outranked the possession of a degree when defining “academic success.”

In describing his success, Ethan mentioned getting good grades, but immediately coupled it with the practical use of the knowledge gained. When asked how he would define academic success, Ethan said, “For me academic success would be to graduate with honors.” But then he quickly added, “AND [added emphasis] to be able to work successfully in that field of study.” When asked which he considered being more important, Ethan stated very emphatically, “working, hands down, is more important because in order to survive and live you have to have the skills needed to work.” Like Ethan, Ben described what he considered to be academic success and linked it to career performance. Ben explained academic success as the ability to take theory, implement it into practice and even expand beyond what was initially learned. Ben explained:

The knowledge that you actually bring from the course that you take – not necessarily the grade point average. . . . It’s what you can actually do, the things that are required in your field. It’s not necessarily the book knowledge. It’s the ability to do it.
Paul also echoed the ability to perform well in the world of work. When asked to define academic success, Paul did not hesitate. He quietly responded that his definition of success was based on the learning of information and the applicable use of that information, not only in the world of work, but also in everyday life. Paul clarified his definition by stating:

Academic success for me is more than just the grade I get. If I have learned something that is going to prepare me for the various parts of my life, if I’ve learned something to make me better at my job, better at being an everyday person . . . that’s definitely success. Success overall for me is having that become a part of my arsenal, if you will, for how I live the rest of my life.

After a moment of reflection, Paul then added, “To be able to take something I learned in the classroom and immediately make it an application in my life. That’s, to me, pretty successful academically.” Paul also went on to clarify how he viewed academic success in relationship to his personal life rather than in relationship to grades earned. Paul said:

I’ve got to do the “tour” on the dean’s list. But I’m not always gonna get an A. I’m not always going to get a B+. . . . Especially as a full time dad, as a full time student, as a full time employee of a place, something’s going to end up getting into that. But to have been able to take what I have learned and have it help me to be a better husband, a better dad, and a better employee, I think I’ve been successful.

Similar to Ethan, Ben and Paul, Silas also addressed the issue of how he used knowledge and skills to measure his academic success. In our interview, Silas pointed out
how possessing a degree may not always represent the possession of skills and abilities.

Silas, who still is a student, explained:

> Even now [as a current student] I feel I am successful just because I have learned many new things. I haven’t even gotten finished, yet, but some of the things I have learned to do have already helped me. And it’s that knowing how to do things that counts. You know there’s a lot of people with degrees who don’t know how to do things, so in the end, knowing how to do things is probably the most important thing [rather than the degree].

Peter also echoed Silas’ emphasis on the possession of skills and abilities over that of a degree, when he humorously pointed out, “I’m working on my master’s now [in administrative leadership], but I hope I don’t become one of those overeducated people who have the degree but can’t do the job.” Laughing, he added, “I know a few of them.”

Then, in a more serious tone, Peter added:

> I think I’ll be okay doing the job [of an administrator], though, because I do have some of the skills already. At least I feel I have the skills. I’m already in charge of 36 people at work during my regular shift. And of 16 people 24/7. Being actually able to do the job is a whole [emphasis added] lot more critical, but everyone has to have the degree, now. So, I am getting the degree.

Dan, too, shared Silas’ and Peter’s insight. Dan matter-of-factly pointed out:

> Just because you have a degree, doesn’t mean you know anything or that you can do what you need to do. You could get straight As and still not be successful at what
you are supposed to be doing. It is what you can do when it comes time to work out there, that makes you successful.

Like the other respondents, David also illustrated a similar perspective regarding the value of attaining skills and abilities when he stated:

People focus too much on the degree, and not enough on the quality of education received. So, my opinion is if a person actually received the skill sets that they’re required to have to be successful in their job then they’re academically successful.

While similar to the definitions of academic success shared by the other respondents, David’s definition is of particular interest because David’s academic coursework was not focused on the learning of a particular trade or skill, but rather consisted of a general program of study coupled the military leadership experiences he already possessed.

David explained how he managed to move quickly through the degrees he obtained, completing all three degrees in three years and one term. This was accomplished by using military experience credits and fashioning his own programs of study for his associate’s, bachelors’ and master’s degrees through the use of the Board of Governors and the Board of Regents degree options. In discussing the coursework he did have to complete, David explained how he felt much of the coursework required to obtain his degrees was of little value in the real world of work. Articulating more fully on what he meant, David offered this explanation:

I am a firm believer that the philosophy of the well-rounded student is a complete and utter waste of time. If my job that I want to do and be proficient in requires me to have a full knowledge of computer systems, that’s where my degree passion lie. It
should not lie with learning Spanish or taking sociology and psychology. It should be literally more job-orientated and not ‘let me make you a warm and fuzzy person so that you can graduate school and be well rounded.’ I don’t believe in that. David also said that since finishing his degrees and working in his present position, his definition of academic success now includes how well he provides services to others. He pointed out, “My other way of considering myself an academic success now is dependent upon the people I assist.” Thus, when his clients are successful, David feels academically successful.

Statements such as these indicate the men in this study place a heavy reliance on the applicable way they can apply their school knowledge in the world of work and life. It is the practical application that makes them feel they have been academically successful. For these men, the ordinary measure of academic success rest heavily on the ability to use the skills learned in an applicable way on the job and in everyday life.

**Doing One’s Personal Best**

For the eight men in this study, feeling academic successful at the college level meant reconciling the demands of school with the responsibilities of work and family. At times this meant a compromise that often impacted school performance. Thus, academic success was also viewed through the lens of doing one’s personal best, with an emphasis on the information learned rather than on the grade received.

Peter illustrated this belief when he stated, “I worked full-time and getting Bs was great for me.” Peter also pointed out he had often found that grades did not always reflect the true level of knowledge obtained. Using himself as an example, Peter stated:
I’ve learned more in some classes that I got a C in than those I got an A in. Some I had to work really extra hard to get a C, like go to tutoring and stuff. And others I didn’t do much of anything at all and ended up getting an A. You know there are classes that will give you lower grades for missing classes or turning things in late. That doesn’t mean you know anything less, it just means you missed class or didn’t get something turned in on time.

Having done one’s personal best, even if it meant not receiving the highest grade possible, was still viewed by Peter as being academically successful, regardless of the grade that might have been received. When asked how he felt when he received a C after working so hard, Peter thought for a moment and then acknowledged that he was well aware that math was not his “thing.” Peter then laughed and added, “For me that C was as good as an A and I was glad to get it!”

Silas’ definition of academic success was similar to that of Peter’s in that it also focused on doing one’s personal best rather than achieving a particular grade point average or receiving a particular grade. In describing academic success, Silas explained, “It’s not so much getting a 4.0. It’s not so much as making straight As. But academic success is knowing that you’ve done your best.” Then, after a slight moment of hesitation, Silas quietly confided, “I have not been a 4.0 student. I haven’t made straight As, but I am very pleased with my performance in school.” Silas pointed out that due to a family obligation he once ended up receiving a lower grade for a paper. “I just couldn’t get it finished on time. Had it been turned in on time, it would have been an A+, but one day late and it became a B+.” Although he managed to receive a grade of A for the
course, he said he still thinks about that paper. He confessed that he will always view the paper as an A paper, despite the dropped grade. This is because, as Silas pointed out, “the work itself was, after all, “A” quality. My instructor told me it was the best one in the class, actually. It was just the lateness that made it a “B”.” Silas admitted being glad he had done well enough on the paper that the dropped grade did not damage his overall course grade. However, he said even if the overall course grade had been lowered because of the late paper grade, he would know that the overall course grade was not a reflection of his knowledge of the course, but rather the result of a late paper.

Dan also revealed that although he was proud to be on the Dean’s list, that he definitely did not see all grades earned as a true reflection of academic success. Instead, Dan indicated he preferred to measure academic success by the level of application used to accomplish set goals. Dan used himself as an example, stating, “Personally, I look at it as how I’m doing with my classes, you know. . . . Did I really apply myself? Or did I just do the bare minimum to get by?” According to Dan, grades are important to a degree, but only in the sense that it is a passing grade. Explaining further, Dan said he does not define academic success by grades since he does not feel they always reflect true learning. Instead, Dan defines academic success by the amount of effort applied, regardless of the grade he has received (as long as it’s a passing grade). Although Dan stated he has felt this way throughout his school life, this way of thinking really struck home after receiving a lowered grade for one of his very first college courses because of excessive absence. Dan discussed his thoughts about the lowered grade very candidly:
I know the idea behind that [the grade being lowered], and I don’t mind having the lower grade because I knew from the get-go that if I missed too many classes, the grade would get dropped down. I deserve it I guess, for not going. But that grade, the grade you know, really doesn’t tell what I know. It just shows I missed too many classes. . . . Even though my grade for the class was a C because of the missing, I know it’s a C because it was one grade dropped for the absences so that made it a C. It wasn’t a low grade for what I know. That grade was B.

When asked how he felt about this kind of classroom rule, Dan’s tone softened, and he smiled broadly and said, “You know, a teacher can drop your grade but they can’t take away what you have in your head – you still keep all that – you can’t ‘drop’ that, you know.” Dan then went on to discuss at great length how such classroom rules were at fault for making grades not true representations of knowledge. Dan explained that such policies “take what is supposed to show what’s been learned [academically] and changes it just because of a bad behavior which usually hasn’t got much to do with what was learned.” To illustrate his point, Dan shared this incident from his childhood:

I was like third grade and I couldn’t find a pencil to use so I used an ink pen on my spelling test. The teacher gave me an F because of it. I really didn’t miss too many [words], like three out of twelve or so. . . . But because of the ink pen, it was zero- a big fat zero - because we weren’t supposed to be using them [pens].

I asked Dan why he had not asked to borrow a pencil from his teacher to use for the test and he responded by laughing and saying, “No way would I ask her. She was a big stickler on ‘being prepared’ and it would have cost me recess. And recess was important,
you know. So I took my chances with the ink pen.” Dan shared that he had encountered similar situations throughout his K-12 years. He elaborated by explaining, “I was pretty ornery when I was little, but it was things I did, or didn’t do, that sometimes made my grades bad, not really what I knew or didn’t know.” Dan went on to say that often it was a “technicality” that resulted in a lowered grade, such as with the pen incident and the spelling test. Dan recalled that he had felt pleased despite the F he received because he spelled most of the words right, even the one that he had struggled with the most. Dan described himself as a poor speller and noted that doing well on a spelling test was something that rarely occurred for him. Reflecting on how receiving the F made him feel, Dan answered, “I don’t know. I don’t think I really cared too much about that then. I didn’t realize how unfair it actually is. It was just the way it was.” After a few more reflective moments, Dan added, “I still don’t really care too much. I know what I know and what I don’t. But maybe two grades should be used - one for school work and one for behavior.” Dan added he does feel a sense of pride when he sees his name is on the dean’s list. However, if not on the dean’s list, then he would still be pleased with himself as long as he had tried his best.

Ethan’s, Ben’s and Paul’s comments also focused on doing ones’ best as a true measure of academic success, especially when completing difficult college level coursework. Ethan noted he felt more successful after completing a challenging class where he had to do his absolute personal best in order to be successful rather than in an “easy A” class where all a student had to do was “show up and breathe.” Ethan pointed out:
To have to work hard in a class and succeed is a lot more satisfying than not having to work too hard. Even if you don’t get a perfect grade or whatever. It just makes more sense to be proud of hard work.

Ben also addressed the issue of using one’s personal best as an indicator of success, especially when taking challenging coursework. While in college, Ben shared that one of his hardest courses had turned out to be his favorite because he had been forced to apply himself. Ben recalled having to spend large amounts of time and effort on completing a final assignment for the course. Ben noted, “I really put my all into that project, even if I had not got an A for it, I still would have felt like I did.” For Ben, the effort applied in completing the difficult project, more so than the grade received represented success.

These sentiments were also illustrated by Paul who pointed out:

Classes that are easy classes are like that ‘everybody gets a trophy’ thing. But when you have to try your hardest, and you do your best, then that’s what shows how good you are at being a student. Good students try hard, even if they don’t always get the best grades. I know there have been times when I really did my best, but the grade was just mediocre. But to me what I did was still worth a ‘trophy’. A real trophy. I still felt successful.

For these respondents, effort and knowing one had done his personal best represented academic success beyond just that of a grade or public recognition received. By recalling incidences where they felt their assigned grades did not reflect their actual knowledge, and reflecting on how they felt with regard to their lived experiences, the respondents illustrated their perspective that grades should not be the sole measure of academic
success. Rather, in defining academic success, these participants felt “doing one’s personal best” was more representative of academic success than of grades received.

**Degree Obtainment/Goal Completion**

In addition to the two measures of academic success described, the value of degree attainment and goal completion were also mentioned in definitions of academic success provided by Ethan, Silas, Paul, Ben, John and David. Although the respondents focused their definitions on the use of skills and abilities learned in the course of degree completion, they did acknowledge that the degree itself could be used to represent the possession of these skills and abilities. In addition to completing a program of study at the associate’s degree level, several of the respondents had continued on, earning bachelors’ and master’s degrees. Because they had continued with postsecondary education through progressive levels, I also asked if their definitions of academic success changed as they advanced in degree completion. Participants who had completed associate level degrees and then continue on to higher levels addressed how they viewed their lower degrees. Additionally, those who had yet to finish a program of study and complete a degree focused their discussions on the expectations they had related to their program of study completion. In all cases, however, the significance of the completion of a degree was discussed with respect to the respondents’ definitions of academic success.

Ethan and Silas, currently students, both addressed how degree completion would represent academic success in that it would represent their abilities when they attempt to obtain employment. Ethan said, “Certainly the degree itself represents a degree of
success, after all, it seems even associate degrees are required for just about anything now.” Likewise, Silas commented:

Having the degree shows you did the work for it [the degree], as well as the things you know, so in a way, the degree that you get shows that so when you go to get a job, it makes a difference.

Paul also felt having a degree was important because to have the degree, serves to “show what you know” when seeking, or keeping employment. Likewise, Ben echoed the thoughts of Ethan, Silas and Paul when he stated, “When I was working on my bachelor’s degree, it was good to know I had my associate’s in case the bachelor’s didn’t work out.” Ben then explained that had he not been able to finish his bachelor’s degree, he would have used his associate’s to gain employment. Then he pointed out that when obtained his associate’s degree he had felt academically successful because the degree provided a credential that would have allowed him to work in his field.

However, although John and David, both holders of masters level degrees acknowledged that degree obtainment was important in representing knowledge gained, degree attainment had not been their actual goal at the associate’s degree level. For example, John revealed that his primary goal was to get a decent job so he could marry his fiancé and start a family. David shared that his primary goal had been to work with veterans through the job position he now holds; however, this position required a master’s degree. It was from these vantage points they viewed their academic success.

When discussing his own academic success, John brought up the complexities related to how he measured his own academic success at the time he pursued his
associate’s degree, and how his definition of academic success had evolved overtime.

John explained,

I probably didn’t care that much about the education piece. . . . I knew that I had to
do the classes and perform well in order to reach my goal, which was ultimately
getting married and having a job and that sort of thing, so I was much more
motivated by the ends vs the means.

For John, the goal of degree obtainment was coupled with the “much bigger goal” of
obtaining a job so he could get married and start a family. When asked to elaborate more
on this, John said that at that time in his life he had felt that he should not get married or
start a family without first having the means to provide for him and a family. This
included being able to provide a home and being self-sufficient financially. When asked
if he had any other employment options, John shared that his family had a long history of
employment with a well-known local large chemical plant known for producing both
high and low volume chemical and polymer commodities. Both his father and
grandfather were employed as laborers by the company and getting employed there
would have been very easy for John at the time he graduated from high school. Yet,
John’s father encouraged him to go to college, John said:

my dad always told me at the time, “you need to go learn to work smarter, not
harder. You don’t wanna work with your back every day like I do. I don’t want that
for you. You’ve got talent. Why don’t you go use it?”
John made the decision to go to college, but that decision was fueled by the need to be employable so that he could marry. John chose a two year program of study in an allied health field, knowing that at the end of it, he would be able to seek work in that field. Since obtaining his associate’s degree, John admitted his definition of academic success had evolved, as had his views regarding set goals. John explained his thoughts regarding this by stating:

Sometimes things just do not work out or go as like we planned it, or even as fast as we’d like them to. It doesn’t mean what was attempted was unsuccessful. It just means the ultimate goal . . . the final goal, may need to be changed or left behind. Sometimes you have to change in mid-stream or let things sit a little longer. And recognizing that is also being successful . . . maybe more successful, than not recognizing it.

Thus, although a self-professed “goal setter,” John now recognizes that a changed or abandoned goal may also be considered successful in some ways. When asked to provide an illustration of what he meant by this John used himself, stating that after he finished his master’s degree he realized that someday he would like to complete a doctorate in administrative leadership. However, with two adolescent children still at home, John places their needs before his wants, “I need to be a dad right now, taking care of those tough things that are coming, and then I would say as soon as that gets settled, I’ll probably shift right back to, okay, now, let’s do something for me again.” This goal is therefore one that must wait for a later time, but which John feels one day may be realized.
Like John, David’s definition of academic success featured a perspective that included the achievement of an employment goal that was contingent upon degree completion. In addition to broadly defining academic success as the ability to use skills and abilities learned, David also described academic success as the ability to obtain a desired employment position. In his discussion of academic success, David explained this by using himself as an example. David reported he did not feel academically successful until he had reached the level of degree he needed for his desired employment position: that of a master’s degree. David pointed out, “I took the quickest way out of the two lower degrees to get to the degree that would make me successful.” He then elaborated by explaining, “I don’t believe my associate’s or my bachelor’s made me an academic success. I think my master’s made me an academic success.” David said he drew this conclusion because it was a master’s degree that he needed in order to achieve his goal of a particular desired position of employment.

In summary, from the interviews held with the respondents regarding the definition of academic success, the themes that emerged were: the ability to practically use the skills and the abilities learned, the amount of effort involved in producing or doing one’s personal best, and the achievement of goals for which having a degree was required.

**Research Question Two: How Do These Men Perceive Their Own Past and Present Academic Successes?**

Three themes emerged from the data related to how these men perceived their own past and present academic successes. The themes that emerged were: public recognition & personal pride, overcoming learning obstacles, and high school survival.
Public Recognition & Personal Pride

Public recognition and personal pride was one of the themes that emerged when participants were asked to recall past and present academic successes. Early memorable events of academic successes that included some form of public recognition and personal pride were recalled by Paul, Peter, David, John, Ethan and Dan. College level accolades that resulted in recognition and brought forth a sense of pride, such as being on the dean’s list were recalled by Ben, Ethan, Dan, Silas, and Paul. And degree completion, which also evoked a sense of pride, was discussed by those who had experienced degree completion: John, Paul, Peter, Ben and David.

In sharing an early memory of academic success, Paul smiled and reported that his “greatest moment” had been when he learned to tie his shoes. Paul pointed out:

It’s supposed to happen in kindergarten, you know, learning to tie your shoes, you got a checkmark on your grade card for that. But I just couldn’t do it. I never got that check mark. So when I finally did it, in first grade, it was a great accomplishment. When I showed my teacher she praised my new ability and I remember I was so proud of myself.

After accomplishing shoe tying, Paul said his main objective during first grade became getting an “O” for outstanding or “S” for satisfactory on his report card. This was because, as Paul recalled, “I was getting U’s like crazy. For me success was NOT getting a U. . . . I remember I wanted to see a line of Os or Ss on my grade card, to show my parents and grannies.” When asked if he ever succeeded in doing so, Paul replied, “eventually, like in second and third grade . . . I finally had more Ss than Us, and even
some Os.” When asked how this had made him feel, Paul replied “Absolutely great. Almost as good as when I learned to tie my shoes.”

Peter also very easily recalled experiencing early academic successes in elementary school. He smiled and stated:

I won a spelling bee one time, I remember that. It was just a class one, but I was really proud of that. And I got a certificate for it. Then, I won a Black History quiz. It was also for my class. Got a certificate for that, too.

Peter said what made these events memorable was they were times that he not only did his personal best, but that his personal best turned out to be “the best of all.” Peter also pointed out that what made these moments special for him was the public recognition he received, especially from his teachers. One teacher, Peter recalled, “told me how she was proud of me for winning [the spelling bee] in front of the whole class. That meant a lot.” In addition to verbal praise by his teacher for winning the spelling bee, Peter also recalled receiving various certificates. He described these as “the ‘award’ kind that teachers give out and that are signed [by the teacher]” for various academic accomplishments, like winning the history quiz. Receiving these types of awards helped make these moments memorable.

One of David’s early moments of academic success also involved a spelling bee. Although David came close to winning at the county level, he placed second. David fondly recalled:

The words were really hard. We were down to the last two [competitors] and we both missed the word, so we had to go another word. It was so nerve-wracking. The
other person missed the word and I had a chance to win. But I will never forget that feeling I felt when the judge said “aw, I’m sorry, but that’s not right.”

Despite his second place finish, and initial disappointment, David reported the event still held good memories for him, and he did consider it an early experience of academic success. Elaborating, David explained:

It was at the county level. Which meant I was the best from my school. And, I got the ribbon, the certificate and I also got a silver dollar that I still have today. It’s actually up at my mom’s house. That was one of the biggest things. Winning that silver dollar. I’ll never get rid of that [the silver dollar].

What made this event so special and memorable to David was, David recalled, “winning that silver dollar. To me that was something.” David paused for a moment to reflect then added, “Maybe because it was something different to win [the silver dollar, as a prize].” In addition to receiving a unique prize, David also said that representing his school at the spelling bee would still have been important, even if he had not placed second, as it meant he was “the best” at his school.

John also reflected on his early academic successes by recalling a time during his middle elementary school years when he had represented his school. John reported he had been selected by his school to attend the Golden Horseshoe, a prestigious state level history competition. John recalled, “I didn’t win, but I got to go, and it was important. I felt happy to be able to represent the school at that. It was an honor just to go, just to be there.” John’s words illustrate the sense of pride he felt in representing his school at this highly acclaimed state level academic event.
In addition to representing his school at a state level event, John also discussed a memorable time when he had been the overall winner of a school fund raiser. Although it was not an academically related event, John explained that it did represent the achievement of a set goal; a skill he has used for academic success. John recalled, “I won the grand prize, which at that time was a television set, a black and white TV, with rabbit ears and all that.” Reflecting on how it made him feel to win the top prize, John laughed and replied, “It made me pretty full of myself. I mean, I won the TV, the grand prize!” In explaining what significance this event might have had on his academic success, John paused for a moment, shifted to a more serious tone and said:

I’ve always been motivated by a goal. If there’s a goal in mind, and I see it out there, then if I want it, I’ll go get it, and that’s how it was with the TV. . . how’s it’s been with whatever I set out to do . . . that’s always been kind of present in me. Whether it’s with academic things or not. If it’s a goal, I work towards it. It was my goal and I achieved it. And I was proud that I did.

For John, achieving set goals and being publically recognized for achieving them were sources of pride present in his early elementary school years.

Academic success that represented school-wide achievement and led to public recognition and feelings of pride were also experienced by Dan. For Dan this took place in his reading and art classes. He explained:

For every book you read, you got like this little ticket. And whoever had the most tickets at the end of that term, you know, you’d win prizes and so I got to win a book. And I got a good grade. It was a big thing for me, and I was proud of it. Then
I got a little award certificate and a little trophy as the overall winner. I was really proud of that because not everyone got that and the teachers made it a big deal.

Winning a book reading contest and receiving awards and public recognition for his efforts from his teacher as well as others gave Dan a great sense of pride.

In addition to experiencing a memorable event of academic success in elementary school, Dan also experienced another great sense of accomplishment in middle school when a book he had written as part of his reading class was chosen by his class peers as the overall best book. Dan recalled:

One of our teachers, the reading teacher, had us write these books and we laminated them. And the books got to go to our library there in the school and the other kids got to check them out and read them. They voted on the best books and I won that. I got a certificate for the “best book”.

