Life After Drop-Out:
An Examination of Rural, Appalachian First Generation Non-Persisters

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This dissertation titled
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Abstract

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Life After Drop-Out An Examination of Rural, Appalachian First Generation Non-Persisters

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High percentages of college students fail to persist in higher education each year (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Rosenbaum, Stephan, & Rosenbaum, 2010; Tinto, 2012). Until recently, the national goal was to make accessible the four year degree for all United States citizens in order to advance the goal of being the most credentialed society in the world (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Lee, 2012; Leef, 2006). Marginalized populations, however, sometimes face opposing forces or conflicting priorities when making the decision to attend and persist in higher education. This study recognizes what other researchers have determined regarding the lack of college persistence in first-generation students and seeks to add to that body of knowledge by examining the role of higher education and its impact on rural, Appalachian working class students who do not complete their bachelor’s degrees. The findings of this study indicate that for these participants higher education was not the appropriate path for them after high school and that there were responsibilities growing out of their culturally-shaped experiences that first required their attention. The themes in this study indicate that family relationships, social integration, academic management and financial matters took precedence over higher education for these participants at that stage in their lives; however, for many of
the participants, a college education remained a priority and the degree was earned later in their adult lives.

The unique, cultural characteristics of Appalachian students should be considered by stakeholders when determining higher education goals and practices. Among the important considerations should be flexible expectations for the enrollment and completion of higher education, as well as delivery models that take into account place boundedness that grows out of Appalachian students’ strong connections to their communities and families.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family - my husband Ken,
my children, Matthew, Ryan, Christina and Lauren and
the many friends and family who supported my efforts and helped this
first-generation, rural student realize a once far-off dream.
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Chapter One

“We will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.”

US President Barack Obama (as quoted by Kirwan, 2009, p. 28)

In the twenty-first century, the urgency to remain competitive in the global marketplace education is commonly viewed as central to success and the American dream (see e.g., Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Lee, 2012; Leef, 2006). Students and their families are surrounded by messages stating that the path to success is through a college education (Arum & Ruska, 2011; Collins, 2000; Kolb, 2011). Many policy makers and school professionals seem to accept that the United States must increase the population’s educational attainment in order to remain among the world’s leaders in innovation and technology (Collins, 2000; Kolb, 2011).

Despite the hopes of realizing economic benefit nationally from increased college-going, a high percentage of students fail to complete the bachelor’s degree (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Rosenbaum, Stephan, & Rosenbaum, 2010; Tinto, 2012). According to some analysts, moreover, only some jobs in the future really will require a four-year degree (e.g., Babones, 2010; Collins, 2006; Crawford, 2009; Thurow, 1996). Certainly, an argument can be made that the nation needs well-educated talent sufficient to sustain the research and development infrastructure (or to improve upon it), though even this position seems inadequate to warrant the push for “everyone” to attend a four year college or university.
Rationales for and Realities of College Attendance

One likely reason for the push for all to attend college is that society has led people to believe that education is the “great equalizer,” and without a higher education, one will not be able to obtain a “good job” (Collins, 1979; Drucker, 1993; Johnson, 2006; Leef, 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Treiman, 1970). Another oft cited assumption is that holders of a bachelor’s degree credential will garner incomes that are significantly higher than individuals who do not possess the credential (Hennessy & Fiske, 2006; Katz & Autor, 2005; Lafer, 2000). Finally, a commonly held belief is that a person with a four-year college education can “move up” in society and “do better” than his or her family members in the previous generation (Born, 1996; Glass & Nygreen 2011; Johnson, 2006).

One component of the American dream is the conviction that hard work and educational credentials will be rewarded with upward social class mobility (Hochschild, 1995). This belief is so embedded in the United States’ culture that questions regarding educational opportunity and class status often go unasked possibly in an effort to disguise that a class system indeed exists in this nation. Reports of large disparities between the rich and the poor in the United States, however, suggest the need to challenge previous conceptions about higher education as the path to upward class mobility in a country where competition, maximizing one’s class, and being the best are central to the concept of success (Baxter, 1994). For low-income and working-class individuals, the pressure to pursue upward mobility may be so strong that it leads to decisions that may not be in the best interests of all members of a society (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). For some, the
decision to pursue higher education may actually have a negative impact. In this study, I will examine a particular population – rural, working-class, Appalachian non-persisters in higher education.

Data show that the return on investment in a college degree does benefit some Americans (Brewer & Ehrenberg, 1996; Thomas & Zhang, 2005). Whereas some students seem to benefit from obtaining the four-year college degree, the scenario among those from lower SES families may often appear very differently. (Glass & Nygreen, 2011). Fewer students from low-income families attend universities than their higher income counterparts and have a higher attrition rate than their peers from more affluent families (Glass & Nygreen 2011).

Despite the value of uncovering and redressing the impact of the myth on college attendance, making the claim that the four-year college degree is appropriate “for all” may actually sidestep the real issue. In fact, the term “for all” has been used by education advocates as a way to imply a form of blindness to differences in class, race, ethnic, and cultural populations without specifically challenging the mechanisms that sustain disparities related to class, race, ethnicity, and culture in higher education (Rosenbaum et al., 2010). Ironically, however, the claim that higher education is “for all” has placed pressure on students for whom college is really not a rational choice (Burnell, 2003; Grey & Herr, 1995; Reid & Moore, 2008). Among those students are (1) those who have viable economic options available to them immediately after high school (Burnell, 2003; Reid & Moore, 2008), (2) those who are not likely to succeed academically in a four-year
college (Choy, 2001) and (3) those who wish to live in parts of the country where jobs requiring the college degree are limited (Burnell, 2003).

I want to get a good job. Some people view a four-year college education as the passport to the middle class (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). According to a 1997 survey of American college freshmen conducted by the Higher Education Research Institution at UCLA, for example, nearly 75% of respondents indicated that getting a better job was their primary reason for attending college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Just how accurate are the claims regarding the need for individuals to obtain a four-year degree in order to secure a good job? According the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2009), on-the-job training is the most significant type of postsecondary education for 6 of the 20 fastest growing occupations. Moreover, on-the-job training is the most important type of postsecondary education for 12 of the 20 occupations with the largest numerical increases of jobs. For only 6 of the 20 occupations reported by the BLS is an associate degree or higher the most significant level of postsecondary education or training required (BLS, 2009).

For over half a century, educators and policy makers have portrayed a college education as the channel to white collar employment in the United States. Yet, according to some economic and education researchers, the expansion of access to higher education and increases in degree attainment have created greater outlooks, or maybe even the expectation that completing the degree will automatically lead to upward mobility and financial security in amounts that a national market would not be able to bear (Anyon, 2005; Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Lafer, 2002; Nasaw, 1979). The belief that “good jobs”
require a four year college degree is not supported by data about the number and nature of job openings projected for the future (Rosenbaum et al., 2010; Thurow, 1996; Thomas, 2010). According to some reports, the unemployment or (if they are lucky) underemployment