The selection of his book by his peers as the “best book” made Dan feel very accomplished. Dan explained:

It was nice to be seen as “the best,” especially in reading class, because I was always on the bottom in there. I liked it [winning] a lot. Sorta gave me a big head for a while, but I pretended it didn’t.

Additionally, while in middle school, a piece of art he had drawn for art class was selected among others for public display. When discussing this event, Dan proudly stated, “Well, mine ended up in a bank. Right as you walk in the front door, I was pretty proud of that, too. Everybody who went in there got to see it.” Dan pointed out the recognitions
he had received had made these events special, especially that received from teachers, as well as the awards themselves (a trophy, and certificates). When asked what he meant when he commented that he pretended not to be proud, Dan said he had not wanted to “be a show off” because he knew what it felt like to be the loser, and not do so well in school.

For Ethan, early academic success occurred in conjunction with the annual school-wide science fair. For the school science fair, Ethan built a model of the space shuttle to scale. Ethan recalled, “I got an A in class, and second place in the school science fair.” After pausing for a moment, Ethan continued, “The person who got first place was the old clichéd volcano.” As if to explain why the volcano won first place, Ethan then bitterly added, “He was the kid of a prominent family in the community. It was politics.” However, in discussing his own project, Ethan eagerly offered:

Oh, I think it should have been first. I did a great job on it. It was certainly good enough to be first. It was to scale and I had drawn on details, like inside it. And I had drawn diagrams about what parts did what. But even in elementary school it’s sometimes about who you are. I knew mine was better. But I did get second place. Of the whole school. So, I was still happy. No one would have beat him anyway, so second was just as good. . . . I liked the ribbon, too, even if it was for second place.

Despite the politics that Ethan felt had robbed him of first place recognition, he was still proud to have placed second, and his words indicated he enjoyed the school-wide attention he received, as well as the award received (a ribbon for second place).
The early academic successes recalled by the respondents were all viewed by the participants as moments that were memorable due to the public recognition that had been received and the feelings of pride that had been evoked. A similar perspective was also held with regard to their postsecondary pursuits.

When discussing postsecondary academic success, Ben, Ethan, Dan, Silas, and Paul all reported they had made the dean’s list. Ben immediately admitted he was mostly proud of this accomplishment because it was for his parents. Ben said, “Those certificates were mostly for them.” Elaborating on what he meant by this, Ben said that his parents had not been certain that he would do well as a student, and that the certificates represented how well he actually had done: “proof” he had done well. For Ethan, being on the dean’s list represented the standard of excellence he had set for himself. Ethan also stated that he hoped to graduate with honors. In explaining why this was important to him, Ethan said, “I’ve done a good job, and I am proud of it. It’s nice to be recognized for that.” Like Ethan, Dan also stated he enjoyed the public recognition that came with being on the dean’s list. Dan pointed out, “I did so bad in high school, it’s something that shows how well I can actually do, you know. And it makes my mom really proud of me.” For Silas and Paul, recognition by being on the dean’s list was appreciated, as they felt it showed how hard they had worked academically. Silas pointed out, “I am proud of how well I have done. Being on the dean’s list shows how hard I have worked.” Paul also echoed a similar sentiment when he stated, “Doing well needs recognized, and I feel I deserve that recognition. Lord knows it’s been earned!” For these respondents, being on
the dean’s list was appreciated and valued as something which publically recognized how hard they had worked to achieve a certain level of academic success.

Degree completion was also perceived as a great source of personal pride by those respondents who had completed degrees. John, who had completed a master’s degree, discussed the pride he had felt each time he had completed a new degree. John explained, “I am proud of each degree. They were years apart, but each one meant something. Each was equally important to my life at the time it was earned.” Unlike John, David, who also has a master’s degree, only felt a sense of pride when he completed his master’s degree. This was because it was a master’s degree David needed for his desired job. David explained, “Getting my master’s degree was the one that made me feel proud. The bachelor’s degree, like I said earlier, was a waste. And the associate’s was only a step to what I needed. A bottom step.” However, unlike David, Ben and Peter, who had completed bachelor’s degrees, expressed feelings of pride at achieving both their associate’s and their bachelor’s degrees. Ben pointed out:

I could have worked with my associate’s, but I wanted to continue on. But I was very proud when I earned it [the associate’s degree]. But I was even more proud when I finished my bachelor’s. It’s in a more select area.

Peter was also very proud of his degrees. Peter pointed out, “my associate’s was for transfer, but I was still proud of that. It was still a degree. Some people might not count it, but I do.” However, Peter reported he was even more proud of his bachelor’s degree because he was the first of his sixty three cousins to earn one. Unlike the others, for Paul, completion of his associate’s degree came after many years and many delays. When
asked how he felt after completing his degree, Paul stated he was not only proud but relieved that he was finally done as it had been “a very long journey.” Paul stated he was now looking forward to completing his bachelor’s degree, a program he recently began. When asked how he felt about his new pursuit, Paul smiled broadly and said, “I can’t wait to finish it!” Then, after a moment, he laughed and added, “When I finish it, I am going to rent a billboard and tell the world!” For the respondents who had completed degrees, degree completion was considered an academic accomplishment in which they took great personal pride.

**Overcoming Learning Obstacles**

When discussing moments of academic success experienced during the K-12 years, two respondents, Paul and Dan reported memorable events of academic success that were connected to overcoming a learning obstacle. In both cases, the respondents noted that what made the event memorable was that it represented achievement despite a learning obstacle. Likewise, Peter also recalled overcoming a difficult learning obstacle while in college.

In discussing his past academic achievements, Paul replied, “one of my biggest achievements was actually making it to eighth grade.” Paul explained:

You know, very few kids flunk kindergarten or even first grade, and the ones who do usually have really bad problems with doing schoolwork. I was one of those kids.

Doing really bad. I didn’t flunk, but I came close.

Elaborating on his early academic challenges, Paul quietly stated, “I didn’t mean to be a student that wasn’t doing good.” The Paul shared that in his early years his hearing,
and thus his ability to learn, had been impaired by a blockage that was remedied with surgery when he was in the third grade. Paul recalled, “By the time they figured it all out, I was nearly deaf and failing elementary school.” After the surgery, Paul stated he began to receive some passing grades in elementary school, getting mostly “S” and at times even “O” on his report card.

In discussing the academic changes he experienced after the surgery, Paul laughed and said, ”I felt so smart, like the ‘brain fairy’ had visited. But it was mostly just because I could actually hear what the teachers were saying. Before, I thought all they did was whisper!”

Having fallen behind in elementary school, Paul reported that he continued to struggle in middle school, trying to catch up. Mathematics proved especially hard and he eventually failed seventh grade because he could not pass his math classes. The need to repeat seventh grade was especially hard on Paul. Paul soberly described the situation in these words: “It was so hard, that setback in seventh grade. Seeing my friends go on to the next grade, without me.” It was at this time that Paul said he was checked for a learning disability. However, Paul expressed his doubts about having one. He explained:

They [the school] felt I had failed because of a learning disability, so I was tested and declared “disabled.” But I think it was really because I got such a late start in elementary school because of my ears. I was years behind. I had missed important things like how to borrow and multiple and all of that. And I was expected to do things that relied on things I really had not mastered, or even knew of. I just couldn’t get caught up fast enough, and it all came down in the seventh grade. I think a better
term for me would have been “delayed” rather than “disabled.” I was behind. I just wasn’t where the school thought I needed to be.

When asked how he did his second year in seventh grade, Paul stated, “it was a very painful year. But not from the school work, it was from being left behind. I was very depressed that year. A psychological mess.” However, being in band helped Paul stay focused, and he pushed himself to succeed, even when he did not feel emotionally well. In passing seventh grade, Paul said felt he had overcome a huge obstacle in his path. This is why Paul considered making it to eighth grade one of his biggest academic achievements.

Dan also experienced struggles in early elementary school. Dan revealed that reading and spelling had always been a struggle due to his dyslexia. However, in elementary school he not only succeeded in getting a good grade for reading, but also won prizes in his reading class in relation to book reading and book writing contests. Dan pointed out, “Whenever I’d do well in reading I felt like a million bucks, because I usually didn’t do too well with that [reading] and usually just barely passed.” Thus, winning prizes for reading was special to Dan. In discussing this, Dan grinned and explained:

You know, with dyslexia it’s really hard, reading is, so to do so well in that [reading] was especially special because it was my weakest area. To do well in your weakest area is a great thing. It means you are whipping it.

Dan’s comments indicate that he especially valued winning prizes and recognitions in his reading class because doing so represented overcoming a learning obstacle.
Like Paul and Dan, Peter found himself struggling academic due to a learning obstacle; however, Peter’s difficulty occurred while in college. When identifying one his greatest accomplishments in college, Peter quickly declared, “Passing my math classes!” Then, Peter went on to explain, “I flunked math the first time I took it. It was terrible. It was the first time I had ever flunked anything. I’ve always had trouble with math. I just couldn’t never get it.” Peter confirmed he had finally passed the course, on his second try, but not without a lot of tutoring. In recalling the experience, Peter said it had been something he never wanted to experience again. As a result, Peter asked for tutoring before he was failing a course. Peter disclosed, “From that point on, if I had the slightest idea I was in trouble, I went to the tutoring center. I worked hard there, a lot, to pass that math.” Through hard work, Peter said he managed to overcome what had always been an academic problem area and he considered this a great academic accomplishment.

For Paul, Dan, and Peter being successful academically also represented overcoming an academic learning challenge.

**High School Survival**

When discussing past academic successes at the K-12 level, all eight respondents also addressed events that occurred during their high school experience. There was a general consensus among the respondents that they could have performed academically much better during their high school years than they actually did. Of the respondents, David and Dan reported that staying in high school and graduating had in itself been their greatest accomplishment at that time. The other six respondents also recalled memorable moments; however, these were not all directly related to academic success.
David began by describing his high school experience as “not a pleasant time.” When elaborating, David pointed out he had been double promoted in elementary school, so he entered high school much younger than most of his peers. In addition to being younger than his classmates, this was also the time during which David’s father, a self-ordained minister, became extremely conservative in his ministry; this impacted his expectations for David’s behavior and appearance. David stated that because of these reasons, he found himself constantly engaged in altercations. David calmly explained:

I was actually suspended every school year from freshman through senior year for the first three days of school and the reason being is when you get picked on like that . . . I only weighed like 105. I was actually a really small kid and every year the same guy would start something and I learned from my freshman year that the only way to make him shut up was to smack him in the face with a school book. So I did that. I got suspended, but when I came back, after that . . . they left me alone a little bit, and you know, the egging and the picking and the stuff still happened, but you know I kind of told them, I’ll only take so much.

Academically, David said he maintained what he needed to stay under the radar of his parents. In recalling this time period of his life, David said:

I wasn’t that guy that really cared if he made the honor role. Matter of fact, I wanted to keep attention away from me especially when it came to my, you know, parents. I would do just well enough for them to leave me alone. I wanted no attention on myself, whatsoever.
In commenting on his teachers, David, a general education student, stated that he found his high school teachers “very selective” in who they helped. In explaining this, David stated, “Teachers had the people that they concentrated on the most, and if you weren’t one of those you got no assistance and that was pretty much it.” Instead, David credited his middle school teachers for aiding in his school persistence. David pointed out, “I’d probably been a high school dropout if it weren’t for those teachers in my middle school area. They were the best teachers I ever had.” After pausing a moment, David continued, “They would go out of their way to make sure you were doing the right thing. I remember one, Mr. Harris (pseudonym), paddled me quite often, but I earned it and deserved it. They cared.” Although he had thought about dropping out as a solution to his miserable social situation, David had not. In discussing why, David shrugged and said, “If I had, I’d nowhere to go. No means to take care of myself. My parents wouldn’t have taken care of me and I was too young to work.” While discussing events in high school David said he could not think of any that he felt were memorable moments of academic success or that were related to later academic success, aside from not quitting and graduating.

Dan also reported that his high school experience was “pretty miserable.” David explained that just as he began high school, his grandmother, with whom he was extremely close, passed away. Losing his grandmother took its toll on him. Dan recalled, “It was hard on me . . . . it was just rough. She had helped raise me and then she wasn’t there anymore.” Dan readily admitted to behaving wildly at this point in his life, although deep down he knew better. Dan explained:
Everything that was going on with me, the hurt and anger . . . I think I was at a point where I didn’t care. And I knew I was still young enough that the stuff I was doing was probably just gonna get me a slap on the hand.

In naming his greatest academic accomplishment at this time, Dan reflected for a moment, then stated, “I guess you can consider my biggest accomplishment is I finished high school. I really wanted to just quit.” In explaining what had prevented him from quitting, Dan laughed and said “My mom, staying on my behind and getting the law involved.” Dan went on to explain that because he had started missing a lot of school, his mother was asked to appear in court. When she appeared in court, she asked for Dan to be placed on juvenile probation, rather than be given a warning. Dan’s mother knew that although Dan liked to skip school that he would not want to go to a juvenile detention center and that a court-imposed attendance probation would require him to attend school. The strategy worked and he stayed in school. Even so, Dan admitted that despite attending school regularly after being placed on attendance probation, he did not do much of his own schoolwork. He sheepishly admitted, “I had girls doing my school work for me. They kept me around a C level. I’m kinda embarrassed about that now.”

Furthermore, Dan revealed he only did the minimum amount of schoolwork required. When recalling these days, Dan was quick to point out, “But I’m older now, and I see how much education - how important - it really is.” When he was younger and in high school, Dan did not take an interest in completing his work well. Yet, even with his overall lack of interest, Dan completed high school and received his diploma and his high school vocational trade certificate.
Ethan did not do well at the beginning of high school either. Ethan stated, “My grades were really pitiful. Simply awful.” However, after starting a vocational program of his own choosing, his attitude towards school changed. Ethan recalled, “About halfway through my junior year, I decided to grow up and realized that my success was up to me and not up to the teachers.” Ethan stated he began to see the end of high school not as the end of school, but rather “as the beginning of life more or less. And that I was gonna have to do more with myself than just skate by on my grades and the skin of my teeth.” As the whether the particular program of study in which he was participating led him to this epiphany, Ethan stated, “If it did, it only really served to show me that there’s work out there to be gained and you really have to know what you’re doing to get the work.”

After he completed his vocation program of study, Ethan became certified in drafting and design. He later used this vocational training “to fall back on” when he was medically discharged five years later from the Army. Ethan reported that looking back on his high school experience he would credit the vocational program in which he participated as something that was a great academic success. This is because it provided him with the means to take care of his family when he was discharged from the Army and needed work.

John was also enrolled in a vocational studies program. And like David, John said he mostly remembered being caught up in the awkward social transitions associated with adolescence. As a result, he really did not perform as well as he could have academically. John explained:
Honestly, high school is where I dropped the ball. I made the B honor roll every single time, but as you noticed, I said that’s where I dropped the ball because I could’ve made straight A’s, but I never took a book home, never cracked a book, didn’t have to study. Didn’t try [emphasis added] to study.

John offered a reason why he performed so poorly; he said, “I wasn’t motivated to try to do better. No one told me, “Oh, you know you could do better.’”

During this time John said he discovered his love of science, as it was the only subject he found interesting. John pointed out, “It was at that time, however, I found myself being drawn to the sciences.” With the sciences, John said he found an internal thread of motivation, explaining, “Even though I wasn’t being all that motivated externally, it was just “Ooh, I like this. I think I’m gonna apply myself here. And I did.”

Although he also found high school a socially awkward and difficult time, John does feel his high school experience was valuable as it led him to his current career area.

For Ben, high school was also not a pleasant time. Ben attributed this to his own inattentiveness and lack of motivation. When admitting this, Ben grinned broadly and said, “I’m probably ADD, but I was just never diagnosed.” Ben went on the state that it was not until high school that he learned how to curb his inattentive urges. He was often bored by the constant repetition he encountered in the classroom, and noted this condition had plagued him since his early days of elementary school. In pinpointing when he felt he started doing better, Ben noted, “Probably about sophomore year I started getting a lot better.” It was at this point, that Ben said he began to distinguish between what he already knew, what he needed to know and what he did not need to know. Ben pointed
out, “I’d sit in class, maybe even fall asleep, if it was just more of what I already knew, but if there was something that I didn’t know, I took notes and paid attention to it.”

At the end of his sophomore year, Ben was asked if he would like to participate in advanced computer coursework that was selective and challenging. He had already completed every computer class the school offered. Although he was in general track courses, Ben decided to participate because of his interest in computers and the fact that the coursework would offer what Ben described as, “something different than, you know, the norm.” The coursework was challenging and difficult, and Ben stated that it “helped reassure me that I could do those things. So it was really nice getting through those courses. Cause they were really difficult.” The coursework came with an added bonus of being college credit bearing courses. Ben explained, “Up to that point they only offered them [the computer classes] in college. So I actually did receive college credit for them.”

In addition to receiving college level course credit, Ben also received the outstanding senior award for computer science his senior year. Ben said he felt this was his greatest academic accomplishment in high school, and explained, “They actually created an award for computer science for me and another one of my friends our senior year. And we were the first two to receive it.” Ben proudly pointed out that this award continues to be given each year to a graduating senior.

Ben said being awarded the academic trophy for outstanding work in computer science was his most memorable academic accomplishment of high school. However, when asked his feelings about earning college credits for the computer classes that he completed as part of his high school curriculum, and for which he won the award, Ben
smiled and acknowledged that the classes had earned him college credits, but more importantly, they had “saved” his life because they helped him “survive” the boredom of high school.

For Paul, the memorable event in high school that he credited as a very high moment of academic success was also one that led him to discover an interest that would later direct his career path. Because of a learning disability that had been diagnosed when he was in middle school, Paul stated learning expectations by his teachers were not set very high when he entered high school. Although he performed well in the general track the first two years of high school, Paul was, as he described, “ushered” into a vocational program for his last two years of high school, despite his wishes not to do so. Paul vividly recalled:

Because I had been tested and declared, “learning disabled” all the special education folks decided that as I entered high school I needed to have a trade so I didn’t become a burden in society and I told them, I said “I’m wanting to go to college” and they said, “Yeah, but you may never get through that.” I knew I could do better if they would let me try, but they didn’t. I was put into vocational education with all the others that had learning problems and pretty much left to my own devices. No one really cared what I wanted to do or wanted to give me a chance.

Feeling he had no option but to comply, Paul selected his vocational program based on what he did NOT want to do, rather than by his interests. Paul said he looked at the programs offered and eliminated the ones in which he wanted no part and those he felt in which he would do poorly. During this time, Paul noted two things he learned about
himself. First, Paul found himself helping other students, as his disability was only slight while other students in his classes were more cognitively challenged. Allowed by his teacher to assist some of the others students, Paul realized he was “happiest when I got to help people.” Paul pointed out that this helped him in later years to decide on his present career.

In addition to the pleasure he found helping others, Paul also discovered he found pleasure in learning new things. Paul explained, “I just started falling in love with learning anything that I could.” Paul soon found himself excelling with the academic portion of his program. As a result, Paul was inducted into the National Honor Society and graduated with academic honors from high school. Paul stated these were very proud moments for him. When asked what made them special, Paul replied:

Earning that honor helped me show the ones who didn’t think I could do well academically that I was able to do just as well as the other students. My family was very proud of me and my granny who was a seamstress fixed me up with a nice suit of clothes. I was proud of myself. I mean I had always had a hard time of it in school, until right at the end. And here I was on top of the heap!

However, at the end of high school, although Paul could have been certified in his area of vocational training, he wanted no part of it and elected to forego the process needed for certification. When asked why he did not attempt certification, Paul stated that having been selected for the National Honor Society and having graduated with honors gave him the confidence to go college, which had been what he had originally wanted to do.
Unlike the other respondents who discussed at least one memorable moment of academic success while in high school, Peter and Silas revealed they felt they had no memorable moments of academic success in high school. Instead, these two participants emphasized that it was their participation in extra-curricular activities that had provided them with memorable moments of success. For example, when discussing his high school academic experience, Peter shrugged and said, “I did alright. Nothing big though.” Peter continued and stated he had participated in the vocational education track, with a focus on business, and that the only academic class that had interested him had been history. After a few moments of reflection, Peter added, “you know, I didn’t do anything big in high school, but I did find out how much I liked student government.” In describing what he liked most about student government, Peter stated:

I’m a big fan of United States history and how it correlates with politics and I was just really amazed how the forefathers could envision a country that was based on freedom and based on just a few documents. I was very interested in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence and the political minds of the day. I was just interested in history and we are formed today.

Peter continued to discuss his interest and passion for student government, stating that his interest had not ended when he graduated from high school and that he had also participated in student government and served as student government president at the community college he had attended. Peter revealed that he enjoyed the experience of being student government at his community college, and that it was partially responsible
for his decision to major in history at the university level. In discussing his plans to continue with his interest in politics, Peter replied:

I love everything about them [politics] but unfortunately, there’s not a lot of money there unless you’re working in DC. And unless you’re working in someone’s office who never gets beat, or, unless you’re working for some kind of agency.

However, Peter is now pursuing a master’s degree in public administration with the hope of someday working for a non-profit. And, like John and Paul, Peter credits his early high school experience with putting him on his current career path.

Silas also claimed he did not achieve anything “big” academically during his high school experience. However, when speaking of his academic performance, Silas disclosed, “I excelled, did very well in English. I loved English. But I hated math. I struggled very hard in math, and science. It brought my g.p.a. down. Way down.” Then Silas laughed and added, “I was not what you would call ‘an academic success,’ but I was good at other things.” Then Silas explained that during high school years, he loved participating in band and show choir. Silas noted he had been selected to participate in All-County and All-State Choir, as well as All-County and All-State Band. Recalling these accomplishments, Silas smiled and said good-naturedly, “you know, not everyone was asked to be in those groups . . . just us good ones.” Then Silas’ tone became much more serious as he added, “Those were, in my opinion, great accomplishments and great, great memories.”

Although Silas did not consider himself an academic success in high school, he still felt he had experienced a degree of success through his participation in extra-curricular
activities. Additionally, it was these activities that encouraged him to try and do well with his school work because in order to participate in these extra-curricular activities he needed to maintain passing grades.

Even for the participants who experienced memorable moments of academic success while in high school, extra-curricular activities served to lessen the perceived harshness of the participants’ high school years. As a member of band throughout junior high and high school, Paul pointed out how participation in this extra-curricular activity had helped him concentrate better during high school. Paul credited band with helping him “stay focused and see things through, especially the big picture.” Describing this, Paul said:

I was a part of something, you know? You get to hear something when you really don’t even understand the music, but then when you get to do a concert even though it still didn’t sound good ‘cause you’re just learning to be a musician, to see it all come together. Being a part of something bigger helps you understand what role you play, even if it’s a small one.

Ethan also said that being a band member and how it helped sustain him during high school. In describing what participation in band had meant to him, Ethan fondly recalled, “School sucked, but I was a ‘band geek’ and band was fun. I liked to go because of it.” Had Ethan not been in band, he said he knew he would not have enjoyed high school at all.

For Ben, sports served as an outlet and source of motivation to do well academically. Ben, who had described himself as very “bored” with most academics during his high
school years played baseball and football in junior high and high school. He displayed a sense of pride when he said he had been really good at both sports, and said that even when he was not doing well academically, he had at least been good at sports. Ben eagerly admitted, “They are the only reason I went to school some days. I mean, if you were absent, you couldn’t play. And they kept my grades up. I was really good, too.” John also enjoyed playing sports, simply saying, “those were great times.” Dan shared the same sentiment, stating, “I did some sports, and I was pretty good. They made school tolerable.”

Only one participant, David, who reported he had been prevented from participating in extracurricular activities by his father, did not participate in any high school social activities. When asked in what he might have participated, had he been permitted, David replied, “sports, I loved sports, and I did participate in them when I was younger, and I loved it.” For these participants, engagement in social activities served as a source of motivation and provided them with additional experiences of success and engagement.

In discussing their perceptions of high school academic success, six respondents, Paul, Dan, Ethan, David, Peter and Silas reported they had not only participated in a vocational training education track, but that they had also earned certificates in their respective programs of study. According to state law, the respondents could have graduated from high school without completing the additional requirements that the certificates required. Yet, despite the extra academics required in earning a vocational trade certificate, none of the respondents identified this accomplishment as a memorable moment of academic success. Instead, the respondents downplayed the academic value of
earning the certificate. For example, when asked how he felt when he earned his certificate, Paul, who never worked in the field in which he was certified said, “It never occurred to me not to do what all I needed for the certificate; it wasn’t all that hard to get, anyway.” Likewise, Ethan, who had worked in his area of certification for twelve years after his military discharge said, “I never thought not to do what I needed to complete it. I mean, by that time [the end of high school] I knew I could use it for work. But it wasn’t too difficult to do.” The general perspective of the other respondents, were as Peter shrugged and stated, “It was a vocational program. There were a lot harder classes than that. And I didn’t take those.” These responses appear to indicate the earning of a vocational certificate during high school was not valued as a memorable academic accomplishment.

Those respondents who did not participate in the vocational education track at their high schools participated in the general education track. John and Ben participated in the general education track but received very little guidance from counselors, and faced overall low expectations from their teachers. Although both maintained decent grades, John pointed out, “most [teachers] really didn’t seem to care [about those in the general track] except that we passed high school so they didn’t have to mess with us anymore.” This perspective was also echoed by Ben who stated, “unless you were a ‘brainiac’ and in college prep, they [the guidance counselors] didn’t bother to help you with things [like getting ready for and into college]. You weren’t that important to them.” Because of these perceptions, both John and Ben admitted they had not really considered college until the
end of their final year of high school. They also pointed out that because they had very little assistance from their high schools, transitioning into college had been difficult.

High school was described as a difficult time by all the respondents, even those who had experienced academic success. In describing their high school experiences, all respondents acknowledged they had not applied themselves to their fullest abilities. However, some had managed to maintain respectable grades, and all had managed to earn their high school diplomas. Although not all respondents were able to pinpoint an academically related successful moment during their high school years, those who could not did report some form of successful high school experience.

High school survival, overcoming learning obstacles, and public recognition and pride were themes that emerged during discourse with the participants regarding their perceived past and present academic successes.

**Research Question Three: What Do These Men View as Factors From Their Lived Experiences That Positively Contributed to Their Academic Successes?**

Four themes emerged from the data regarding factors from their lived experience that participants felt contributed positively to their academic success. These themes included: job security & economic stability; family support; self-reliance; and military service.

**Job Security & Economic Stability**

When asked about factors from their lives that positively contributed to their academic success, all eight respondents spoke at length about the desire and need for better job security and economic stability. Each participant also stressed the belief that he
felt a postsecondary degree would be beneficial, if not be required, in finding a “good job.”

Of the eight participants in this study, John, Peter, Paul, Ben, and David had completed degree programs at the time of their participation in this study. Additionally, these respondents reported they had completed degrees, or were working on degrees more advanced than their initial associate’s degree in order to ensure their present levels of employment. Paul pointed out having a degree for his present position had been “highly encouraged” and he reported he had complied with his employer’s request and finished his associate’s degree. As for David, Ben, Peter and John, their degrees had been minimum requirements for their present positions. Dan, Ethan and Silas, the three participants who have yet to complete their programs of study, all reported the economic stability that could achieved through job security as being as a factor that contributed to their academic success.

John readily acknowledged that the job security and economic stability that was possible through the obtainment of an associate’s degree had been a contributing factor in his academic success. John explained:

The fact that I could get a job after it was completed in two years appealed to me. I was at the point that I was ready to get married to my wife and we thought instead of me spending several more years in college, I should just go ahead and just get the associate’s in this program because I could go right to work after I finished it. And it would only take two years. So I was very happy to do it. I knew it would give me the ability to get a job, and earn what I needed to start my family.
Ben was also “job ready” when he completed his associate degree program. However, Ben decided to continue on, and pursued a bachelor’s degree. Ben explained his decision to continue on: “I decided, with the way the economy and everything was going, that with a bachelor’s degree I would be wanted that much more.” Ben then pointed out that although he is securely employed in his field, and makes a decent income, he is now contemplating an additional degree, at the master’s level. When asked why, Ben smiled and replied:

Well, recently I learned about one of the only accredited programs at the master’s level, in the entire country. That would be an accomplishment itself, to just go through that program. You know with a master’s degree, you could be all that more wanted, but to graduate from one of the only programs offered, well that would make you rare. You’d really be wanted. You wouldn’t have to worry about finding a job because the jobs would find you.

Ben continued to explain that when he began his associate degree program of study, the associate’s degree in that field was just then becoming a basic requirement, whereas previously, experience had often been allowed to substitute for the degree. Ben explained that the need for a degree to practice in his field contributed to his academic success. Without the degree, Ben pointed out he would not have been employable in his field and would not have the job security he now feels he possesses.

Paul’s career field also began implementing the basic requirement of an associate’s degree about ten years ago. At the time Paul began his program of study, an associate’s degree in that field was as Paul explained, “nice but not ‘required.’” However, today an
associate’s degree is a minimum requirement. Paul, who secured his present position through the use of nearly a decade of experience, reported he was approached by his employer and encouraged to complete his degree. Paul explained the situation in these words:

When they suggested, it was very heavily suggested, that I finish it. So I kinda thought I had better do it or else. But since I really didn’t have that much coursework left to do, it was not that difficult to finish. Besides, I knew if I ever wanted to changed jobs or if I lost this job for some reason, I might have problems getting a new one without it being finished.

With the completion of his associate’s degree, Paul said “I felt a whole lot safer. Not just in my present job, but knowing that if something doesn’t work out and I have to move or something, I could find another job with it.” Having once experienced a job loss related to the lack of formal education, Paul pointed out what he considered to be the advantages of having a degree: portability and desirability. Paul explained “I can take that degree and hopefully go anywhere.” He further illustrated this point by offering this analogy, “It’s kind of like that universal tool that you can buy at Wal-Mart that’s either a pair of pliers or a knife.” Paul, who is now pursuing a bachelor’s degree, explained that his decision to continue with a bachelor’s degree has also been motivated by his desire to maintain a competitive edge in today’s tough job market.

David knew the degree he needed for the position he desired, so obtaining that degree became his goal. In David’s case, his associate’s degree was merely a first step. David explained, “my associate’s and bachelor’s degrees would not get me the job I
wanted, but I had to get them to in order to get the degree I needed.” However, David does credit his desire for job security as a contributing factor to his academic success at the time he was completing his degrees. David explained:

When I first came back [from the service] I did not have the means or the mobility to go anywhere else. At that time, I was in a world of hurt. I was medically discharged but I had to fight for my medical retirement. I did not get it until years later. So when I got out, I needed a job. My education was for practical reasons. I was literally stuck with this option and no other. My education was needed at that time, in order to be employable. To get a decent job. I couldn’t do what I had been trained to do in the military. I needed to get a degree in something. So I did.

David also reported that he had never planned to go to college, but after his military career ended, he realized the necessity of a degree in obtaining job security and economic stability. Although he now receives his military pension, he still credits the need for job security and economic stability as factors that contributed to his initial college academic success.

Dan, Ethan and Silas are still working towards completing their programs of study. However, these respondents also reported that job security and economic stability were factors that contributed to their academic success. Dan, who spent several years working as a truck driver before and after his military career pointed out that although trucking had provided a good income to him, he had to work a lot of overtime, which was often dangerous. Dan explained:
I was running wild out on the road driving trucks. You know legally you’re only supposed to drive like 10 to 11 hours a day. I’d run three or four log books and drive sometimes 20 hours a day. They (the company) didn’t care. Long as I didn’t get caught, they didn’t care. That was making them tons of money.

However, although Dan was making plenty of money, he also realized he could not keep up this pace. Dan recalled, “I knew one day I would end up killing myself or someone else. I needed a job that was good that didn’t have me out pushing myself over the edge.” Because of this, Dan decided to return to college, and set as his goal, a four year degree. Dan explained how he thought a four year degree would help him. Dan said, “well, only with a bachelor’s degree can you get a really decent job that doesn’t work you to death.” Because Dan had participated in a vocational program when in high school, Dan did not feel he was “college ready.” Because of this, Dan selected to enroll in a Board of Governors transfer/general studies program with an emphasis on engineering at his local community college because he felt it would be the one most likely to help him academically prepare for entrance into a university level engineering program. Dan explained how he felt this strategy would help him:

Basically, this Board of Governors will be like having a decent SAT score so I can pretty much go to any type of four year school I want and be at the same level as somebody coming out of high school with a decent SAT score.

Dan also pointed out much that much of his academic success at the community college level had come from his desire to “level the playing field” since he had not participated in a college prep study program while in high school. Dan reported that job security was so
important, that it was the only reason he had come to college, and that it was why he worked so hard to do well.

Job security also served to bring Silas to college. Silas admitted that he had come to college solely with the hope that it would assist him into securing a good job. After relocating to his native West Virginia, following two years served in the Navy, Silas found work as a meat cutter at a local grocery store. After working as a meat cutter, Silas was finally hired for what he considered to be a “dream job” at a local factory.

Silas explained, “I made $18.00 an hour. I had good insurance, great benefits, a great retirement plan. I thought that I was gonna be set. I told myself, ‘I will retire from here.’” Content with this position at the factory, Silas would have happily worked there until retirement. However, after only twelve years on the production line, Silas learned the factory was closing its doors and outsourcing its labor to Canada and Mexico. In December of 2009, Silas became unemployed.

After drawing unemployment for nearly a year, Silas soon realized that to be competitive in the current job market, he would need “some kind of college degree.” In the fall of 2010, with funding from the Trade Reform Act and a high degree of anxiety, Silas began a two year program of study at his local community and technical college that would allow him to be employable upon graduation. With one term left to complete at the time of this study, Silas reported that he is looking forward once again to finding a good job and having the job security and financial stability he once enjoyed. Silas said, “I cannot wait to graduate. The entire time I have been here, I’ve only had one thing on my mind: finishing and finding my new ‘dream job.’ It’s why I have worked so hard.” These
comments by Silas indicate that, like his fellow respondents, he credits the desire for job security and economic stability as a contributing factor in his academic success.

Ethan is also in his final term of school. When discussing factors he felt contributed to his academic success, Ethan immediately stated, “I want a good job.” Currently finishing an associate’s degree, Ethan plans on continuing directly to the bachelor’s level, although he will be able to be employed with his two year degree. Elaborating on why he planned to do this, Ethan said he views postsecondary education as a necessity in today’s turbulent economic climate. Because of this, Ethan reported, he has decided that after he completes his associate’s degree, he will definitely pursue a bachelor’s degree, even if he can only commit to part-time studies. Ethan explained, “Back when I was getting out of high school I immediately saw that associate’s degrees were swiftly becoming what high school diplomas used to be.”

Ethan further pointed out he had seen advertisements for many jobs that traditionally had been considered unskilled, but which now require the minimum of an associate’s degree. Speaking to this, Ethan said, “I just read a study yesterday morning that said most employers are looking at a minimum of a bachelor’s degree for entry level positions. Which would now mean we’ve moved up.” This trend appeared to disturb Ethan, and he continued to ponder aloud, “Is the craziness going to continue to where before long you have to have a PhD for an entry level position? . . . So you have to have a doctor in environmental engineering to become a janitor?” Ethan noted the current academic entry level requirements for his field of study varied, depending on the employer. However, Ethan planned to ensure his own job security by completing at least a bachelor’s degree.
In discussing this, Ethan stated, “I don’t agree with it [the need for degrees in seemingly all things]. But I will do it [get a higher degree] because it will probably eventually be required. And I want to be able to make a living in that field.” Ethan’s comment indicated that although he was strongly opposed to such mentality, his desire for job security and economic stability served to propel him towards academic success.

Peter also addressed job security and economic stability when asked about factors of his lived experience that he felt had contributed to his academic success. Peter explained that at the time he decided to go to college, he was employed in food service and had been given an opportunity for advancement. However, Peter said he thought of how this position would impact him in the long term and decided that college was a better option for securing a position that would provide long term financial security. Peter explained:

I had a job at Wendy’s that I had been working all through high school, and they wanted to train me to be a manager, but I really didn’t want to do that and I knew that people with higher education made more, usually, in the long run. I mean that would have been fine for me, a manager at Wendy’s, for a while maybe, but not a family. They don’t make much more than minimum wage there. A family would have a hard time living on just a little more than minimum wage. So I decided I better go to college because I thought it would help me get a better paying job.

Peter understood the economic limitations of working for minimum wage. Having been raised in a poor family, Peter did not want to continue to face similar financial hardships throughout the rest of his life. Peter pointed out:
We were really poor, very poor, and I knew that I never wanted my kids to grow up poor. I have a great mom and dad; they just couldn’t do what other people could do. They’d done their best. But I knew I didn’t want to be poor the rest of my life so I went to college. So I could get an education and get a good job.

Peter, continued on, stating he saw college as a way to ultimately secure a better financial future for himself. As a result, instead of training to be a manager at Wendy’s, he decided to enroll in community college and work on a transfer degree in order to eventually attend a four year university. “I knew with a college degree, especially a four year degree, I could get a job that would let me provide for myself without struggling,” Peter explained.

Peter acknowledged his journey through postsecondary education had been filled with doubts about whether or not he would academically succeed. However, his desire for good employment provided the incentive to continue on, despite his academic struggles. Peter quite candidly revealed, “I’d talk about quitting all the time. But I didn’t.” Peter confessed:

I didn’t think I’d ever finish. But I pushed myself, pushed myself because I didn’t want to be poor all my life . . . . or for my kids to ever be poor . . . . and I did it. Because I knew to get a good job I had to finish.

Peter’s comments echo the sentiment of the other respondents in that the desire for job security and economic stability were valued as factors that contributed to the respondents’ academic success.
**Family Support**

Another factor of their lived experience that respondents identified as being beneficial to and aiding in their academic success was the support of their families. Participants immediately identified parents, spouses/fiancé, and children as sources of support during their college careers and discussed how they felt these sources of support had contributed to their academic success. In addition to sources of support, the participants also discussed three types of support: emotional, financial and skill based (such as in how to use a computer or draft a paper). Parental support was noted as being primarily emotional. Likewise, spousal support was noted also as being primarily emotional, but for those participants who were married while in college, spousal support also included much needed financial support. Finally, support received from children, was noted as being emotional as well as skill based, especially for those participants who entered college as non-traditional students.

**Support from Parents**

Of the varied sources and types of support discussed, parental support was discussed by all respondents, and three sub-types emerged: unconditional, conditional and non-existent. John, Paul, Peter, Silas and Dan discussed at length the unconditional support their parents provided. On the other hand, Ben and Ethan revealed the support they had received from their parents had been conditional, and David reported parental support for him had been non-existent. However, all respondents indicated that regardless of the type of parental support received, it had been an aspect of their lived experience that contributed to their academic success.
John, who now holds a master’s degree, shared that parental encouragement to attend college came early while he was still in high school. A laborer, John’s father had encouraged him to go to college so he could have a less physically demanding job. John said having his parents’ support was important to him, especially when he doubted his academic abilities. John explained:

I knew they thought I could do it, and that helped me at difficult times. Also, knowing they wanted me to find a career that made me happy was also important to me. I wanted to make them proud, so I worked hard.

John wanted to please his parents because he felt they believed in him. As a result, he strived to succeed academically.

Peter’s parents were also supportive of his decision to attend college, and he did so right after high school. However, Peter was quick to point out that his parents, “would be supportive of anything that would help me make a life for myself. Anything that would help me take care of myself.” Peter further explained that he meant his parents would have been supportive of anything that would help him become an independent adult, whether it be a full time job or attending college. Peter elaborated:

They were happy I went, because college to them meant maybe a better job. But any job would have probably been ok. They knew they couldn’t pay for it [college], so they didn’t think about it. But I was able to get financial aid and that, with my job, paid for what I needed, so I could go. And they were glad I was able to.

Knowing his parents were pleased with him made Peter push himself harder to finish, especially when he felt the coursework was too hard. He explained:
At times, I’d say I was going to just quit, especially when I couldn’t get the math. They didn’t understand why I said that because they thought I could do it. They didn’t know a thing about college or anything, but they had faith in me. That I could finish it. And I did.

Peter pointed out that although his parents were supportive of his college endeavors, there was never any pressure from them to do well or to finish. However, like John, he still felt compelled to do well and finish because he wanted to do well for them.

For Paul, who initially studied ministry at a private Christian college immediately after high school, the support provided by his parents functioned to sustain him throughout the many years it took to complete his degree. Paul recalled:

The first time I went to college, I won a scholarship, and they were really proud of that, plus that I was going to study to be a minister. One with a degree. Of course I couldn’t have went without the financial aid and scholarship money, they couldn’t have paid for it, but they cared about me doing good. And I wanted to do good for them.

Even after Paul withdrew from the first college he attended, Paul found his parents to be supportive in that they did not see his leaving school as a failure. Paul explained:

My granny became very ill right before the end of spring term, and I just felt I needed to go home. I was 7 hours away, you know. I wanted to go home because she was so sick, but after I went home for a week over spring break, I went back to finish out the rest of the term. This was because it was important to her that I finished that term. She was better, but still not real good. So, even after I finished out the term, I
went home and I ended up staying home . . . I wanted to be with her because I knew she did not have that much time left on this earth. Everybody understood. Family is important, you know, and, well granny wouldn’t always be there. School would be though.

Two subsequent attempts to return to college by attending local community colleges, were also supported by Paul’s parents; as were the breaks he took from coursework to go back to work. When discussing this, Paul shrugged and stated:

“It’s just the way it is. If it had taken a million tries before I ever got through, they wouldn’t have given up on me. They wanted me to go, but at the same time they understood when I couldn’t stay [in school] and worked instead.

By the time Paul finished his associate’s degree, he was a married adult with five children. Paul’s journey had taken nearly ten years. Reflecting on his parents support over that time period, Paul explained, “My parents are the kind of people who would support just about anything I did.” Paul laughed and added, “As long as it’s legal.” Paul stated his only regret was that his grandmothers had not lived to see him finish. He said he would like to have shared his academic success with them.

As a non-traditional student, Silas entered postsecondary education as a middle-aged adult after an industrial employment lay-off. However, Silas still reported parental support as a factor in his academic success. Silas pointed out, “I’ve had great support from my home. Not just my wife and three daughters, but my mother and my father and my siblings. They’ve cheered me on all the way.” Silas drew strength from knowing his parents were supportive since at the time he graduated from high school his parents had
not viewed him as “college material” because he had been an academically weak student in high school. Silas revealed that he has a deep sense of satisfaction in knowing he has finally made his parents proud of his academic abilities by doing well in school. Smiling, Silas explained:

I like that they are proud of my efforts after all these years. My school efforts. But then I guess once a parent always a parent. . . . I want to do good because it reflects on them as my parents, even still to this day. And I want them to be proud of me.

Although Silas entered college as an adult, he still credits the support he has received from his parents as a factor that has helped him to do well academically.

Dan was also a nontraditional student when he entered college. He joined the military right after high school, and served for several years. However, after a medical discharge from the Army, and a divorce, Dan returned to West Virginia and currently resides with his mother. Dan reported his mother is pleased he is attending college, although he also reported that she would not have felt this way at the time he graduated from high school. In explaining why he thought this, Dan said:

I was pretty wild in high school. I mean my grandparents and my mom did a good job raising me, but I went through a wild time. I wouldn’t have done well then, and she knew it. I would have flunked out and been a huge mess. But now she is very happy about it because I do so good in school. And that, in turn, makes me feel good, and makes me want to do good . . . because she is so happy about me doing good. It’s like a big cycle.
Dan also pointed out that by living with his mother he is financially helping her. This is because she has been ill and has not been able to work. Dan felt his mother’s happiness provided him with a reason to do well, as his doing well in school has made her happy.

Although John, Peter, Paul, Silas and Dan identified unconditional parental support as a factor that contributed to their academic success, Ben and Ethan reported they had received parental support but, only under certain conditions. Even so, Ben and Ethan still considered this limited type of support an important factor in their academic success.

Ben described his parents as being “supportive in their own way.” Ben then explained that although his parents’ initial actions could be perceived by some to be non-supportive, he actually viewed them as being very supportive. Ben said, “You see, I just did enough to get by in high school. I was kind of lazy in high school. Okay really lazy.” As a result, Ben’s parents felt he lacked the maturity needed to be successful academically and refused to support any attempt at college at that time. Ben further explained:

I think towards the end of my high school days they knew that I could do what I needed to do to get through school, but they didn’t really think “well, he’s ready to do it.” So they actually wouldn’t sign any of my stuff to get into college right out of high school. They weren’t convinced I had the right mindset to go to college.

After working various jobs for a year, Ben’s desire to go to college grew to the point his parents finally decided to let him give it a try. However, Ben only enrolled part-time his first term. Ben’s mother wanted to be sure that he would do the work. Ben said dryly,
“I had to prove myself to them.” After a successful first term, Ben enrolled full-time with his parents’ support.

Discussing how he felt about his parents’ initial decision, Ben did not hesitate and said, “they helped me best by not helping me at all.” He noted that at that time he was fully aware he lacked the needed maturity and that he “probably would’ve flunked out.” He also stated that he was glad they made him wait, as it increased his desire to go and his determination to do well. Thus, the initial lack of parental support by his parents was viewed by Ben as contributing to his increased desire to go to college and his dedication once he did.

Also a recipient of condition parental support, Ethan viewed the conditional parental support he received as one of the factors that drove him to succeed academically. Although, in Ethan’s case, parental support was initially present, this support was lost when Ethan changed his program of study. Ethan explained:

They do not like my present major. My ex-wife didn’t like the idea of it either, so although I would like to have done this years ago, I did not because of her. When I first came [to school], it was after my divorce. My original idea was to come back to school, gain some more knowledge and skills and apply it towards what we were doing [at work]. But once laid off, with no job to go back to and with no wife, I started thinking about it again . . . . and I decided to do it.

In explaining why he thought his parents were not supportive of his new field of study, Ethan pointed out:
It’s all about money. They think it won’t be as good a paying job. And it won’t. So they aren’t happy about it. But I am. And I am the one who pays my bills, so why not do something I have always wanted to do, even if I make less. It’s what I have always wanted to do.

For Ethan, the loss of their support was no surprise. A returning non-traditional student, Ethan explained that the first time he tried college he had left after a year to join the military and that his parents “really hated it” when he enlisted. It was not the leaving of college his parents hated, but the fact he joined the military, said Ethan.

After being medically discharged from the military, Ethan returned to work in the field he had studied while a vocational student in high school. When he returned to college this second time after his military career ended, it was to further himself in his career field. At that point in time, the parental support was present, but Ethan said he knew it was only because of what he was studying. After he switched from pre-engineering to criminal science, his parents no longer supported him. In describing how he could tell they no longer supported him, Ethan readily stated, “Because they tell me it’s stupid. And that I should be doing what I already can do, and furthering that so I can make more money.” Ethan paused for a moment. Then he continued on, “I knew they wouldn’t like it. I knew they would hate it just like when I joined the Army.” He laughed and added, “But now I’ll just try all that much harder, just to show them I can do it.” For Ethan, the loss of parental support now gives him a reason to be academically successful.

David also addressed the issue of parental support. Unlike Ethan’s conditional parental support, David felt he had no parental support. Still, David explained how the
lack of it functioned to drive him to succeed. David, who graduated from high school at the age of sixteen, recalled:

At that time, I was pretty much told by my father that I was expected to stay there at home and work. If I left, then I left, and I didn’t need to come back. So I did. They were done with me after that.

After a first attempt at community college that lasted only a year, David joined the military. After a medical discharge seventeen years later, he returned to school and completed three degrees in less than four years. During that time, David had little contact with his parents and his relationship with them continues to be strained. In reference to their lack of support, David stated:

My home life showed me what not to do when I was kid. That is one of the main reasons I can say that part of my life was a success, because I was able to say “If I do that, I’m gonna wind up being needy my entire life.” It served to keep me from being that way. I could only move forward because there was no going back.

David pointed out he felt this had been advantageous to him. He explained, “Had things been different, I would not be who I am or where I am today. And I certainly would not have gone to college or obtained three degrees.” Thus, David views the lack of support he received from his parents in a type of positive light, viewing it as a factor that helped him academically succeed.

*Support from Partners*

Another source of familial support identified by the respondents was that received from spouses/fiancé. This source of support was recognized by John, Paul, Silas and Ben,
as being one that positively influenced their academic success. The other participants, Dan, Ethan, and David had been divorced when pursuing their associate degrees and did not recognize anyone who served in the role of significant other, and Peter, single, stated he had not been involved in any type of exclusive relationship at the time he was a student.

When asked about those who had played a significant role, John immediately acknowledged his wife of twenty plus years as the driving force behind his decision to pursue and complete a two year associate degree program so he could quickly pursue employment and they could marry. She also served as a source of support while he pursued his bachelor’s and master’s degrees. In describing her support, John stated, “she’s been there all the way . . . in all ways.” John then explained that his wife had initially provided emotional support when she was his fiancé and he was pursuing an associate’s degree. Following their marriage, they both worked and she assisted by providing additional financial support for the family, as well as fulfilling some of his family obligations while he was busy completing coursework for his higher degrees. Her willingness to take on additional obligations was one of the most important factors in his success, he stated; without her help, the additional coursework would have been much harder to complete.

Paul also recognized his wife as a source of support that contributed to his academic success. Now married eleven years, they met when they were students together at the first community college he attended. After meeting her in the school library, Paul dropped two classes making himself more conveniently available for study dates, but he ended up on
academic probation anyway. Paul laughed and recalled, “After doing that, I learned the
meaning of what ‘satisfactory academic progress’ really meant.” On the other hand, being
a young, single mother, she demonstrated a high degree of self-discipline that included a
tightly scheduled life consisting of her school work, her job at a local department store,
and her responsibilities as a mother. Paul explained:

She came in early to prepare and study for her classes because her free time was very
limited; in fact, she really didn’t have any [free time] at all. I begin doing the same
so I could at least see her, and pretty soon I had developed that habit, too. Pretty
soon I was studying more than I ever had before, just because it meant I could see
her.

Her support of him in his academic endeavors has been a lengthy task. Paul
explained, “It’s taken me a long time to get through school because I stopped and
worked, but she’s been there the whole time.” Paul paused a moment, then continued,
“She is my biggest fan. She’s my greatest cheerleader. She kept telling me I could do it,
even during the long stretches when I thought I couldn’t do it.” Like Paul, she put her
degree completion on hold to return to the job market. However, Paul reported that after a
job loss, she resumed coursework and finished her associate’s degree before Paul finished
his. In doing so, Paul pointed out that she was also able to contribute financially to the
family, allowing Paul to reduce his workload so he could finish his degree. Paul felt that
without her financial help, he would have had to work more hours to provide for his
family and would not have had the time to finish the degree he just completed or attempt
the one that he now pursues.
The spousal support Silas received was similar to that described by John and Paul. Married for over twenty years, Silas described his wife’s support as his “greatest source of strength and stamina, next to God.” Silas shared that by the time he began his coursework, his wife had already completed an associate’s degree. He said he felt this had helped him, and explained:

When I started I was so nervous. But I knew she already had experienced all the struggles and problems. She had been down the path and she knew the path and could help me down it, and she has.

Silas, who has one more term until he graduates, said that although his wife has helped him, she has also subjected him to some good natured teasing. Silas shared:

Sometimes I’ll go to her, if I’m struggling with one of the classes or whatever. I’ll say “look, I really need you to help me because I’m not getting it.” And then she looks at me and kind of stubborn and hardheaded she says, “Well nobody helped me!” But then she’ll help me. She wants me to do good. She loves me, so she always helps me.

Without her support, Silas says he probably could not have succeeded academically to the degree that he has.

Although not married while in college, Ben reported his fiancé had supported him and this had assisted him in being academically successful. Engaged while in school Ben explained, “I knew if I wanted to stay with her, I would need to finish.” When asked why he thought this, Ben smiled and simply stated, “I knew she wouldn’t want me if I didn’t finish because she would see that as lazy and worthless.” Then he quickly added, “I know
I wouldn’t want to be with someone who I thought was too lazy to finish, or worthless, so I don’t blame her.” As a fellow student, she also served as a role model much like Paul’s wife had served for him. Ben recalled:

She kept me organized and reminded me of things. I didn’t need reminded all the time, but she made sure I didn’t forget important things I needed to do. Sometimes I would be so involved in doing something that something else might slip my mind, but she made sure I remembered. She was a really good student. She studied and worked hard. So I did, too, because of her.

Through his recollection, Ben acknowledged the instrumental role his fiancé played in contributing to his academic success. Because of her, Ben said he was motivated to stay in school; she also provided him with a model of how to be an academically successful student.

For the men who were married and engaged, the support provided by their wives/fiancé was viewed by them as contributing a great deal to their academic success. The general consensus by the respondents regarding this support is well represented by this statement by Paul, “I could not have done this myself. . . .well, maybe, but it would have been awful hard.” Unlike the parental support discussed by the respondents, the spousal support received by those who were married/engaged was emotional as well as financial.

Support from Children

In addition to support provided by parents and spouses, two respondents identified their children as vital sources of support who they felt had contributed to their academic
success. Although this support was emotional, it was also reported as skill related in that the respondent’s children served to assist them with school related basic skills.

As a non-traditional student who returned to the classroom after a twenty-one year absence, Silas learned basic computer and research skills from his three teenaged children. Silas explained:

My girls have helped me a lot. There have been times that I struggled doing papers or getting a power point ready. And I have hollered for my girls “Girls, get in here and help me.” And they would get the computer set up. They would show me what to do. And they would, of course, being teenage girls, roll their eyes and say, “Dad, we learned this in second grade.” They’ve laughed at me a lot. They’ve poked fun of me and made fun of me. But at the same time, they’ve been very supportive.

In addition to learning how to use the computer, Silas also credited his children with assisting him in his writing classes as well as learning how to find valuable resources on the internet. To illustrate this, Silas shared:

One of my first assignments was to write this essay, and it had to be in MLA format. I had no idea what that was, but my middle one knew and showed me how to Google and go to the OWL [the Online Writing Lab sponsored by Purdue University]. I did that paper. And the MLA was perfect [added emphasis].

Silas acknowledges that he could go to the learning center for this type of assistance; however, when his children give him assistance, Silas shared that it made a bigger impact as it showed how much they cared about how well he did academically. Knowing this makes him want to do well for them.
Paul also felt his children’s support was instrumental in his academic success. Paul and his wife have five children. When they married, she had a three year old child that Paul adopted and then they had four children together. Reflecting on his educational journey with regard to his children, Paul pointed out, “They were my motivation every day.” In discussing other ways they had contributed to his academic success, Paul shared:

Well, we’d get our homework out and do it together. And here all this time I thought I was being a role model . . . like, an example. Then I find out from my wife that the kids think they have been helping me do my homework, and serving as my example. It just warms me that they want to help me. That they thought they were helping me. It made me want to do my best. For them. You know how it makes you feel good when you help someone and they do well. I like to think it gives them that good feeling. Like they helped me.

Thus, like Silas, Paul found the support received from his children valuable and credited this support with contributing to his academic success.

Support that positively influenced the respondent’s academic success was reported to originate from three sources: parents, spouses/fiancé and children. In addition to these sources of support, the respondents also discussed emotional, financial and basic skills as types of support provided by the sources they had named.

**Self-Reliance**

In addition to their families, the respondents also discussed the role they felt they themselves had played in their own academic success. Throughout these discussions, a theme of self-reliance emerged. All eight respondents identified themselves as self-reliant
and identified self-reliance as a factor that contributed to their academic success. Respondents reported that self-reliance had assisted them with the transition into college, as well as sustained them academically when they struggled with school-related issues. Of the respondents, John, Ben, Peter, and Silas credited self-reliance with helping them succeed academically at their first attempt at college. For Ethan, Dan, Paul and David, self-reliance was coupled with prior knowledge gained from previous attempts at college. It was this combination these men credited with helping them succeed academically.

This self-reliance was bolstered by outside others, such as school personnel/support services and faith in God. However, the general feeling expressed by all but two of the respondents is well represented by these words from Dan, who still has one more term to finish: “Yes, I know about the advisors and all that, but you know . . . . I am the one who needs to ask for the help, if I need it. It has to come from me.” Thus, although all the respondents were able to identify at least one form of assistance outside that of family members, for which they were appreciative, outside assistance by school personnel was not identified or considered by six of the respondents as a form of support that directly contributed to their academic success. Only two, Paul and Silas, identified and valued outside sources as directly contributing to their academic success.

When discussing self-reliance, John explained how it played a key role in his transition into college and as a factor that assisted in his academic success. John shared how his transition into college was not attempted until after he had graduated from high school. John reported this was due primarily to a lack of knowledge regarding college culture and knowledge of how to go about getting into college. John entered college
occurred over two decades ago and recalled that at that time, “We were company people (referring to how the men in his family had been generationally employed as laborers with the same company). We really didn’t start talking about college until I was almost ready to go there.” His parents, although emotionally supportive were not instrumental in the logistical aspects of college transition. John further elaborated:

It certainly wasn’t that, you know, they felt like their son couldn’t do something like that. They were very supportive, but you know, they just didn’t know. They’d never been to college. They didn’t know how to help me get signed up.

When asked if he had been professionally assisted by high school guidance counselors, John reported he received very little support or help from his high school with his transition to college, stating, “they didn’t push you to go to college. At that time, they probably did a lot more recruiting for the military. Or, they wanted you to go to work in the factory.” Although he had selected a program of study before heading to college, John felt he was very discouraged by school personnel once he arrived at the community college. They told him of the competitive nature of the field he had chosen. He recalled, “It was discouragement” rather than “Okay, we’re gonna help you be successful with meeting that goal” that met him when he arrived at college.

Although John participated in college orientation, he received only bits of essential information and was not aware of continuing advising services. Lacking professional direction from college personnel, John said he looked at the course catalog himself and figured out his own schedule based on what he believed he needed for his major course of study. When asked why he did not seek the assistance of an advisor, he stated “I had no
idea . . . there was even such a creature at that time.” As a result, he used what he had read in the catalog, and signed up for the core classes listed for all science majors. When recalling this, John said, “I just read it myself. Did it myself. Tried to do the best I could.”

While taking general education and science core classes, John became interested in the allied health field when he learned about it from someone at his church who practiced in that field. Recalling this, John shared:

I guess my parents were talking to different people about college and what to do and this and that, and he said, ‘Well, have him come talk to me.’ As a result, I got to spend an afternoon looking at the different facets within that career area. I thought, ‘Yes, this is what I wanna do.’

Although John had a basic idea of what he wanted to study, he credited the assistance of this particular individual with helping him pinpoint what he eventually came to choose as a field of study. When asked the role this person served in assisting him in his career, John hesitated a moment and then replied, “well, he showed me that area, but the grades I had to earn myself.”

Ben also reported a high degree of self-reliance when transitioning into college. In identifying who assisted him, Ben replied:

I did it all by myself. I had a girlfriend at the time that I first started going to college and she helped me out with where to go, like which building was what, but I had to figure all of it out myself.

Elaborating on what he had to figure out by himself, Ben said, “the FAFSA paperwork, the scheduling, getting registered, all that stuff you do to get started.” When asked how
he felt about having to do all of this himself, Ben responded matter-of-factly, “Well no one else would have done it for me.” Then he quickly added, “I could do it myself, so I did it myself. So, I didn’t really need anyone to do to do it” Although Ben pointed out that he waited a year after his high school graduation before going to college, he questioned whether he would have received transitional services at his high school, regardless. Ben explained, “They helped some students . . . Where I went [to high school] academic success was number 1. But they wouldn’t have helped me. There was no ‘guiding’ for students like me [general students] from the guidance people.” From Ben’s perspective, he relied only on own abilities to transition into school.

Although Peter’s parents were very happy he had decided to attend college, they lacked the knowledge needed to help him transition into college. However, unlike John and Ben, Peter reported that he had assistance by an outside person with his transition into college. Peter’s neighbor, who worked in student services at the local community college, assisted him with the transition. Peter recalled, “My sister knew a little bit where she had tried to go. She was currently going when I first started….but, if it wasn’t for her [the neighbor] we probably wouldn’t have known what to do.” Peter indicated that although the neighbor’s help was valuable, he was aware that this type of assistance was also offered by the school, and he could have obtained it there. Peter explained:

She helped me and my sister, but we could have went to the school, too. Where she worked. It was that she lived close, so we just went there. We didn’t know what to do, and she told us, but the others [counselors at the college] could have told us, too, if we had went there. We just went to her, instead. It was closer.
Asked about other school personnel and services the school offered, Peter recalled that he often utilized student support services, as well as utilizing tutoring services, on a regular basis. Peter also said he found the community college staff and faculty very helpful and supportive of his educational pursuits. In describing them, Peter said:

The staff . . . was great. We’ve become good friends, me and them. The teachers: they had a great staff so they always helped you with anything you needed. The counselors always helped me with anything I had a question with.

In evaluating whether he felt school personnel or the services offered had been a factor that contributed to his academic success, Peter casually shrugged and replied:

Sure, I guess so. I mean I used tutoring all the time for math. Because I flunked it the first time, and I never wanted that to happen again . . . with anything. But I had to ask for the help. No one came up to me and said ‘let me help you with that.’ If I hadn’t asked, I wouldn’t have got it . . . . I asked for help when I needed it. The first time I didn’t and I failed the math. But after that . . . . I asked when I felt I needed it.

And they did help me, but you had to go ask.

From Peter’s perspective, asking for help resulted in the help necessary to succeed; however, in order to receive the assistance needed, he had to rely on himself in asking for the help.

John, Ben and Peter all emphasized self-reliance and how it was essential to their academic success. For John and Ben this meant navigating college transition by themselves. As for Peter, the assistance received from a neighbor during his transition
into college and the student services utilized by him in the course of his program of study were perceived to be the direct result of his own willingness to seek help.

Unlike John, Ben and Peter, who completed college with their first attempt, Ethan, Dan and David left college shortly after beginning college and joined the military. After serving time in the military, they resumed their academic pursuits and successfully completed a program of study. All three identified prior knowledge learned during their first college attempt, coupled with self-reliance as being factors from their lived experiences that resulted in academic success.

Ethan described his first attempt to transition into college as a “disastrous mess.” Ethan explained he had completed a vocational program during high school and attempted to advance this training at the postsecondary level. When asked if he had received assistance when transitioning into college from his family or his high school, Ethan said he had not. However, once he arrived at college, Ethan consulted with an advisor about his plans. But, after seeing his high school transcript, she discouraged his choice of program in what he felt was a very condescending manner. Ethan reported that her attitude only made him more determined to attempt the program he had selected.

Ethan soon felt the classes he had selected were too demanding and acknowledged, “I was in over my head, but because of her attitude, I felt I had no one to turn to.” Feeling he had no one to ask for help, Ethan reported relying on himself to figure out what he needed to do. He stated he thought, at that time, his only option was to leave school since he was not doing well academically. Because of his poor academic performance, Ethan decided to join the military before the end of his first term. Ethan recalled “I didn’t
realize you had to drop the classes, withdraw. And so I failed all of them.” In
summarizing his first experience with college, Ethan stated, “My first experience I had no
cue what I was doing. I didn’t want to ask. She [the advisor] had made me already feel
so small. So I just did what I felt was best.”

When Ethan reentered school fifteen years later, he said he felt wiser. He had learned
that relying on himself meant he needed to seek answers to his questions, and help when
needed. To describe this, Ethan explained:

I’ve had a lot of positive help and suggestions from faculty, and from some staff. I
know that services are there for those that might require them. I just don’t require a
whole lot. I just want to get in, get my schooling done, go home for the day. And if I
need help with some advising and what my schooling is, I know I can go see one of
the advisors. But I haven’t really depended on them.

Ethan was also openly critical of the student support staff at the college he now
attends. He commented, “I’m not certain that the advisors always have their head
screwed on right, or really care what the students want.” Continuing on, Ethan
specifically criticized the services the school provided for its veteran population, pointing
out, “You know there’s no signs, no brochures. There’s no posters saying ‘here’s what
we offer for our veterans.’”

Due to this lack of visibility, Ethan explained he had only learned of the veteran’s
services department at his school a few weeks prior to his last term. Because of this
delay, his military transcripts had not been fully evaluated until he was about to graduate.
As a result of the transcript review, Ethan received several credit hours of course credit,
but also discovered he had taken and paid for a class for which he had already earned credit. In frustration, Ethan pointed out:

Two weeks ago was when my military transcript was *finally* placed on the record.

And I’ll be graduating in one term. And that’s only because I had to really push for it. As a veteran, I really haven’t seen any benefit of having the veteran services. I’ve ended up taking a class I didn’t need to take at all because I already had what I needed to get credit for it.

In evaluating if these services had helped in his academic success, Ethan indicated that he felt they had not really assisted him, as the credits had been applied too late to impact his overall school experience. Additionally, this only seemed to add to the degree of mistrust developed during his prior attempt with college participation, which served to fuel his self-reliance. Ethan demonstrated this attitude when he said:

I mean, the first time, I learned some people just don’t care. So this time, I mostly found things out for myself. When I needed to ask about something, I did, but I made sure to ask more than once, and more than one person, to be sure the answer was right. Or to ask someone I knew I could trust would know the answer. That’s what has helped me, finding out who to ask and just asking them myself.

Ethan’s words reveal that although he did use school support services, he viewed his own self-reliance as a contributing factor to his academic success.

According to Dan, having prior knowledge was also valuable and he felt his first attempt with community college helped him be more successful with his second attempt. Although the colleges he attended were located in different states, Dan found their
student success policies and procedures very similar. At his previous school, Dan came to an understanding of the types of services that offered the kind of help he might need during his initial orientation visit. He explained:

They [personnel at the first community college he attended] were really helpful about telling you, you know, if you go to the library or help center, they’ll have these people in there . . . that can help you with whatever you may be struggling with. It’s not like you’re there lost. Out on the track by yourself. They were there, and it was their job to help you when you needed it. But, it was pretty much up to you after that. I mean you had the material and handouts about it, you knew where it was. It was up to you to go there and get help, you know. Just because it’s there doesn’t mean it can help you if you don’t go yourself.

Dan’s comments indicated he fully recognized the support services available; however, in describing them, he emphasized the important role he felt the student played in seeking any help that was needed. Years later, upon reentry into college a second time, Dan said he remembered these services and asked questions regarding similar services at the new school he was attending. Dan explained, “I was like, well, that school had it: I’m sure this one has it, too. So I asked professors and they told me where to go. Where these places were…”

When asked if he had used these services, Dan reported he had used advising and tutoring services. However, he again pointed out that he felt the responsibility for visiting his advisor and attending tutoring sessions fell on him, and that had he not asked for the
help he needed and sought the services himself, then he would not have been as successful.

David also said he had not received any assistance with his transition from high school into college even though he reported participating in the Upward Bound program at his high school. When discussing Upward Bound, David reported that it had not assisted with his transition. David said, “The only thing that program did was let me know about school, but only in the sense that you could go to college and get a degree. It didn’t tell me how to go about it, though.” When describing his first attempt at college, David recalled the sense of aloneness that he felt and how he had relied on himself during the transition:

I drove to school right before classes started. . . . It was a few days before school started. I found out where I needed to go to register for classes and then I went to financial aid to see about how to pay for it all. I stayed, lived, in my car for a few days while my financial aid was getting done. . . . Then I had a dorm room. . . . I also got a map of the school and went to my classes. I had no help with anything. I found my own way around, with my map and schedule.

When asked if he had asked for help, David answered, “I didn’t need to since I found everything out for myself.” However, David reported leaving school the next year to join the military. In discussing why he left school, David revealed, “The only thing college taught me the first time was that I was not ready for college. . . . I had very little confidence in myself and poor grades when I left, like a 1.2.”
Seventeen years and ten deployments after joining the military, David was medically discharged and returned to try college a second time. He not only successfully finished his associate’s degree, but continued on, completing a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. In identifying what he would credit as being a factor in his academic success during his second attempt, David heavily praised the self-confidence he gained while in the military as well as his own abilities. In describing his college experience the second time, David said, “Easy. It was a cakewalk.” Regarding the student support services he received, David thoughtfully recalled:

In all my college experience I actually went to a lot of people asking for assistance [with advising] . . . . and I could find no one to help me. The only thing that ever assisted me was the academic learning center [at the community college level], and I even went back to them when I was working on my bachelor’s degree. I went there for some tutoring. Even when they weren’t supposed to be helping me [because David was no longer a community college student], they were good to help. But I’m who went . . . . who asked for the help. Overall, I didn’t get a lot of help, of any kind, except when I asked them [the learning center] so aside from that [the help at the learning center], I just did it myself. Found out things. Did them. On my own. Didn’t really need anything else because I could do it myself.

Echoing the remarks made by John, Peter, Ben, Ethan and Dan, David’s comments revealed that he believed self-reliance had been a factor in his academic success. Like Ethan and Dan, David’s first attempt at college was not successful; however, he was successful in a subsequent attempt. Like Dan and Peter, although David utilized student
support services that he acknowledged as being helpful, he still reported he felt the utilization of these resources that assisted him in being academically successful resulted from his own undertaking. However, in addition to self-reliance, two respondents, Paul and Silas, did value the assistance of college support services and credited them as being crucial to their academic success.

After praising college support services, Paul and Silas, who are both ministers of the Christian faith, spoke at length about the role of God in their lives and their studies. In addition to support provided by student support services, both respondents credited the will of God as helping them be academically successful and giving them the degree of self-reliance that was necessary to be successful. Paul, who attended three different colleges before completing a program of study, articulated he learned to be proactive and rely on himself at the first college he attended. Paul recalled that this school, a private Christian school, had a mentoring program that matched older students with incoming new ones. Paul said he learned early he had to be the one who asked the questions. In describing his experience at this school, Paul stated, “I learned I really didn’t know everything I thought I knew. I was very humbled. I learned I had to ask a lot of questions, even though I had that student mentor.” When asked to elaborate on the role of his student mentor, Paul said:

Even though I had a mentor, they didn’t really do a whole lot. I mean, like I didn’t have anybody to hold my hand and figure out the registrar’s office is who I need to go talk to if I need to drop a class. I had to learn that on my own. The mentor didn’t offer the information and if I didn’t ask they didn’t know what I didn’t know.
Two years after leaving the private Christian college, Paul returned to college at a local community college for a second try. Because of his previous college experience, he knew where and how to look for the help he needed at his new school. However, although he was doing well academically, his decision to serve as a minister necessitated another break in his formal education after beginning the second attempt. Paul explained:

I left after I was in school a second time because I had the chance to take a full time ministry position. As a youth minister. How could I say ‘no’ to that? It was what I had always dreamed of doing.

Four years later, the church downsized its ministry programs, and Paul, a junior pastor with no degree, was let go. After that, Paul then returned to yet a third college, for a third attempt, and finally finished his associate’s degree. When asked what he felt made his third and final attempt an academic success, Paul responded:

My family, my friends, everyone who believed in me. And myself. I had a lot of help along the way, and I needed it at times . . . . but ultimately, myself . . . . because it’s what God wanted for me. He is the one who gave me what I needed to finish. At times that meant asking for help. You just have to listen, and do what He says. God gives us the ability to be successful.

When asked to further describe the ability he spoke of, Paul said, “For me, it was getting out there and doing what I knew needed done. Looking for answers to questions, getting the help I needed . . . . like tutoring.” After describing his own self-reliance, Paul paused for a few moments then added:
You know, I’ve had so many people that opened their doors to me and listened to me whine and cry, that I have to also say they’re also the reason why I’ve been successful. We may think we are alone, but we really never are. He [God] is there, and He puts others in our path who can help us when we need it. When we can’t do it ourselves.

An intertwined relationship of self-reliance, supporting individuals/services, and God’s providence were noted by Paul as factors that contributed to his academic success.

In like manner, Silas also credited his academic success to his faith in God. When discussing factors he felt had assisted in his academic success, Silas focused on the will of God and said:

The Lord leads us where He wants us to go. I feel He has a purpose, and that’s why I am here. Why I am successful. Since I lost my job back in 2008, I have gripped even more tightly to Romans 8:28 “For we know that all things work together for the good to them that love God and to them that are called according to his purpose.”

When asked if he thought he knew what that purpose was, Silas paused thoughtfully for a moment and said:

I do not know what that purpose is yet, but I do know that being here I have become more tolerant. Before coming, I had a different mindset. But being here has opened my mind. . . . and it gives me the opportunity to reach out and help others – to serve them not as a minister, necessarily, but as a friend.

Recalling his transition into college, Silas rolled his eyes, shook his head and said, “I needed help. With all of it!” When asked who had helped him, Silas mentioned the
positive encounters and the relationships formed with the faculty and staff, noting that his advisor had been the most helpful and that Silas considered him “a very dear friend.” As for the role Silas thought he, himself, had played in his academic success, Silas solemnly stated, “I listen to God, and follow him.” To illustrate, Silas said:

You know God gives us ways to help ourselves. I have always had trouble with my math. So I went to the ASC and the math support specialist helped me, almost every day. And I eventually passed all the tests. This is how God works. He helps us help ourselves. But we have to do the work. That is up to us.

Silas’ words indicate that he viewed his self-reliance as well as assistance from others as the result of God’s divine force. Similar to Paul, Silas also valued these as being factors that contributed to his academic success. However, unlike the other respondents, who focused primarily on self-reliance and did not heavily credit the assistance of outside others as contributing to their academic success, Paul and Silas not only valued the help provided by outside others but also indicated by their comments that they felt this help had been provided by God.

Military Service

Four of the participants, Silas, Dan, Ethan and David, served time in the military and were honorably discharged veterans. Two of the five branches of the US military were represented by the respondents: the US Army, and the US Navy. When asked about aspects from their lived experiences that they felt had contributed to their academic success, those respondents who had served in the military credited traits they reportedly developed while serving in the military with being significant to their academic success.
Traits mentioned by the participants included: attention to detail, self-imposed standards of excellence, self-discipline, self-confidence and persistence.

When discussing factors he felt had assisted in his academic success, Silas, who had served two years active duty and nine years in the reserves with the US Navy, briefly mentioned his time in the service. Silas said:

My time in the military . . . made me want a job that I could be with my family every night, every day. I did not want to leave them. I did not like missing things with them. That’s why I didn’t re-enlist . . . And, when I came back to college I paid attention to everything I was told, or was handed on a piece of paper. Like I had been taught. Deadlines, requirement, things like that. Other students would say, ‘who told you that’ and I would say, ‘well, it’s on the syllabus.’ I was surprised at how little other people, students, paid attention to details.

When asked if any other traits had been learned in the military that he applied to his present academics, Silas shook his head and answered, “No not really. I’ve always been someone who did things on time. But I didn’t always pay attention. But I found that has been very useful in college. It has helped me do well.” A dean’s list student, Silas stated he feels he has done very well academically because has only received one C thus far in his college career.

Ethan, who served three active years in the US Army before being medically discharged due to a chronic health condition, credited his military service with giving him a certain trait which he viewed as helping him be academically successful. When asked about this trait, Ethan explained, “In the military there are standards. And these are set
higher than ‘average.’ So I set standards for myself that are higher than maybe what would be for the average student.” In sharing an example of a standard he had set for himself, Ethan said, “Well, I don’t have [emphasis added] to graduate with honors to finish my degree, but for me, I feel I need [emphasis added] to graduate with honors, because that is the standard I have set for myself.” Ethan revealed that he is a dean’s list student and that he is currently on track to graduating with honors, the direct result, he believes, of the high academic standard he has set for himself.

Dan, who served as a US Army Ranger for nearly five years before a serious injury sustained in Afghanistan resulted in a medical discharge, credited the military with giving him two traits that he felt has assisted him in being academically successful: self-discipline and confidence. Dan explained:

Now that I’m back in school, I see that I still have that discipline that was instilled in me when I was in the military. It’s there if I need it. And used to be through school [high school], I’d always question myself. I’d always be like going to the teacher or going to other students and be like, “Is this right? Does this look right?” I don’t do that anymore. I know it’s right. I guess it’s the confidence I now have in myself.

Dan said that during his high school years, he had lacked both these traits, which had led to poor academic performance. Referring back to his time in high school, Dan admitted, “I really didn’t have any self-control, self-discipline at that time, but I learned it in the military.” Then he smiled and added, “In there [the army] you need it to stay alive!” However, since returning to college, Dan said he has been using this trait to help
himself be academically successful, and he believes possessing both these traits have made a positive difference in his academic performance.

Similar to the other three participants who had military service, David, who spent over seventeen years in the US Army before being medically discharged, found that the self-confidence gained while in the military served as a valuable asset while in college. David explained:

I was very unsure of myself before I joined the military. Joining the service built my self-esteem. When I returned to school, I had confidence that I did not have before [when he first attempted college prior to his military service]. Having that, having the self-esteem I didn’t have before, helped me succeed in my academics.

In addition to having improved confidence, David also spoke about developing persistence during his military career, and said, “In the military you don’t give up. You don’t quit. You keep going. So now I’m not the type who quits, no matter what gets thrown my way.” David reported that he felt this this persistence, learned in the military and the self-confidence he gained while in the service, have contributed to his academic success.

The desire for job security and economic stability, the support of family, self-reliance, and traits instilled during military service emerged as themes from factors the respondents reported when discussing aspects of their lived experiences that they felt had positively contributed to their academic success.
Other Emergent Themes

Additional themes which emerged which do not fit neatly with the categories of the Research Questions, but which add to the depth and breadth of this research study included those related to: Love of Learning, Spousal Interdependence, New Expectations, and Personal Values.

Love of Learning

In discussing past and present academic success, the respondents also addressed their changing perceptions of school knowledge and academic learning. Seven of the eight participants indicated they had developed a love of learning, even though economic and job security factors had held more significance for attending college. Conversely, David was the only participant who felt that his decision to pursue higher education had been solely to obtain the degree required for his present level of employment. David clearly stated, “my education was need-based.” David viewed most of what he had been required to learn at the college level, purportedly to become a well-rounded student, a “complete and utter waste of time.” However, the other seven participants described in great detail the development of a love of learning and how this had been lacking in high school but emerged during participation in their postsecondary education experience.

This metamorphosis was well illustrated by John, who discussed at length his awareness of his change of attitude with regard to the acquisition of school knowledge. While earning his associate’s degree John said he was more focused on the “ends vs the means,” but he recalled noting a shift in his own mentality as it became “all about the learning,” instead of about “just getting done.” John stated, “I absolutely loved the
learning, and it wasn’t related to finishing anything!” In a similar manner, Dan spoke about discovering a love of learning when he stopped overloading his schedule “just to get done.” Dan pointed out that by taking a reasonable course load rather than an overloaded schedule (in a rush to “finish”) he realized “you get more out of your classes.” Likewise, Paul and Silas addressed the enrichment they found in learning new things. Paul pointed out, “I love to learn. It’s a wonderful thing, learning, the way the mind opens up, receives new information.” Silas echoed a similar sentiment by stating, “I have learned more than I ever thought possible. And most of all I have learned that I love to learn new things.”

Peter noted he discovered a love of learning early in his college career. He explained, “Back in high school, I used to just learn things because I had to, but once in college, I learned them because I wanted to.” Ethan, who changed his major in order to pursue a childhood dream pointed out that upon changing his schedule to take the appropriate classes, he had experienced excitement and looked forward to going to school, “for the first time that I can remember.” Ben also admitted college had not only instilled in him an appreciation for the knowledge he gained from coursework, but that it had also reshaped how he viewed “learning.” No longer does Ben see learning as an isolated event that only occurs in the confines of a classroom. He stated that although he is finished with his degree, he continues to “learn every single day.” Emerging during their postsecondary pursuits, the love of learning, as perceived by these men, had been absent during most of their high school years.
**Spousal Interdependence**

Five of the respondents were married at the time of this study and in discussing the role of their marital relationships, a theme of spousal interdependence emerged. John, Paul, Silas, Ben and David all reported that their wives had college degrees and that they currently worked outside the home. All five men also revealed that they were supportive of their wives’ educational and career pursuits, and valued them as much as they valued their own education and careers.

When discussing his wife, John praised her for being very supportive of his additional educational pursuits throughout the years, and said that if she decided to return and pursue a bachelor’s degree (she holds an associate’s degree) that he would be supportive. In describing her, John said, “She is a working professional and I would love to see her continue on with her education, earn a bachelor’s degree.” John stated that he considered any career goals that his wife may set as important as his own, and ranked any educational pursuits which they may require the same level of importance as his.

Paul also reported that he was very supportive of his wife. Paul explained how his wife had put her degree completion on hold to return to the job market at a time when the family was financially struggling. However, after a job loss, she too resumed, finishing her degree before Paul finished his. When discussing this situation, Paul pointed out with a tone of pride and admiration in his voice, “She got to come back to school here and finish her degree when she lost her job . . . . and now she’s back to work . . . . she makes pretty good money, too.” These comments reflect how Paul valued his wife’s academic pursuits and career and considered them as important as his own.
Silas’s support of his wife echoed that of John and Paul. Silas explained that his wife left high school to marry him right after she completed her junior year of high school. However, she completed her GED and then began college when their youngest child began kindergarten. Silas said that his wife told him, “When the girls get in school and they’re at school all day, I’m gonna go back to school, get my education.” She did and completed an associate’s degree in 2003. Silas then added that she had considered continuing and working on a bachelor’s degree in accounting, of which he stated he would be very supportive. In describing how he felt about this, Silas smiled broadly and said, “you know, she asked me one time, ‘would you be upset if I made more money than you?’ and I said ‘No! Please Do.’” Silas also stated he felt that as equal partners in their marriage, it is his role as her husband to support her interests, as it is her role as a wife to support his.

David also expressed a view of reciprocity when discussing the education and career of his wife. Although not married while in school, David is now married. David described his wife as a working professional who may have opportunities of career advancement in the near future. When discussing his wife’s career, David acknowledged the freedom receiving his military medical retirement gave him. When asked to explain, David said his retirement status gave him the ability to fully support her in her career efforts, especially in the event of a move. David explained, “If she wants to excel and exceed – do whatever she wants to do, I’ll follow her. I mean money’s not a key factor in my life at this point. I have my military retirement now.” When asked if he would have any issues with her making more money than him, David quickly replied, “None at all. In
fact, that would be wonderful!” Like the other married respondents, David also indicated he valued his wife’s education and career as he did his own.

**New Expectations**

Another additional emergent theme worth noting was that of new expectations. Seven of the eight participants revealed that unlike their own parents, they did expect their children to attend college and complete a program of study. This shift in attitude was very well represented by Peter who pointed out that attending college was “not the norm were I’m from, in my family.” Yet, when asked about what his expectations would be for his own children (when he has them), Peter said he would expect his children to not only attend college but to also complete a program of study. Having worked full time while completing his degree, Peter emphatically stated, “I know if I can get through by working full time and all that, they can they can do better. . . . No excuses!”

This sentiment was also shared by David, Paul, John and Silas, all of whom had adolescent children. David explained that his daughter was already a college student. Although he noted they were estranged, he said, “I would expect that [college attendance] of my children, regardless.” Paul answered easily when asked if he expected his children to go to college. Paul said, “Mine will definitely [emphasis added] go to college. In fact, my oldest son will go next year. Notice I said will [emphasis added].” John also clearly illustrated a similar belief when he pointed out, “With my kids, it isn’t if [emphasis added] you are going to college, it is more like where [emphasis added] you will go, or what [emphasis added] it will be you will study. Making the decision to go isn’t really what it’s about now.” Likewise, Silas said, “My oldest is in school right now, here, with
me. There was no question if she would go. It was just whether it would be here or someplace else."

Ethan, Dan and Ben also shared these views; however, their answers reflected the belief that only a degree that would ensure favorable employment options should be pursued. Ethan said:

I want them [my children] to go, but I don’t want them to get a degree they won’t be able to use. Since the idea of college is to get a good job, then it would just be a waste not to get a degree that could be used [for employment].

Concerned with employment possibilities, Dan pointed out, “I would want them to get a good degree that will help them get a job. There’s a lot of degrees out there that are just totally worthless.” Ben’s comment echoed those of Ethan and Dan and focused on the actual employment capabilities that an earned degree could bring. Ben said:

Well, if I ever have any of them [children], when they do go they need to make sure they are getting one [a degree] that is valuable, and not one that everybody and his brother is getting and is a dime a dozen.

Unlike their own parents, who had not expected their children to attend college, the respondents in this study did expect their children to not only attend college but to also complete a program of study. However, several respondents also indicated that although their perspective on their children going to college may be different than that of their parents, college attendance was still viewed through the lens of employment possibilities that a degree could provide.
Personal Values

Additional findings of interest included those of a cultural nature in that they spoke to the place of personal values. Personal values that emerged from the data included those associated with family, home, a sense of humor, self-reliance, patriotism and faith in God.

The value placed on family was evident as the men spoke of how family needs as a whole are placed above that of the individual family members. Paul, Dan, John, Ethan. For Paul and Dan, each indicated that placing their education on hold was considered secondary to meeting the needs of their families. In Paul’s case, this meant adjusting his school schedule from full-time to part-time so that he could work and provide for his family. At times, Paul did not take classes at all because of family obligations. As for his thoughts on this, Paul nonchalantly pointed out, “I had a family to take care of.”

Dan also adjusted his schedule in order to be more available to his mother, who was ill. For Dan, this meant postponing needed coursework. This also meant delaying his graduation date by a term. Dan confessed, “Well, I’d like to get done, but I need to be available to help her. It’s just one term.” When commenting on how he would feel if the situation took more than one term to resolve, Dan pointed out, “Well, I guess I’ll just be that much more behind.” In addition to delaying his graduation date, Dan also changed his university transfer plans. Although Dan had been accepted at one particular university, he decided to apply and possibly attend a different one, closer to where his mother lived. In discussing this decision, Dan said the switch in colleges was “in case she needs me, I’ll be closer, and I can help her.” Dan articulated he did not mind changing
schools even though the new school would not have his intended program. However, Dan said, “that’s okay. Since I won’t be graduating right away, it’ll give me time to figure out what else I might like to do instead.” Dan’s words indicate that although he had made plans for himself, he was willing to change these plans due to the needs of his family (his mother), even if it meant changing schools and changing programs of study.

John discussed delaying his studies based on the needs of his children. Although John had completed an associate’s, bachelors, and master’s degrees, he revealed his desire to someday complete a terminal degree in his field of study. When asked if he might soon pursue one, John replied, “I’d love to work on my PhD, but I just can’t right now. Maybe when my kids are older.” Elaborating, John explained that the time needed for that pursuit would conflict with his parenting and that his felt his children needed his full attention at this time. However, John also indicated that once the needs of his family had lessened, he planned on pursuing a terminal degree.

The need to parent and provide for his family also conflicted with Ethan’s school endeavors. In describing how he felt, Ethan revealed:

Like I said, I feel conflicted, but I have to be sure my family is taken care of first. When I feel bad about putting my schoolwork first, I tell myself that I need it in order to take care of my family. It’s a Catch-22, really. I need the schoolwork to finish my degree, but I also need to be a parent.

Examples such as these illustrate how valuing family intersected with their educational pursuits.
Love of place, or home was demonstrated by Silas, Dan and Ben who discussed at length the importance of living in their native area. Silas explained that for him, the love of place/home was so strong that he preferred to leave a good paying job with the Navy to go back to his native West Virginia after only a two year enlistment. When discussing why he did not re-enlist, Silas said, “We [Silas and his wife] wanted to come home. We missed home.” Dan also came home, following his discharge from the Army. Dan explained:

I didn’t like it there [North Carolina]. I wanted to come home. Once I was out, I stayed there a bit, but I didn’t like it. I have tried to get my ex-wife to relocate here so my girls would be closer, because they are still little and its hard travel on them. But she is from there. I understand her not wanting to leave.

When discussing why he had wanted to go to college, Ben pointed out that he originally wanted to get a college degree so he could “get out of this town.” When asked why he had not left once he had successfully completed his degree, Ben smiled sheepishly and replied, “I decided it wasn’t that bad, after all.” When asked if he could see himself leaving in the future, Ben paused for a moment and thoughtfully answered, “I don’t think I would ever want to leave.” The Ben immediately added, as if to justify his previous comment, “It’s my home.” When discussing the possibility of relocation, the respondents all answered with a responds similar to that of Ben’s: that they would be reluctant to leave, and would to prefer stay where they currently had lived. Only David and Silas had relocated from another area of the state; the other respondents were located
near (less than an hour) where they had been raised. However, David and Paul did say they would move if necessary, but that they would prefer not to relocate.

Another trait that was displayed by the participants was that of a sense of humor. This trait was illustrated multiple times by all eight participants when responding to questions asked. Questions asked were often answered with lighthearted, witty or tongue-in-check type answers. An example of this occurred when Dan shared information about the reason why his grandfather left one area of West Virginia to reside hundreds of miles away, across the state. Dan said with mock seriousness, “He had [emphasis added] to leave because every time he brought a girl home he wanted to marry, his granny told him it was a cousin. So he had to leave to find a girl that wasn’t related to him.” Like Dan, Paul also displayed a sense of humor when relaying information about his family. When asked if any of his siblings had ever attended college or participated in higher education, Paul very seriously replied, “Oh, yes. I have a sister who went to college.” Then he smiled broadly and added, “for about a week.” Another example of humor was demonstrated by Peter when I asked why he worked full time, instead of part-time while in school. After pausing thoughtfully for a moment, Peter smiled and replied, “Well, I like to eat.” Responses such as these reflect the element of humor that was practiced by all the respondents, multiple times throughout their interviews.

Another value exhibited by the respondents was that of self-reliance. Participants illustrated this when discussing their academic success. Self-reliance was also demonstrated when topics such as seeking assistance and being on the dean’s list were discussed. The overall perspective held by the respondents with regard to utilizing any
form of assistance was that the responsibility in seeking help was that of the student. The perspective shared by the respondents is best illustrated by these words of Paul, used when he was explaining the importance of asking for help, “If you don’t ask, then you can’t get the help, so taking the initiative in helping yourself, and being the one who asks, is what helps you.” Like Paul, the other respondents indicated they felt the responsibility for asking for help lie with the student. Therefore, proactively seeking help for oneself for fulfilling the initiative to fill their academic responsibilities ultimately led to ones’ success.

Like the importance of family, a sense of humor, and self-reliance, a strong sense of patriotism was also displayed. This trait was well represented in the four respondents who were honorably discharged military veterans. The data revealed that three of these four respondents, Silas, Dan and Ethan exhibited a high level of patriotism when discussing their decision to enlist. Silas shared he had been inspired by the Persian Gulf War, noting that as he watched the coverage as a senior in high school he felt compelled to join. Silas said, “Something intrigued me. Something said ‘why don’t you serve your country?’” Like Silas, Dan joined the military shortly after high school. He was ready to stay in as a career solider, and told the recruiter to go ahead and sign him up for twenty years. Serving his country Dan said, “was awesome.” Dan also expressed his belief that all young people should engage in mandatory military service. Dan explained, “I honestly believe . . . boy or girl, it should be mandatory.” When asked why, Dan replied:

We would have a different society of people. I just know we would. We are very spoiled and just want more and more. But in the military you get to see the way
others live. They sometimes have very little. It would help young people appreciate this country and what they have, instead of always wanting more and taking it for granted they will get it.

For Dan, military service had given him a greater appreciation for his country, and he was proud to have served.

When discussing his reasons for enlistment, Ethan’s answer was similar to that of Silas and Dan. Ethan said, “I believed it was my duty and obligation to go to the Army or any branch of the service. Give back, I suppose.” Only David pointed out that his enlistment was the result of a different type of need, citing a severe lack of self-esteem. David stated, “I needed help finding a way to tell myself ‘I can do this.’ So joining the service was the best way because it did build my self-esteem.” However, although David did not initially join the military based on a high level of patriotism, he currently exhibits a high degree of patriotism today. Having served in the military for seventeen years, his current employment includes working with veterans, a position that he considers a “calling” rather than a “job.”

And finally, two of the respondents revealed themselves to be very deeply religious. Although the other respondents did not discuss religion, it is interesting to note that both Paul and Silas not only mentioned and discussed their faith at great length, but also self-identified as ministers of non-denominational Christian churches. Throughout their interviews, both made references to their deep faith in God, discussed how they had felt called to the ministry at an early age and their service to Him while on Earth. Both reported relying on “The Lord’s will” in making decisions regarding their school work as
well as their overall lives. Paul demonstrated his practice of this when he recalled leaving school for a four year period, to be a full time youth minister. Paul felt leaving school to pursue the ministry was God’s will. In recalling that time, Paul simply stated, “God wanted me to do that, and so, I did. Then he had other plans for me.”

Silas also demonstrated a deep faith. Silas pointed out that although news of his layoff had been a very dark time for him, he had trusted in God. As a result, Silas reported that during his unemployment, he was able to oversee the construction of his new church, and that its membership had grown. When recalling this, Silas quietly said, “God had a plan for me. I just didn’t know it at the time.” Both respondents also referenced scriptures, as part of their answers to questions, such as in Silas’ advice to incoming freshmen. When asked what he what advice he would give a new college student, Silas said, “The first words out of my mouth would be, ‘Learn Philippians 4:13- I can do all things through Christ, which strengthens me.’” For Paul and Silas, relying on God’s will was first and foremost in their lives.

These personal values: family, home, a sense of humor, self-reliance, patriotism and faith in God were displayed by the respondents. They should be noted because personal values and beliefs reflect the culture of one’s origins and influence one’s lived experience.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have taken the emergent themes from the data, and arranged them according to the research question I felt they would assist in answering. In addition to arranging the emergent themes under the research questions that I felt they would assist
in answering, I have also added a section for additional emergent themes which I felt were of interest and noteworthy in the context of this research but that could not be easily organized by the Research Questions. Overall, fourteen themes were identified and discussed in this chapter. Although some of the themes found were distinct, others intersected, overlapping between the research questions and additional findings. However, as can be expected, this only shows how the nature of the findings is extremely multifaceted, interrelated and interactive.
Chapter 5 – Analysis of Data

Situated in a changing economy, we have seen this group [the working class] reposition itself over the past two decades. This repositioning means more than simply attending college: it means developing new ways to think about occupations, class, and gender roles. . . . (Freie, 2007, p.112)

Introduction

In this chapter I will present a cross case analysis of the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4, in order to respond to the research questions. When analyzing data, Marshall and Rossman (2006) state, “the researcher should use preliminary research questions and the related literature developed earlier . . . as guidelines for data analysis” (p. 156). Thus, in Chapter 5, I have used my research questions and the literature reviewed as the context for my data analysis.

The purpose of this study was to gather the definitions of academic success as perceived by White working class Appalachian males who had completed, or who were within one term of completion, of a program of study at a community college in West Virginia. In addition to how they viewed academic success, this study also strived to reach a better understanding of the perceptions these men have with regard to their past and present academic successes as well as those aspects of their lived experiences which they felt contributed to that success. This understanding was sought for two reasons. The first reason was because literature regarding perceptions held by White working class Appalachian men regarding academic success is noticeably absent in the literature. The second reason was because these perceptions may provide valuable insight to help inform
education policy such as the West Virginia Community and Technical College System’s 2010-2015 master plan, *Meeting the Challenge*.

*Meeting the Challenge* identified as its primary focus student success and program of study completion. Program of study completion is of great interest to the West Virginia Community and Technical College System because although many West Virginia community college students begin a program of study, they do not finish it (CTCSWV, 2010, p.2). In 2007, statistics indicated that graduation rates within 150% of the normal time to program completion ranged from 7 to 27 percent, with most schools reporting a program of study completion rate between 10 to 14 percent. Of those students who did complete a program of study, women were reported as having higher rates of completion within 150 percent average time to program completion than men. At some West Virginia community and technical colleges, the rate of women outpacing men in degree completion is almost two to one (NCES-IPEDS, 2008).

These statistics demonstrate only a small percentage of men entering the community college system persist to program of study completion. Therefore, in keeping with what Walpole (2007) suggests, “as educators, we must learn from the successful students in order to minimize the obstacles and advocate for and assist students with their decisions all along the educational pipeline” (p. 88). This study hopes to respond to Walpole’s suggestion. In understanding the perceptions of these men, a greater understanding of how they view academic success may be gained. This, in turn, may be used to inform educational policy that would lead to higher rates of program completion for White working class Appalachian men.
Appreciative Inquiry

In obtaining the data for this research study, I used semi-structured interviews and an approach guided by the model of Appreciative Inquiry. I enlisted this method for data collection because I wanted to capture the perceptions of the participants in a manner that would elicit information in a positive way and potentially benefit the institutions that serve the identified group of students. According to Reed (2007) the use of Appreciative Inquiry can provide participants an opportunity to focus on and articulate that which is of value to them. In doing so, Appreciative Inquiry functions to build a foundation for future successes. Additionally, Cooperider et al. (2008) contend that by participating in this process, participants may develop a deeper appreciation for the positive influences in their lives. In doing so, they may come to a better understanding as to what facilitates successful outcomes for them and become more empowered. In using this approach, I hoped not only to gather the data desired, but also to engage the participants in a positive interaction that might lead to more empowerment for them as their perspectives are sought out and appreciated.

Cross Case Analysis

In analyzing my data, I used cross case analysis to organize key findings. In doing so, I was able to view the data collectively, allowing for “multiple case studies to illustrate the issue” (Creswell, 2007, p.74). I then used the literature reviewed as a context for my analysis. Of the eight cases, seven of the cases were remarkably similar in detail and shared many patterns. However, some details and patterns found in one case was
remarkably different when compared to the details and patterns revealed in the other cases.

Research cases containing conflicting patterns often are categorized as disconfirming or negative cases (Patton, 2002). Although several of the details and patterns in David’s case did match those found in the others, some patterns appeared to be an “exception that disconfirm and alter what appears to be a primary pattern” (p. 239). Patton writes these types of cases are useful in enhancing credibility, as “perfect patterns and omniscient explanations are likely to be greeted skeptically” (p. 555) in that the human world is not a perfect place.

**The Research Questions**

After analyzing the data for this research project, I first used the findings to answer my research questions. The research questions were designed to give voice to the participants to gain a better understanding of their perceptions. Although findings from this study are not meant to be generalized, they do offer interesting insight and contribute to an area of research for which very little literature exists. Having identified emergent themes in the data in Chapter 4 and organizing them by Research Question, I will now discuss and analyze these findings by the Research Question they answer. To refresh, the Research Questions are:

1. **Research Question One:** What do White, working class Appalachian males define as “academic success?”

2. **Research Question Two:** How do these men perceive their own past and present academic successes?
3. Research Question Three: What do these men view as factors from their lived experiences that positively contributed to their academic successes?

**Research Question One: What Do White, Working Class Appalachian Males Define as “Academic Success”?**

In addition to providing the perspectives of the participants, the findings that answer this question are notable because they add insight to the type of cultural capital possessed and valued by the participants. Bourdieu (2007) writes that cultural capital exists in three forms: the embodied state, the objectified state and the institutionalized state (p. 88). Social classes have distinct preferences for these forms of cultural capital (Walpole, 2007). This means the possession of a certain type of cultural capital may be used to ascertain social rank. Although there may exist disagreements in the literature relating to the association of various cultural capital and social class I elected to utilize the theoretical assumptions of Bourdieu and similar scholars.

**Academic Success Defined**

In order to determine which type of cultural capital the participants possessed, I used the three themes that readily emerged from the data: Practical Use of Skills, Doing One’s Personal Best and Degree Obtainment/Completion. Within these themes were the respondents’ perceptions regarding the value of school knowledge, program of study completion and degree attainment. I specifically examined how the respondents valued these aspects in order to determine the type of cultural capital they possessed. My analysis revealed that in defining academic success the participants in this study demonstrated a preference for an embodied form of cultural capital more commonly
associated with that of the working class: the skills and abilities associated with the production of labor. These men considered having a degree or completing a program of study secondary to the practical use of skills or the school knowledge gained. Thus, the men in this study defined academic success from what has been defined as a working class perspective that reflects working class cultural capital.

The perceptions expressed by these men align with working class cultural capital in two ways. One is these perceptions illustrate the historic ties between the working class and its association with the production of labor. Secondly, they reflect the class distinction between how the working class and the middle class value school knowledge. Willis (1977) addresses the value placed on the pragmatic use of skills by the working class when he writes:

Labouring... takes on specific forms and meanings in different kinds of societies. These processes help to construct both the identities of particular subjects and also distinctive class forms at the cultural and symbolic level as well as at the economic and structural level (p.2)

According to Willis, a distinctive class form of the working class is that “practice is more important than theory” (p.56). In Willis’ classic study of working class ideology during industrialized times, the “Lads” he studied placed higher significance on the ability to perform manual labor rather than on the ability to have school knowledge. Although the respondents in this study had completed a postsecondary program of study, they viewed academic success much like the “Lads”: they placed value on the actual performance of the skills and abilities learned rather than on the free-standing knowledge itself.
Anyon (1981) also makes a similar claim that valuing abilities and skills over the acquisition of school knowledge reflects a working class perspective. More specifically, she examines how class distinctions are represented in valuing school knowledge. Anyon claims that working class students relate more readily to “behaviors or skills” (p.10) whereas middle class students view school knowledge more conceptually, or as a “commodity,” which can be exchanged (p.34). Anyon’s distinction provides a basis for how to determine cultural capital as it relates to social class designation by using the valuation of school knowledge. Therefore, defining academic success in an embodied form, such as by the practical use of skills, would be reflective of working class cultural capital and to define it in a more conceptualized form, such as by degree attainment would be considered reflective of middle class cultural capital.

Findings revealed the respondents’ perceptions were of the embodied form. Value placed on the practical application of skills was well represented by all the respondents. For example, Paul said academic success was “to be able to take something I learned in the classroom and immediately make it an application in my life.” Likewise, another illustrated this connection to knowledge learned and the importance of its practical use in the workplace when he pointed out, “I use what I learned [in the classroom] every single day” (Ben). Additionally, courses perceived as extraneous were brought into question by the respondents, and rebuffed for their lack of applicability in the real world. Statements such as “some of the classes are very, very interesting, and I have enjoyed them, but I’m not sure I need [emphasis added] them” (Silas) and “I’m not sure what I really needed it for” (Peter) indicated this attitude of rejection. These unnecessary courses were viewed as
being, as stated by David, “just ridiculous . . . a waste of my time.” When these findings are taken into consideration along with the class distinctions of Willis (1977) and Anyon (1981), they clearly indicate the respondents’ answers to this question came from a working class perspective and reflect traditionally defined working class cultural capital.

**Significance**

Additionally, the men’s definition of academic success indicates that they adhered to their working class cultural capital throughout their postsecondary experience. This is significant because the possession of working class culture is noted in the literature as not being conducive to academic success. For example, Walpole (2007) claims only the cultural capital of the dominant classes is valued and rewarded by society as a whole. This is further reflected by educational structures who “differentially value this dominant cultural capital, rewarding students. . . . who possess it” (p.22). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) also contend that in postsecondary education, the cultural capital most favored is that which is favored by those dominant in society: that of the middle class. Thus, according to the literature, the working class cultural capital possessed by the respondents in this study was considered to be disadvantageous to their postsecondary pursuits.

Literature also supports that in order to be successful, working class students historically have been expected to adopt new values and beliefs in order to position themselves more favorably for academic success when participating in postsecondary education (Powell, 2008; Tinto, 1975; Woodrum, 2004, 2009). Furthermore, the values of the working class have also been viewed as deficit with regard to those required for academic success (Gorski, 2008; Payne, 1995, 1996). For example, these respondents
considered “doings one’s personal best” as a marker of academic success. Literature indicates that for the working class, multiple factors, such as financial need (Reay, et al., 2005), the demands of family (Bradbury, 2007) and the attachment to place (Howley, 2006) often produce what is considered by academia to be lower aspirations with regard to achievement. However, Howley (2006) argues these aspirations are often the result of the negotiation of school, work and home life demands. This reconciliation, as proposed by Howley, was apparent in the respondents when discussing “doing one’s personal best.” All indicated that because of extraneous demands, school work often suffered. As a result, “doing one’s best” became a distinction of academic success, rather than earning the highest marks possible on schoolwork.

My analysis found that across all cases the definitions and perceptions of academic success remain those associated with working class cultural capital. Despite the disadvantage that the literature associates with this type of cultural capital at the postsecondary level, these men successfully completed programs of study (or were within one term of completion). They had not needed to abandon their working class cultural capital in order to be successful at the college level.

Another area of significance is the relationship this definition may have with regard to “maximally maintained inequality”. In defining academic success from a working class perspective, these respondents demonstrate that class stratification for the working class now encompasses postsecondary levels of education, particularly that of the community college level. Rafter and Hout (1993) contend that in such a situation, class barriers are not removed, they simply become less consequential as the expansion of the educational
system becomes less selective. Thus the structural system of educational inequality will still exist, as all level of the social strata shift and take a new, higher position on the continuum of stratification. Therefore, in addition to illustrating the working class presence in higher education, this definition set forth by the participants may also support the idea of “maximally maintained inequality” by revealing a strong presence of working class ideology at the community college postsecondary level. Hout (2004) writes that “maximally maintained inequality” is “the persistence of intergenerational educational inequality” (p.1). He contends that as postsecondary opportunities become more common place for the working class, class barriers will realign with this expansion and inequalities will still continue to exist. What this might imply is that although access and completion are now more accessible at the community college level, structural educational inequality may still be present as this level of education becomes the accepted “norm” for this social class, pushing educational expectations higher for those classes farther up on the ladder of social stratification.

**Research Question Two: How Do These Men Perceive Their Own Past and Present Academic Successes?**

Themes that emerged from the data that revealed the perceptions held by the respondents with regard to their own past and present academic successes were: Public Recognition and Personal Pride, Overcoming Learning Obstacles and High School Survival. Findings indicate that past and present academic successes were perceived by the participants as providing a source of pride, often due to recognition by others. In cases where the participant overcame a learning obstacle, the incident was also viewed as
being representative of achievement and success. Most moments of academic success recalled in a positive light were those associated with the elementary school level of education, while academic experiences during high school were not viewed as being highly successful. However, despite the academic setbacks associated with their high school experience, all the participants reported satisfaction with academic success at the college level.

Three significant points about the respondents’ lived experiences with regard to this research question emerged upon analysis of the findings. One aspect dealt with the accumulation of positive psychological capital. Another spoke to the transition occurring within working class identity formation as it relates to postsecondary education. Within the findings related to this transition in working class identity, the role of public educational institutions as instruments of social reproduction was illustrated. A third and final point concerned the devaluation of a high school level education in response to deindustrialization. I will now discuss each of these points individually.

**Psychological Capital & Self Efficacy**

School recollections featured experiences related to mastery, goal attainment, confidence building and belief in one’s ability. These types of experiences have been recognized as those that contribute to the accumulation of positive psychological capital. Positive psychological capital is noteworthy because it has been linked to success (Luthans, Luthans & Luthans, 2004). Also present in the findings was an important aspect of psychological capital, that of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is “people’s belief about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise
influence over events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1994, p.71). Identified as one of the four capacities (self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resiliency) of psychology capital by Luthans et al. (2007), self-efficacy is significant because “confident persons will be able to transfer and apply their hope, optimism and resiliency to the specific tasks within specific domains of their lives” (p.19). Positive psychological capital is recognized as an aspect that contributes to leadership and productivity success (Luthans, et al., 2004). Additionally, both psychological capital and self-efficacy have been linked to academic success (Bandura, et al., 1996; Choi, 2005, Schunk and Pajares, 2002). As Bandura, et al. (1996) states, “a high sense of efficacy for self-regulated learning and academic mastery in children fosters scholastic achievement both directly and by raising academic aspirations” (p.1209). Choi (2005) echoes this sentiment when he states, “college students who have a high degree of self-percepts tend to attain higher academic achievement” (p.204). Additionally, Schunk and Pajares (2002) contend that self-efficacy may predict persistence at higher grade levels.

The presence of positive psychological capital and self-efficacy was evident in several ways. Closely related to social capital, psychological capital is slightly different as it extends beyond that of what one is, to that which one can become. Luthans et al. (2007) write psychological capital “recognizes moving (developing) from the actual self (human, social and psychological capital) to the possible self” (p.21). The most apparent example of psychological capital was the program of study completion experience of these men. By successfully navigating the system of postsecondary education to degree completion, the men in this study transitioned from an actual self (that of a working class
individual with working class capital) to a possible self (that of a working class individual with working class capital that has successfully completed a postsecondary program of study).

Experiences recalled by the respondents also captured attributes associated with the development of psychological capital. Many of these occurred at an early age, creating a foundation for later success. According to Luthans et al. (2004), attributes that contribute to the development of psychological capital include (but are not limited to): mastery, goal attainments, confidence building and belief in one’s abilities. However, Luthans et al. (2004) also points out that not just any accomplishment will do. The achievements need to be challenging and complex in order for them to contribute positively to psychological capital. Luthans, et al (2004) writes:

Accomplishments do not directly build confidence. Both situational processing, such as the complexity of the task, and cognitive processing, such as the perception of one’s ability, will affect its development. . . . mastery experiences gained through perseverance and learning ability form a strong and lasting sense of confidence, but confidence built from successes that come easily will not be characterized by much perseverance or stability when difficulties arise. (p. 48)

The respondents had multiple positive experiences throughout their educational careers that fit Luthans et al. (2004) established criteria for building positive psychological capital. Several participants had moments of academic success that featured achieving a level of mastery or reaching an intended goal. Those who did not have academically related events that led to mastery found mastery and goal attainment through participating
in extra-curricular activities, such as music and sports. Alternate sources also provided participants a sense of confidence in their abilities. A sense of pride in the abilities required to achieve these accomplishments also were noted by each respondent. This pride resulted from the participants’ perceived complexity or difficulty in mastering or achieving the tasks. Because of this perceived complexity, these tasks fulfilled the criteria as discussed by Luthans (2004). The tasks recalled included instances of highly observable achievement, such as when Dan was recognized by his school, teachers and peers for winning a reading contest and when Paul received “Os” (Outstanding) instead of “Us” (Unsatisfactory) on his grade card. Occasions of mastery and performance attainment based on effort and abilities were also noted in experiences where the participants perceived themselves as being the best, even if they did not receive the highest award or grade available. For example, although two respondents, David and John, represented their schools at state level events, they did not win. However, they still perceived themselves as being one of the best as they had already won the distinction of being selected to represent their schools. Likewise, Ethan’s project placed second in a school academic fair; however, he still reported feeling a high degree of success because he perceived his project as being much more difficult to complete than the one that placed first.

Additionally, several respondents recalled moments that involved overcoming a learning obstacle. Despite the struggle undertaken in mastering the difficult coursework, these incidences successfully ended with the desired level of satisfactory academic performance. Although respondents stated they “barely passed by the skin of my teeth”
(Dan) or “thankfully managed to get a “C” (Peter), these experiences also fit the requisite criteria by Luthans. This self-attribution occurred because the respondents viewed their accomplishments as complex and difficult. Having experienced events such as these, especially at an early age, facilitated the growth of psychological capital in these men.

The respondents also indicated a degree of high self-efficacy while in high school. This may be considered odd as the respondents reported high school as an academic low point in their lives. However, it was the awareness they possessed with regard to their own abilities that leads to the conclusion they had high self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) writes, “people who regard themselves as highly efficacious attribute their failures to insufficient effort, those who regard themselves as inefficacious attribute their failures to low ability” (p. 84). None of the participants felt their actual high school performance accurately represented their true academic abilities. Instead they cited low motivation and social distractions as reasons for their low academic achievement. For example, John admitted to being socially distracted and “wrapped up in all that stuff that comes with being an adolescent.” When asked if he knew at the time he was capable of doing better, he confirmed, “I knew I could. I just didn’t.” Others echoed the same sentiment of “not trying at all” (Dan). Based on Bandura, this self-awareness that motivation and not ability was the issue demonstrates high self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a component that strengthens positive psychological capital that, in turn, is known to serve as a foundation for academic success. Knowing this was present in these men during their high school years is important to note as it serves to show they were well aware of their academic abilities they just chose not to act on them.
Working Class Transition

In addition to supporting the presence of psychological capital and self-efficacy, I found that many of the educational experiences of these men reflected the transition occurring within working class identity formation that has been purported in recent literature (Weis, 2004; Freie 2007). However, findings indicated a mixed set of perceptions from the respondents: some that reflected traditional working class identity formation while others reflected the newer working class identity that has been described in recent literature (Weis, 2004; Freie 2007). Perceptions that exemplified those of industrialized times included post high school graduation work expectations and under-preparedness for college. Those associated with deindustrialized times included level aspirations and the devaluation of high school level education. Additionally, some of the perceptions by the respondents were noted as having changed over the course of time. This presence of modified and mixed perceptions indicated a state of transition from “historic” to “modern” working class identity in these men.

Freie (2007) and Weis (2004) claim that within the remaking of working class identity a new expectation has emerged: postsecondary educational pursuit. This is in response to the loss of labor jobs due to deindustrialization. Additionally, many traditional labor jobs that are still available now require higher levels of proficiency that require postsecondary training (Watkins, 2008). Weis’ remark, “in light of the present economy, schooling is seen . . . as the only game in town” was very applicable to participants in this study.
Intertwined with the elements of working class transition are also findings that demonstrate that mechanisms of social reproduction do exist in public education systems. Traditionally, in response to social mechanisms, schools sought to prepare workers for the capitalistic labor market, and high school was considered the end of formal education for the working class (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; MacLeod, 2009; Watkins, 2008; Willis, 1977). However, rarely is a high school education enough to ensure job security or economic stability. Consequently, reform within the high school vocational education program has emerged. Yet, as reforms within high school vocational education have redesigned vocational education to facilitate postsecondary pursuit, a devaluation of a high school level education has resulted. As Watkins (2008) claims “the new positioning of . . . postsecondary education can explain a great deal about the changing directions of class formation in the United States” (p. 4). As a result, expectations that postsecondary education is a necessity are now part of the “new” working class identity (Freie, 2007; Weis, 2004), and school systems have altered themselves to pass along this ideology (Watkins, 2008).

When in high school, the post high school expectation of these men was one associated with a strong industrialized economy. These men fully envisioned high school graduation as being the end of their formal education years and the beginning of their adult work lives. Although this belief is no longer held by the respondents, it was their expectation at the time they were in high school. This belief reflects older academic literature that focuses on post high school work expectations associated with strong industrialization (Willis, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976) rather than more modern
literature that addresses the “new” working class that has emerged as a result of economic decline (Freie, 2007, Weis, 2004).

In considering the findings, I noted that although two of the participants did graduate in the mid-to-late 1980s, and might be considered to be from an older generation, the other six participants in this study graduated from high school after 1990. In the United States, declining industry in the late 1980s led to the first noted changes in working class identity formation (Freie, 2007; MacLeod, 2009; Weis, 1990). In 1990, Weis wrote, “the nature of the American economy has changed drastically within years, and the jobs upon which the white working class built their existence have been severely eroded” (p. 9). Since that time, Freie (2007) further argued that in response to deindustrialization, the white working class has “renegotiated” their identity in several ways over the last thirty years. In this repositioning, different expectations regarding postsecondary attendance have emerged. Therefore, since most of the respondents in this study attended high school during economic decline and deindustrialization, the findings would be expected to confirm the more current, rather than the earlier academic literature. However, that was not the case with the participants in this study. Post high school plans of all respondents at the time they were attending high school were that they would directly enter the workforce upon graduation. Respondents who finally did consider attending college considered it late in their senior year or shortly after their graduation and only after the world of work did not seem favorable.

In addition to the post high school work expectations held by the participants, their perceived level of college readiness also indicated a time more reminiscent of
industrialized times. These men viewed the high school education they received as substandard in preparing them for postsecondary education. This is interesting to note as literature regarding high school vocational education reform indicates that vocational programs after the 1980s were designed to prepare students for postsecondary trade school participation or community college in order to be more highly skilled (Watkins, 2008). The West Virginia EDGE program, a vocational program that awards college credits for certain high school level vocational programs is an example of such a reform measure. Since its inception in 2000, the West Virginia EDGE program has attempted to transition high school vocational students seamlessly into community colleges (West Virginia Tech Prep 2011). Watkins (2008) writes with regard to these types of vocational education reform initiatives and their impact on working class formation that:

> the primary educational location of class formation moves to a much more heterogeneous and shifting ensemble of postsecondary programs with community colleges, distance learning, continuing education, certificate programs, tech schools and online universities. (p.4)

Watkins postulates that this shift in education with regard to vocational training also involves a shift in the process of class formation. This implies for the working class that identity will now be constructed via participation in these postsecondary educational opportunities, and that these educational venues will serve as the places to remake their educational and work identities. However, the findings of this study do not support the presence of these reform ideas within the context of the participants’ lived experiences at the time they were in high school. Their high school experiences were more comparable
to those of industrialized times. As a result, the participants in this study felt underprepared for postsecondary pursuits based on the high school educational tracks in which they had participated.

Underprepared academically, all but one of the respondents in this study disclosed they needed remedial academic coursework in math and/or English. Remedial course work is intended to bridge the academic gap underprepared students encounter when they enroll in college. Venezia and Kirst (2005) claim that from an academic perspective, despite the reform movement in high school vocational education, vocationally tracked students continue to be underprepared. As a result they often lack the ability to transition well into college level work. Some scholars report an even more pessimistic outcome for these students. Unnever et al. (2000) write that the achievement gap for students from the working class is often too great to close.

Since all participants were first generation college students who did not engage in a high school program of college preparatory coursework, the need for additional preparatory coursework was not surprising. The U.S. Department of Education (2000) reported that over half of all first generation college students require remediation in math and/or English when entering college. Those respondents who attempted college immediately following high school expressed doubts about being, as one respondent described, “college material.” This attitude even applied to Ben who had completed college courses while in high school. In describing classes taken that counted as college courses while in high school, Ben said, “yeah, I took some that counted as college classes, but the ones that counted [as college level] were the computer classes. My other
classes weren’t college prep.” Upon enrollment and placement testing, respondents found they were as they had perceived: underprepared.

For four respondents, a first attempt to transition into college was academically unsuccessful. This too supports the literature, in the sense that this first attempt by these respondents led to attrition. The four who left after their first attempt also admitted to being in “academic trouble”. Three left on academic probation, and one with a grade point average that reflected a D average. Only after a subsequent attempt, did these respondents succeed. However, all the respondents appear to have successfully closed the achievement gap noted by Unnever et al., (2000). At the time of this study, three respondents were within one term of completion in their programs of study. Five had successfully completed their associate’s degree, three had completed bachelor’s degrees, and two had completed master’s degrees. Additionally, the findings reveal that for those who have completed programs of study at the postsecondary level, all are currently employed using their skills and knowledge obtained during the course of their college careers. In this sense, they have successfully “reworked” their working class identities.

**Devaluation of High School**

In this “reworking” of working class identity, the necessity of postsecondary education for the working class has led to the devaluation of high school level education. This devaluation is especially noted in the vocational and general education tracks (Sax, 2007; Watkins 2008). Watkins (2007) contends that prior to present reforms in vocational education, “the making of the working class has been located in a separately identified secondary-school vocational track” (p. 4). Watkins’ words indicate that vocational
education has been viewed historically as the education most closely associated with that of the working class. However, for those who participate in the high school general education track, Watkins asserts that these students are among the “neglected majority” (p.48) in that they participate in education that seemingly goes nowhere beyond that of high school. Watkins claims, that with regard to general education tracks found in high schools, “no one seemed entirely sure what that training was supposed to yield in terms of occupation” (p.48). Watkins points to a problematic educational issue when she states that the majority of students, almost by neglect, are led to nowhere. Such a problematic educational dynamic is created when the general track does not prepare students for college nor does it prepare them to undertake a skilled trade upon graduation.

Watkins (2008) contends that devaluing attitudes towards high school level education permeate the current public education system due to the new emphasis on postsecondary educational involvement for the working class. Educational value is now tied to the economic advantage that is associated with these postsecondary levels of education. This was clearly evident in the data when the respondents indicated they valued their high school level vocational trade certificates based on the economic, and not the academic, value it possessed. With the exception of one respondent, the participants did not consider the achievement of these credentials to be “academic” successes. Although the earned certificates required additional levels of proficiency in a particular trade area, the participants diminished this achievement when viewing it through an academic lens. Instead, they focused upon the economic advantages that such a credential provided. In expressing their perceptions that their high school level vocational
experience was not that impressive academically, respondents made comments such as “I only had school work half a day. And the classes I did have were called ‘vocational English,’ ‘vocational Math.’ Not the hard stuff,” and “We did classes the first [half] of the day, which were pretty easy.” Only Ethan said he viewed his vocational trade certificate as being representative of high school academic success. However, this was only after he had been discharged from the Army and needed a job. When asked how he considered it an academic success, he said, “I didn’t have to come back to school right away because I had it to fall back on.” These comments clearly indicate that the participants’ attitudes reflect those noted by Watkins (2008) and Sax (2007) in the literature.

The perceptions held by the respondents regarding their academic success are mixed in that they reflect those held by the working class both in an industrialized and a declining economy. Furthermore, the participants’ high school experience did not mirror that more commonly associated with high school vocational/general education track reform. Instead, it was reflective of more industrialized times. However, these respondents did manage to succeed at the college level in that they have completed, or soon will complete a program of study. These respondents completed participation in the venue Watkins (2007) contends must now be used to remake working class identities in the world of postsecondary education and work (Freie, 2007; Weis, 2004).
Research Question Three: What Do These Men View as Factors From Their Lived Experiences That Positively Contributed to Their Academic Successes?

Job Security & Economic Stability; Family Support; Self-Reliance and Military Service were themes that emerged from the data in chapter four regarding what factors from their lives these men considered as contributing to their academic success. From these themes were several notable economic and psychosocial factors. Economic factors included the motivation to provide financially for their families. Psychosocial factors included the emotional and financial support provided to them by their families, the sense of belonging they felt while overcoming academic under-preparedness for college success, and their own sense of personal responsibility and self-reliance. Additionally, for those who had served in the military, self-discipline and persistence were also noted as psychosocial factors.

Interestingly, a number of the factors named by the participants as contributing to their success are those identified in the academic literature as impediments to postsecondary success for the working class. Studies investigating barriers to academic success for working class students have identified economic need and family obligations among those aspects considered as barriers (Horn et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005; Walpole, 2007). Studies focusing on Appalachian students also have explored issues related to economic need, family and academic under preparedness and concur these inhibit academic success and college completion (Bradbury, 2008; OACHE, 2008; Powell, 2008). Even more specific to West Virginia, the West Virginia College Completion Task
Force [WVCCTF] (2012) claims that there are “three broad categories of barriers that prevent students in West Virginia from completing college: social, academic and financial.” This interplay of economic, social and academic factors is viewed as creating a situation of “high risk” and considered the primary reasons for attrition for many West Virginia students. However, although this report initially seems bleak, it does report:

While just under 25 percent of 45-64 year old workers have an associate’s degree or higher, nearly 30 percent of younger workers have at least a two-year degree. Although overall educational attainment is low, the increase in education level between younger and older workers exceeds that of the U.S. and the region as a whole and shows state progress toward increased degree attainment. (p. 2)

Although the overall percentages are small, they do represent a slight increase in degree completion for those in the state of West Virginia. Five of the men in this study are among those who have achieved an associate’s or higher degree. Three others are within one term of college completion. Ironically, the factors named in this report and identified in the literature as those detrimental to college completion, these respondents credited as the very ones that led to their academic success.

**Barriers as Facilitators**

The participants in this study all noted they had been at least partially employed while completing their associate’s degree. Reay et al. (2005) state that employment is often a reality for working class students; this was true of these participants. These students, even with financial aid assistance, had no choice but to work while enrolled in classes in order to meet basic economic needs. Outside employment while in school has
been noted in the literature as one of the most dangerous risk factors for working class students as it takes away time that should be allotted for study. It also places constrictions on course and career selections in that working class students tend to arrange their coursework around employment schedules (Reay et al., 2005). Additionally, when conflicts arise, the need to meet economic demands supersedes coursework (Bradbury, 2008).

When completing their associate degrees, several study participants worked full time in low paying jobs while enrolled as full time students. Those who did not work full time jobs worked part-time ones. In addition, they experienced the need for strategic scheduling in order to accommodate their school and work schedules. Ben, who was employed full time while also taking a full course load, reported that he worked third shift (night shift) in order to free his days for school. Others worked heavily in the evenings, on weekends and over holiday breaks in order to supplement the little financial aid they were allotted for living expenses. Those who were married noted they had relied on their spouses financially to assist the household. Because of the financial strain encountered by these participants, school participation was cited as a financial hardship and was identified as a major source of stress.

However, economic need was identified as one of the most significant factors that pushed them to success. With regard to postsecondary participation, Reay et al. (2005) has argued, “working class students . . . were driven by necessity” (p.161). For the respondents in this study, economic need produced the desire for economic stability and
job security. As a result, it became the primary driving force behind their academic success.

As previously discussed, many working class individuals have encountered difficulty with job security and economic instability due to the decreased value of a high school level education in a deindustrialized economy. This has even occurred for those who learned a vocational trade while in high school. Elkind (1998) argues there is “little social support for what has been called the forgotten half, the 50% of high school students who do not go on to college” (p. 170). Historically, these individuals, especially those in a skilled trade, were able to make a decent living. Similar to the 50% of high school students who did not plan on going to college that Elkind (1998) discusses, the eight participants in this study never anticipated needing a college education in order to provide well for their future families. The participants’ sentiment was as one respondent pointed out, “My overall goal is just to provide a better life for my family. That is what has kept me going every step of the way, knowing, you know, it’s not just for me.”

As Reay et al. (2005) state, these men were propelled by the economic needs of their families to seek a postsecondary education. Five of the eight participants had experienced a degree of personal economic instability by being involuntarily laid-off point prior to coming to college. It was at this point that these five men said they realized the need for advanced education. Silas articulated this realization shared by all the men: “I knew that if I entered back into the workforce, I was gonna have to have a degree . . . . It’s almost a must now. They [employers] at least want you to have two years of college.” In addition to securing employment to provide economic stability, the respondents viewed college
completion as an asset that would make them more desirable in the eyes of an employer. In a state where only a third of the population has a postsecondary degree, possessing a degree is advantageous in the present tight job market (WVCCTF, 2012). The respondents clearly indicated they were well aware of this advantage. As stated by one participant, “a degree can make you that much more needed” (Ben).

The general consensus among all eight participants was, as pointed out by Ethan, “high school diplomas are no longer enough.” As well as providing economic stability for their families, the participants acknowledged completing a degree in order to have a sense of job security. Of those who already held degrees, five confirmed they had completed degrees in order to ensure or to gain job security. Those participants who completed degrees higher than their initial associate’s degree confirmed they had done so to retain their current positions or to ensure their present levels of employment. Paul pointed out that having a degree for his present position was “highly encouraged.” While four others stated a degree was “required” for their present positions. Understanding that a degree is needed for well-paying jobs, participants were driven to complete their programs of study out of the need to survive financially.

Along with being motivated by the need for economic security, the respondents were likewise motivated by their relationships with family and family life. Like economic need, sociological factors such as those associated with family and family life have been viewed as being in conflict with school performance and persistence, and have been regarded as a barrier to academic success (Horn, Peter & Rooney, 2002). While research by Horn et al (2002) is not unique to the Appalachian region, the cultural value placed on
family is strong in the Appalachian area, and does have an impact on school success. However, this impact has often been viewed from a negative perspective rather than from a positive one. For example, Bradbury (2008) writes that Appalachian cultural values place so much importance on family that family demands often take precedence over school demands. This often results in poor performance and/or persistence. As a result, family demands are perceived as detrimental to student academic success. However, Bradbury (2008) does note that “a mutual sense of responsibility with their families serves as an anchor that keeps them grounded” (p. 5). Likewise, Woodrum (2004) also confirms this heavy reliance on family, and how the Appalachian family value system conflicts with the value systems found in educational systems. Woodrum contends “many Appalachian families are caught squarely between the two competing ideologies (that of school vs family)” (p. 9). In West Virginia higher education, this conflict is well acknowledged. The West Virginia College Completion Task Force (2012) has listed family related issues as one of the top sociological barriers to successful program completion in the state.

Yet, despite what is reported as the burdensome weight of family obligation, all but one of the men in this study cited family relationships as a powerful source of academic motivation and as a source of emotional support. Types of support associated with family relationships included those of an emotional, financial and academic nature. Even while discussing the support of family, these men were well acquainted with the conflict presented between family and school. For them, this struggle was acutely felt, and they often felt torn. The general consensus among these men regarding the interrelatedness of
these conflicting aspects of their lives was as Ethan explained, “the question of the importance of the education versus the family versus work. Which one’s more important? In my mind, family’s most important. But you can’t have a family unless you have the work to support it. And you need education to get the work.” Resolving the conflict of family and school took a degree of conscious effort and justification. This was noted by another participant who said, “I have to tell myself it’s like an investment [the time taken away from family], for them [added emphasis], otherwise I just wouldn’t be able to do it (Silas)”

The strong emphasis and value placed on the family by these participants reflects the cultural kinship ties explored by Woodrum (2004) that are culturally related to the Appalachian area. These ties often limit students with regard to college choice, college participation, and degree selection. Howley (2006) has found this emphasis on home and family so great among Appalachian students that home and family are central to college choice and degree selection. In these ways, family may be considered as a barrier as the literature states. However, although torn at times between family and school, the participants in this study identified family as essential to sustaining them during their program completion.

**Sense of Belonging**

In addition to the family serving as a motivation for academic success, findings also indicated that most participants developed a sense of belonging with other students and school personnel. These relationships fulfilled a need to belong and made social connections with the school. These findings support literature that addresses the
importance that a sense of belonging has in the academic success of working class students. Reay et al. (2005) address the role that a sense of belonging plays in that working class students often do not develop this with institutions of postsecondary education as postsecondary education was historically not the “norm” for them. As a result, Reay et al. (2005) conclude that working class students do not transition well. Additionally, Bradbury (2008) argues that not having a sense of belonging often contributed to the success of or lack of success among working class Appalachian students. Similar findings among the Appalachian working class were also noted by Powell (2008) and Howley (2006).

The participants in this study noted the importance of sense of belonging and articulated several sources from where they developed this. With busy lives, only one reported having time to participate in an extracurricular group, yet this need was very real to the respondents. Many found it fulfilled not by student groups, but through classroom groups, and tutoring centers. Paul stated he needed to feel a part of the school, “even if it just was the feeling like I belonged to that class. . .” For several respondents friendships made in classes and study groups extended beyond just a single class or term. As Dan said, “we kept each other from going crazy.” In addition to drawing strength from class camaraderie, the academic skills centers were places noted by these students as places that provided a sense of belonging.

As I noted earlier, Walpole (2007) writes that working class students are often “educationally challenged” and under prepared for college level work. This was very true for these participants. Less rigorous academic preparation at the high school level
necessitated visits to the academic skills centers for these participants. For some, this was in response to an additional course requirement, such as a “skills lab” component attached to their developmental coursework. For others, it was a voluntary undertaking seeking additional assistance to complete assignments. Unlike hours that might be spent on extra-curricular activities, the hours spent in the academic skills centers were easily justifiable by the participants. As Peter said, “had I not went, I would never have passed my class.” They also provided a social setting in which to interact. Several respondents recalled the joy and relief felt when they realized they were not alone in their struggle to understand. Silas said he had benefited from “meeting others being tortured by math” in that several friendships had been made during math tutoring.

For those who engaged in tutoring at the skills centers, a bond with the tutoring staff was also strongly felt by the participants. The staff was credited with “holding my hand” (Silas), “letting me cry on their shoulder” (Dan), and “helping me until I FINALLY got it!” (Peter). As for the centers, several respondents referred to them as “my home away from home” (Paul), “my second home” (David), “where I ‘lived’ for three months when I had that awful math class” (Peter). These comments indicate the familiarity felt in being there. The overall feeling maintained about these types of support services was as one participant said “they [the staff in the academic skills lab] seemed to really care if I could do it. They took their time, and believe me I took a lot of time” (Peter).

Notable in this discussion of needed assistance is that all those who relied on regular tutoring, did so for developmental mathematics. This is not surprising as the West Virginia College Completion Task Force (2012) reports that 70% of community college
students arrive under prepared in at least one subject area. According to the literature, academic under preparedness can prove fatal to college completion plans. However, for these respondents, their under preparedness led them to where their sense of belonging was fulfilled.

**Self-Reliance**

Although the respondents engaged in and acknowledged the importance of academic support services, they regarded their own self-reliance as being responsible for their academic success. Heavily discussed with regard to college transition and academic assistance, the respondents repeatedly pointed out how they had relied on themselves. For example, Dan said upon entry into college, “I knew nothing. But I knew how to ask, and that’s what I did. But, a lot I also just did myself because no one person really helped whole lot. I just pieced it all together for myself.” Likewise, Ben contended, “I figured it out for myself because I had to.” Thus, the participants identified their own self-reliance as a factor that helped them be successful. Considering that a strong sense of self-reliance is credited as being an Appalachian trait (Jones, 1994), this finding is not that surprising.

College transition was difficult for the participants, particularly in the area of student services such as scheduling and orientation. Insider knowledge, such as how to transition into college falls under what Bourdieu (2007) calls “cultural capital.” For working class individuals who lack this “cultural capital,” the transition to college can be extremely difficult or even nonexistent (Reay, et al., 2005). Freie (2007) discusses one way this occurs and writes that although working class parents can be very supportive their lack of knowledge regarding college culture places their children at a distinct disadvantage when
it comes to continuing on into postsecondary education (p. 106). The lack of practical college knowledge by parents has been noted in the literature as being a common access barrier issue for many first generation students in the Appalachian area (OACHE, 2008). Such knowledge includes of how to navigate the college system, from application to financial aid to scheduling, as well as how to talk with faculty and advisors. This leaves students to rely on outside professionals to bridge this gap. Yet, according to Walpole (2007) working class students “disproportionally attend high schools that do not focus on preparing students for college and have fewer counseling resources.” (p.30) Watkins (2008) writes:

Teachers, counselors, and administrators were all habituated to identify both slow learners and fast learners and to track them into their curricular slots. The immense number of students in the middle, however by virtue of that position were neither qualified to benefit from acceleration programs nor in need of remediation in any form. Thus, more often than not, they were just left to muddle through the educational system on their own (p. 49).

The participants noted their parents were of little assistance. However, only in one case was this because the parents did not want their son to go to college. In defense of his parent’s lack of knowledge, John pointed out, “they just didn’t know. They’d never been to college. They didn’t even know how to help me get signed up.” The general consensus was that parents were extremely supportive and proud they just did not know what to do with regard to transition.
Instead of filling this knowledge gap of many parents, professionals such as high school teachers, guidance counselors were noted as providing a lack of encouragement and assistance, and at times completely ignoring the participants. As a result, “there was no guiding” (Ben). Seven of the participants relied on adults outside of high school, such as a neighbor in one case, and a girlfriend in another. Others acknowledged they just stumbled their way through, on their own, asking questions as they went through the multistep processes involved in obtaining financial aid, getting registered, and finding their way around campus. Later, when in need of academic assistance, they credited themselves with finding and obtaining it. The experiences encountered by the respondents are very similar to those found in the literature that contends, “working class students. . . . have fewer resources and less knowledge about the admissions process . . .” (Walpole, 2007, p.30). However, what makes these findings notable was the attitude expressed by the respondents when discussing assistance. Although appreciative of help received, the participants felt their own self-reliance had enabled them to be successful. This was because they felt it was their responsibility to seek it. This was well represented by Dan’s comment regarding the use of student support services and the role of student responsibility, “it’s up to you to go there and get the help, you know.” Comments such as these indicated the strong sense of self-reliance among the respondents when seeking assistance.

*Military Service*

Four of the eight participants had voluntarily served in the military. Each spoke fondly of their service years. They also indicated a strong sense of patriotism had led to
their enlistments. Additionally, the indicated that time in the service had instilled a level of discipline and attitude that they also applied to their school studies.

Walpole (2007) writes that students from homes with limited economics who have high test scores often enlist in the military after high school. This indicates that although students may have the intellectual ability to perform well in a college setting, they may not have the financial reserves that allow it, thus they join the armed forces instead. Of the four participants who had served in the military, two had attempted college initially, but had left college before finishing and subsequently joined the military. At the time these two men left school, their academic outlooks were very poor. This seems to indicate more than a financial issue instigated their enlistments, and that access to college was not an issue, since they had attended and attempted postsecondary education.

Additionally, the findings from this study indicated that enlistment had been brought about by the sense patriotism and the desire “to serve” rather than from economic desperation. A strong sense of patriotism has been identified by Jones (1994) as an Appalachian cultural trait. Jones (1994) contends the area has a strong history of patriotism. He states, “Appalachians have a special feeling about the flag of the United States. This is the land that gave them freedom to be themselves, and when that freedom was threatened, they led in seeking independence” (p. 107). Jones (1994) points out in both Korea and Vietnam “Appalachian soldiers were killed at a higher rate and won a higher percentage of Medals of Honor than other Americans” (p. 110). Likewise, Ergood and Kuhre (1983) concur, “It is a much noted fact that draft quotas in Appalachia have often been filled by volunteers.” (p. 128). The ex-military participants in this study
demonstrated a strong sense of patriotism. Only one of the four had voluntarily left service. The others had been medically discharged, much to their disappointment.

For those who participated in the military, personal traits and skills instilled in them during military service were also credited with assisting in their academic success. These traits included: self-esteem, self-discipline, setting standards, and attention to detail. Self-discipline and self-regulation have been noted in the literature as being nonacademic factors linked to college level academic success (ACT, 2007). The significance of nonacademic factors such as these have been viewed in the literature as being predictive (Allen, Robbins and Sawyer, 2010) as well as conducive of college level academic success (ACT, 2007).

Specifically, self-esteem, as discussed earlier with regard to the development of self-efficacy and psychological capital, has also been linked to student success. Ali and McWhirter (2006) write that lack of self-esteem in Appalachian students is an educational barrier to college pursuit that often prevents even the academically prepared from attending. However, for those who participated in military service, their military service provided them with needed attributes. The respondent who mentioned self-discipline pointed out, “Now that I’m back in school I see that I still have that discipline that was instilled in me when I was in the military. It’s there if I need it” (Dan). Another participant mentioned being driven by self-imposed “standards of excellence” that resulted in setting high academic performance expectations for himself, and a third mentioned being more detailed oriented. As a result this respondent was much more careful with his school work than he had been while in high school, and saw the positive
results of being more attentive. The fourth ex-serviceman pointed out how his self-esteem had improved during his military time, which he felt enabled him to persist. When recalling his first attempt at college, David said, “I left because I didn’t have the confidence within myself to say, ‘I can do this...’” When asked how college was different after spending time in the military, during which he said he found self-confidence, he replied, “I found school to be a cakewalk”. Having gained these traits while in the military, the respondents felt they translated well into their school lives and were definite factors in their academic success.

In identifying factors that they felt contributed to their success, the respondents in this study named several aspects that have been recognized in the literature as being those that are barriers to success. These areas included economic need, family needs, and academic underpreparedness. However, these were viewed by the respondents as having a positive impact on their drive to succeed. The respondents also credited themselves and their own abilities, indicating they felt that their self-reliance had also played a role in their success, echoing the importance of developing a sense of self-efficacy. Additionally, those who had participated in military service named traits that had been gained during service as contributing factors to their success.

**Transformative Change**

In this section, I will discuss several areas where the participants exhibited transformative changes with regard to their beliefs and expectations. Previously discussed was a shift in attitude towards the necessity of postsecondary education with regard to work expectations and employment. Along with work expectations, these respondents
spoke of personal beliefs regarding spousal reciprocity, and postsecondary expectations for their children, all of which are more commonly associated with a changing modern working class identity. Additionally, they articulated gaining a new love for learning. Anyon (1981) writes that transformational change within the working class is not surprising. This is because those who have already shown a degree of resistance to hegemonic forces are more likely to change. Anyon writes,

while a reserve pool of marginally employed workers is perhaps assured by modern schooling, ideological hegemony is not. Ideological hegemony is, rather, extremely tenuous, and the working class may be less ideologically secured than some other social groups. What is important is to make available to working-class students the cultural and ideological tools to begin to transform perspicacity into power (p. 33).

For the White working class Appalachian men who participated in this study, participation in a community college provided them the ideological tools to transform.

The ideological shift in believing in the necessity of postsecondary education for employment purposes has already been discussed in Research Question One. However, another ideological shift that developed in these men was the development of a love for learning with regard to school knowledge. Despite their economic and job security related reasons for attending college, seven of the respondents in this study demonstrated a love for learning. Only one case, David, did not. He presents what Patton (2002) calls a “disconfirming case” (p.239).

David’s case is non-confirming because he does not appear to have developed a love for learning with regard to school knowledge. David said “my education was need-
based.” He then asserted that his participation in higher education was solely to obtain the degree required for his present level of employment, and that his attitude did not change in the course of fulfilling this goal. He still viewed most of what he had been required to learn at the college level to become a well-rounded student, a “complete and utter waste of time” with no value. He commented that he uses maybe a tenth or less of what he learned in college in his present job, crediting his own lived experience, abilities and skills far more than any knowledge learned in school. Having only completed the minimum degree requirement for his job, he stated he has no plans to ever continue on. “David is done,” he said “done with school forever.” In this aspect, David’s case represents a non-confirming case in this study. Although David was extremely successful with academics (he achieved a master’s degree) his attitude towards school knowledge did not change during his postsecondary experience. Instead, David’s attitude remained similar to that noted by Anyon (1981) as being common among working class students: separate and disconnected from his life and what he actually does.

What should be noted here is that the degree David earned both for his bachelor’s and master’s degrees were ones that allowed portfolio credits for life experience. This means David did not experience the requirements of a traditional curriculum, but rather was awarded a substantial amount of college credit for skills obtained through life experience. His actual coursework consisted primarily of a limited number of general education requirements associated with the degrees he was obtaining. This allowed him to advance through several degrees quickly. In only three years and one semester, David progressed from beginning an associate degree program to completing a master’s degree.
This truncated college experience may not have allowed for him to develop an appreciation for the inherent value of learning within a college environment.

The other seven participants did demonstrate a transformational experience with regard to how they viewed learning. Like the students in Weis’ (1977) study, the participants in this study claimed that while in public primary and secondary school they simply focused on getting things done, often with little to no appreciation. This attitude was initially carried over into their postsecondary pursuits. However, as they progressed through higher education, they learned to savor the content and developed an appreciation for learning that was not present in their early school experiences. They recalled noting a shift in their own viewpoint as it became “all about the learning,” instead of about “just getting done.” John stated that at that moment, “I realized I absolutely loved the learning [emphasis added].” Four others spoke about discovering a love for learning when they stopped overloading their schedules in a rush to “just to get done.” Their advice to new students would be to take their time and “savor the learning.” Additionally, they said they would urge new students to follow their passions when it came to career choice. One participant noted that he had arrived at this conclusion when he changed his major in order to pursue a childhood dream and experienced looking forward to going to school for the first time that he could remember. Another explained at great length how he now views learning as an ongoing process that is integrated into his daily life. He shared that although finished with his degree, he continues to “learn every single day” because he loves his career. “I think about it all the time, and want to learn more. It isn’t just a job where I go home and forget it.” In short, these men now view
learning as a continuing process that is enjoyable and internally drive; no longer is it an isolated event that only occurs in the confines of a classroom.

In addition to changing attitudes towards learning and school, new expectations regarding the expectations for college participation for their children were demonstrated by these men. This is a significant component in college success. According to Walpole (2007), “for White students, parental expectations were the strongest direct predictor for students’ predisposition to college” (p. 60). Historically, most working class people did not have college expectations for their children. The participants indicated this was very true of their own parents. They confirmed that had they not attended college, but rather entered and stayed in the workforce, their parents would not have been disappointed. As Peter pointed out, “they just wanted me to really get a job and be able to make it.” Whether or not college was necessary for reasonable and secure employment to happen was irrelevant.

Although the expectation for postsecondary education was not there, parents were reported as being supportive and proud as their sons pursued this. In one case, David reported his parents were unsupportive in all ways. For David, leaving for college was not a welcomed behavior and it resulted in alienation from his family who did not see the purpose or need for him to go to college. This type of rejection is similar to what is described by Finn (1999) when he writes, “border crossers are likely to be censored by their own as traitors” (p. 47).

Unlike their own parents, the participants in this study do expect their children to attend college and complete a postsecondary program of study. This shift in attitude was
well represented by one respondent who pointed out that attending college was “not the norm were I’m from, in my family.” Yet, when asked about what his expectations would be for his own children (when he has them), he stated he would expect his children not only to attend college but also to complete a program of study. Having worked full time while completing his degree, he emphatically stated, “I know if I can get through by working full time and all that, they can they can . . . do better . . . . No excuses!” (Peter)

The expectation that their children will attend college represents the adoption by the participants of a new “habitus” in Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction. Bourdieu’s (2007) theory of cultural reproduction rests on the interplay of capital, field and habitus. Capital, in the form of economic, social and cultural aspects that are passed longitudinally down the generational lineage, supplies individuals with a particular set of skills and knowledge. This capital is often transferred in social institutional structures, such as schools, which act as the “field” in which the transfer occurs (Grenfell, 2007, p. 55). The “habitus” is comprised of the experiences taken to be the “norm” for the membership of the group (Bourdieu, p. 83). Although the participants in this study were not expected to go to college, the participants in this study do expect their own children to participate in postsecondary education. This change in belief illustrates what Walpole (2007) contends about the “habitus” of first-generation college students. Walpole states that changes in the habitus can occur in that a student “can adopt new values, or habitus elements, as the result of novel experiences, historical changes in the material environment, or exposure to another individual’s habitus, which are possible in the college environment” (p. 23). Thus, having attended college, these participants have
established a new “habitus” or “norm” for their children, which is that they will be expected to go to college.

Another new “norm” demonstrated with this generation of working class men reflects an alteration in the traditional gender roles of the working class. The married men in this study practiced spousal reciprocity. This type of marriage partnership is one in which both partners are interdependent on one another. In earlier studies of gender roles and working class men in an industrialized economy, traditional gender roles were strongly defined (Willis, 1977). Even in a declining industrialized economy, MacLeod (2009) notes an adherence to traditionally defined gendered roles, while Dolby and Dimitriadis (2004) and Kenway and Kraack (2004) note an even more exaggerated role related to male heterosexuality. However, according to recent literature, gender roles now feature a shared reciprocity with regard to financial and social aspects of the home. Weis (2004) argues she has found that in a deindustrialized economy, such as that of the last decade, new beliefs and attitudes related to White working class male identity and traditional gender roles have emerged. Weis writes, “Given the demise of the industrial economy . . . the male-based family wage was no longer viable.” Thus, more working class women have entered the workforce in order to ensure and assist in maintaining their family’s financial stability. As a result, Weis finds, “at the heart of the remaking of the White working class lies the reconstruction of male/female relations…” (p. 91). Like Weis, Freie (2007) concurs that “traditional gender roles are being reworked, in practice, if not in theory” (p. 110) among the White working class in today’s present deindustrialized economy.
Of those who participated in this study, five were married, two were divorced and one was single. Of the five married men, four had been married or engaged to their current partners during their college attendance. Their behaviors and beliefs with regard to their wives support the literature that describes the modern working class identity. All felt, as Paul stated, “My wife is the biggest key to my success.” In addition to the emotional support given, the participants’ wives were also reported as instrumental in contributing economically to the family. At times, some of the wives had been the sole financial provider for the family. As a result, the men reported they shared in household and childcare roles when needed. As John noted with regard to traditional gender roles “it takes us both to keep it [the family] going, and we each just do whatever it is that is needed, when it is needed, regardless of what it is.”

The wives were also all noted as holding degrees. The men were supportive of their partners’ current professional careers. Additionally, this included being supportive of any continuing education their partners might decide to pursue in the future. With regard to their wives continuing their educations or advancing in their careers, the five married participants echoed this sentiment of Silas: “that’s never been an issue. I’ve supported her going to school . . . getting a job.” Reconciling traditional ideology with the modern economic demands has resulted for these respondents in shared reciprocity with their wives.

**Summary**

In this chapter I analyzed the data obtained from my research study with a focus on the transition currently being undertaken by the working class with regard to norms, need
and identity formation in light of the current economic climate. In doing so, I have conducted my analysis within the context of White working class Appalachian males who elected to participate in postsecondary education at the community college level. These findings are only meant to give voice to the participants and add insight to existing literature. They are not meant to be generalized, nor are they intended to be representative of all working class individuals, community college students or Appalachians males. In my concluding chapter, I will discuss potential meaning and interpretations of these analytical findings, as well as make recommendations for practice and future research.
Chapter 6 – Summary Discussion, Recommendations, and Personal Reflection

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and brings about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 2007, p. 34)

Introduction

This chapter will provide a brief summary discussion of five points raised when I analyzed my findings. Following this, I will provide recommendations for future practice and research. Finally, I will conclude with my personal reflections as the researcher of this study.

The goal of this study was to examine how White working class Appalachian men who had completed, or who were near completion, of a program of study at a public community and technical college in West Virginia perceived academic success and what aspects from their lived experiences they felt contributed to that success. Questions for this study were designed to align with the tenets of Appreciative Inquiry. Building upon an appreciative perspective, the “emphasis is firmly on appreciating the activities and people” (Reed, 2007, p.2). Through my analysis, I discovered that some of the findings supported the research literature while other findings contradicted the research literature, bringing forth a number of points of interest for discussion.
Summary Discussion

Five thought provoking points for discussion emerged from my research and analysis. The first relates to the research design that sought volunteer participants for this study. In other words, participants self-selected. A second is connected with the psychosocial sources of support identified by the participants. A third speaks to the remaking of working class identity. A fourth is associated with the possession of working class cultural capital. And, a fifth addresses the importance and place of psychological capital and its development.

First to note is that the participants in this study were all self-selecting participants who self-identified themselves as White working class Appalachian men. Through this act self-selection, these men demonstrated some level of self-identity by identifying as a working class individual. This is significant because as Lareau (2003) argues, in American society, there is often ambivalence regarding class, as American society is often viewed as being class-free. And, as hooks (2000) points out, class lines in American society are often blurred due to the material culture and social trappings of the middle class that the working class is capable of financially affording. Furthermore, many individuals choose not to be identified with the working class, as the more acceptable “norms” of American society are those of the middle class. As Walpole (2007) writes, “social class can be disguised, and people deliberately attempt to conceal their social class because they are ashamed or want to conform to the social class norms that surround them” (p.4). However, these men readily identified with being working class although several wore designer label clothes, drove expensive cars, and were in
possession of the latest iPhone or iPad technology when meeting me for their interviews. Although these men could have hidden their working class status, or at the very least, disguised it, they chose not to do so. This indicated a strong sense of self-identity in these men and should be noted.

Secondly, it must also be noted that these men were among those already successful, and this may have impacted the way in which the psychosocial factors from their lived experiences were viewed by the respondents. As noted in comments in Chapter Five, one has to wonder why the psychosocial factors identified had a positive impact for these men, but also exist for others as a negative influence. For example, family needs presented as a positive factor for these men rather than as a negative influence. This intriguing contradiction leads to many questions: Why does a factor present for some as a positive influence and for others as a negative one? What dynamic must be present for this to occur? Is this perhaps due to the new emergent working class identity formation as previously discussed? Or, is this something more culturally contextualized? Or, perhaps it should be contributed to the unique personalities and circumstances of these selected particular participants? Like the positive influence of family needs, the relationship between sense of belonging and academic under-preparedness also presented as an interesting finding. As discussed earlier in Chapter 5, many of the respondents found their sense of belonging fulfilled through the use of academic skill centers and tutoring groups. For busy students who have tightly scheduled lives, these support services provided the sense of belonging that has been identified in the literature as a critical
component of student success, especially for Appalachian students. It was through academic need that this sense of belonging was fulfilled.

The implication is that student support services may find that a single service, such as tutoring, may function to fulfill a dual role for students. Opportunities to meet social needs are often not met because participation in extra-curricular activities cannot be justified by busy students who must juggle family, school, and work. Hence, there appears to be an unusual symbiotic relationship that is created when an academic risk factor is coupled with a social need: it built a positive factor for success. This may be an interesting aspect to consider with regard to how these services are delivered.

A third notable finding from this research supports the idea that the working class is “remaking” its’ identity through the use of postsecondary education. Several transformational changes were noted with regard to the perceptions of these men that reflect the remaking of the working class identity in a deindustrialized economy. This is significant, for as the working class repositions itself in a deindustrialized economy, participation in postsecondary education becomes a necessity for securing economic stability. As the overall climate of change brought about by deindustrialization encompasses the working class, an orientation from labor based jobs that required little if any postsecondary education to more technological and service related positions that do require postsecondary educational engagement has emerged. With this has come the necessity, rather than the atypical election, of postsecondary education for working class individuals. Thus, postsecondary education for the working class is becoming the “norm.”
The implication here is that primary and secondary schools must develop and hold high expectations for all their students. Specifically, high school programs need to acknowledge that some kind of postsecondary education will be required of all graduates, not just those in the college prep tracks. This means that high school teachers, guidance counselors and administrators must no longer adhere to the old standards in which only the college preparatory track students are readied for postsecondary education. This is not a new idea, and many primary and secondary schools have already adopted educational reform measures. However, the experiences of the men in this study suggest that de facto standards may still exist with regard to preferential treatment, especially with regard to general and vocational education tracks despite reform movements. Thus, actual practices within the schools themselves need explored and addressed.

A fourth notable aspect involves the traditional view that misalignment exists between working class cultural capital and that of the middle class cultural capital preferred by postsecondary institution. Although my participants lacked the favored cultural capital that would be expected for them to succeed in postsecondary academic pursuits, as defined by Bourdieu (1977), they were indeed successful. Additionally, they retained their working class capital in the process. This contradicts the research literature. Yet, it brings forth multiple thoughts related to school culture and the “working class friendliness” purported to be a part of today’s community college culture.

It is worth our time to explore the claims that working class culture is not congruent with academic success in our schools, especially at the postsecondary level. For example, many college transition programs have as their sole purpose the integration and
acclimation of the working class student into the preferred middle class culture of postsecondary education. These programs, although well-meaning, often unintentionally demean the cultural capital of the working class student by expecting the student to change or adapt to a new culture. Schools need to reexamine themselves in order to determine how they value and view working class culture capital. If, as my findings suggest, working class cultural capital is not detrimental to academic success, then it befits schools to examine their structure, curriculum, pedagogy and overall climate of acceptance. As Freire (2007) writes with regard to the working class and education, “The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure…” (p.74). The time has come for schools to view and value working class cultural capital as an asset rather than a deficit to be overcome and abandoned in order for students to academically succeed. Schools, not the working class students, need to change.

And lastly, a fifth and final point deals with psychological capital. The respondents all indicated they had educational experiences that may have contributed to the building of psychological capital and self-efficacy. These experiences occurred in primary and secondary school, providing a foundation for the growth of self-efficacy and psychological capital. Having had previous positive experiences no doubt influenced the success of these men.

The implication here is that experiences that foster the development of psychological capital and self-efficacy should occur as early as possible in the educational pipeline, as early experiences are essential in building a solid foundation for future success. Thus,
although this study examined success at the postsecondary education level, conclusions such as those related to the development of a strong sense of self-efficacy should lead schools to provide early and sustained attention to establishing and fostering self-efficacy in order to assist in the development of psychological capital. If the men in this study had all had powerful experiences at the high school level, their transition into college would have been much different.

Overall, the results of this study accentuate the caution that must be heeded when working class students move towards and into higher education. Care should be taken not to stereotype this particular demographic or to accept in toto that working class values are detrimental to academic success at the college level. This research illustrates that there is no place for deficit ideology. Instead, a greater understanding of what works for the working class in postsecondary education should be sought in a positive, appreciative way. An implication is that rather than blaming the student and his/her family and the working class community, all levels of schooling must examine their role in the denigration and dismissal of working class capital and its relation to academic success. This is extremely important since change in the identity formation of the working class now rests with postsecondary participation.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The findings from this study suggest that policy makers, administrators, faculty and staff take into consideration or ponder these relative issues, with regard to attending to the needs of working class students:
Staffers of academic skills centers should note that the working class men in this study indicated they drew a sense of belonging through interactions with those working in academic skills centers, rather than in the participation of extracurricular offerings. In addition to serving the academic needs of students, academic skills centers could serve as a nexus for offering students a socially warm environment in which to become more socially connected to school life.

Faculty should note that these participants also commented favorably on the use of study groups in helping to build a sense of belonging.

Administrators should be attentive in that these men noted a need for transition services into the college culture that included, but was not limited to adjustments to social as well as academic expectations.

Policy makers should consider that half of the men in this study were military veterans. As a result, counselors with expertise in advising returning veterans could be beneficial to those returning to civilian life.

Colleges in general should acknowledge that all but one of the men in this study had family obligations that often conflicted with traditional school expectations and policies. This often had a negative impact on academic performance. Perhaps a more “family friendly” environment should be considered with regard to scheduling, types of classes offered (hybrid, online) etc…

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In conducting my research and analysis, other areas for potential research emerged.

Further areas of study might include:
• Research to review and assess community college policies and programs which serve to “close the gap” by assisting working class students in their transition to, and that offer support during, the community college experience. Examining these policies and programs on a more intricate level may add a deeper understanding not only to what assists these students but the manner in which these services should be delivered.

• Research that uses an ethnographic study to seek the voices of the different groups that exist within the working class. As with all social classes, the working class is multi-faceted, and divisions and sub-divisions exist within its broad borders. Research into understanding the way in which academic success is perceived across the various sub-populations of working class individuals can provide greater insight; this, in turn, can be used to inform policies that might lead to greater levels of academic success for all working class individuals.

• Research that also uses Appreciative Inquiry in order to compare the academic experience and success of those students who participated in a community college-university partnership “two and two” program, with those who complete a traditional four year bachelor’s degree experience at a single university.

• Research to examine the academic success of White male middle class students in comparison to the working class students of this study, both who participate in two year programs in order to compare the experiences and find what might be similar and what might be unique contrasting social class differences.
**Researcher Reflection**

As I come to the close of my academic journey, I recall that when I began my academic research, I did not set out to study White working class Appalachian men. I was interested in young working class Appalachian mothers and their struggles to obtain a college degree while raising children. However, after taking a course that explored the male experience in education as an elective in my doctorial coursework, I began to wonder about the male experience, particularly that of the White working class Appalachian male and his issues with postsecondary education. As an instructor of college freshmen, I, myself, knew that for many men, access to postsecondary education was not the primary issue. It was completion of their academic programs of study. They came, but did not stay. Thus, I began to wonder factors and dynamics served to propel the few men who did succeed in completing their program of study.

During the interview process of this study, I was amazed at the honest and compelling discussions these men had with me regarding their school experiences and academic successes. From my perspective I saw academically wounded individuals who the American public school system (k-12) had wronged. However, I also saw a group of men who despite their academic injuries and educational scars had rallied to success at the community college level (and beyond). In doing so, these men seemed to take it all in stride. They held no malice for what had been experienced earlier in their educational lives. They were ones who looked forward and not back. In them I found no signs of “working class acquiescence” written about by Reay et al. (2005) in which the working class accepts and practices exclusion rather than to attempt that which has previously
been denied. Not only had these men attempted what had been denied, they had succeeded.

Being from the Appalachian working class I found my overall subject striking too close to home too many times. As a result, this study was emotionally taxing and draining. However, because of this experience I have developed a much stronger sense of self and purpose. I understand much more fully how educational systems function as structural mechanisms of oppression for the working class. Like the men in my study, I too have changed.
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Legislative findings and intent; statewide network of independently accredited community and technical colleges; operations and administration, Session 2004 (RS). West Virginia Code §18B-3C-8 (3) (2004).


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higher education of higher education. NY: Fordham University Press.


### Appendix A: WV Community & Technical College 2007 Graduation Rates

*Full Time, First Time Degree Seeking Undergraduates – Within 150% of normal time to program completion*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WV Community &amp; Technical College</th>
<th>Overall Average</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Ridge</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgemont</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern WV</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanawha Valley</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountwest</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New River</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierpont</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern WV</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WV Northern</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WVU at Parkersburg</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data taken from National Center for Educational Statistics IPEDS Data Center
Appendix B: West Virginia Community and Technical Colleges

1. Blue Ridge Community and Technical College, Martinsburg, WV
2. Bridgemont Community and Technical College, Montgomery, WV
3. Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College, Moorefield, WV
4. Mountwest Community and Technical College, Huntington, WV
5. New River Community and Technical College, Beckley, WV
6. Pierpont Community and Technical College, Fairmont, WV
7. Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College, Mount Gay, WV
8. West Virginia Northern Community College, New Martinsville, WV
9. Kanawha Valley Community and Technical College, Institute, WV
10. West Virginia University at Parkersburg, Parkersburg, WV
Appendix C: Proposed Study Contact List

West Virginia Community Colleges & Program Coordinators/Directors

Bridgemont Community and Technical College
1) A. Anderson, aanderson@bridgemont.edu
2) W. Javins, javins@bridgemont.edu
3) R. Prokity, rprokity@bridgemont.edu
4) M. Thompson, mthompson@bridgemont.edu
5) B. Wingfield, bwingfield@bridgemont.edu

West Virginia University at Parkersburg
1) C. Bills, Craig.Bills@mail.wvu.edu
2) J. Emrick, Jessica.Emrick@mail.wvu.edu
3) T. Jackson, Torie.Jackson@mail.wvu.edu
4) S. Kolankiewicz, Sandra.Kolankiewicz@mail.wvu.edu
5) M. Sterrett, Max.Sterrett@mail.wvu.edu

Mountwest Community and Technical College
1) R. Brown, brownr@mctc.edu
2) J. Parker, parker54@mctc.edu
3) C. Payne, payne78@mctc.edu
4) T. Tripplet, triplett@mctc.edu
5) J. Whiteley, whitely@mctc.edu

Kanawha Valley Community and Technical College
1) S. LaVoie, slavoie@kvctc.edu
2) D. McDaniel, dmdaniel@kvctc.edu
3) R. Rogillio, rrogillo@kvctc.edu
4) M. Rucker, mrucker@kvctc.edu
5) R. Stringfellow, cstringfellow@kvctc.edu
Appendix D: Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Views from the Summit: White Working Class Appalachian Males and Their Perceptions of Academic Success

Researcher: Stephanie Alexander

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study: This study hopes that by looking at the educational experiences and perceptions of successful community college students, a better understanding of “what works” can be understood.

If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed about your educational and life experiences – both past and present, about the way you view educational success and what you feel has contributed to your own educational success of today.

You should not participate in this study if you do not wish to share what you think of your own educational success, or share information about your life experiences while in college.

Your participation in the study will consist of an interview that will last about 1 hour. Shortly after the interview (1-2 months later), you will be asked by the researcher to read over what has been written about you in order to make sure your experiences have been accurately recorded and described.

Drawbacks/Benefits: Since this study asks for your own personal reflections, you may find revealing personal information discomforting; however, you may find a benefit in that through discussing your past, you may understand yourself and the reasons for your success more deeply, and therefore have a greater appreciation of your accomplishments.

Confidentiality and Records: In order to keep your study information confidential, you will only be identified by a pseudonym (a substitute name). All records linking you to your pseudonym will be destroyed at the close of the study.
Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU;

Compensation: As compensation for your time/effort, you will receive a VISA gift card valued at $25. This is intended to compensate you for the time and costs (such as gas money, or bus fares) associated with your participation in the interview.

Contact Information: If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Stephanie Alexander, alexanderohiou@att.net OR (740) 388-9243

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:
• you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
• you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
• you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
• you are 18 years of age or older
• your participation in this research is completely voluntary
• you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature ______________________________ Date __________________

Printed Name ____________________________

Version Date: 11/13/11
Appendix E: Demographic Information Sheet

What is your current major area of study?

Is this your original area of interest, or have you changed majors since attending school?

Do you have a high school diploma or a GED? (circle the one you have)

- If you went to high school - What type of high school curriculum did you have (TechPrep, Vocational School, College Prep, General?)
- If you obtained your GED, how much time (months/years) passed between the time you left public education and the time you completed your GED?

Has anyone else in your immediate family (parents, siblings) attended college? (if yes, list programs studied, and/or degrees obtained)

What is/are your parent(s)’ occupations?

Are you the first in your family to go to college student?

What (if known) are/ were the occupations of your grandparents?

If you currently work, list:
where __________________________________________________
what it is that you do ________________________________
how many hours you work (on average) per week ________________

If you worked during the school year last year, list:
where __________________________________________________
what it is that you do ________________________________
how many hours you work (on average) per week ________________
Appendix F: Interview Schedule

Possible Questions

Questions Regarding Lived Experiences
1. Tell me about one of your greatest accomplishments in elementary school?
2. Tell me about one of your greatest accomplishments in junior high or middle school?
3. Tell me about one of your greatest accomplishments in high school?
4. Tell me about one of your greatest accomplishments thus far in college?
5. Tell me what you consider to be been one of your greatest accomplishments up to this point in time?

Follow Up Questions
For each of the “accomplishment” questions above:
6. What was it that made this experience the greatest?
7. Who or what played an important role in the experience?
8. In what way(s) did they/it make a difference?

Questions
1. Why did you make the decision to come to college?
2. What attracted you to your major/degree?
3. What is it that interests you about your current course of study?
4. How do you define academic success?
5. Tell me what you think about your academic success.
6. What aspects of your home life do you feel contributed to your academic success?
7. What aspects of your school life do you feel contributed to your academic success?

Tell me what is it you hope to achieve?

What do you plan on doing next? Follow Up Question Is there a particular job/advanced degree you would like to obtain?

What advice would you offer a new student entering school?

Tell me what have learned about yourself in your life as a college student that you feel will help you in the future?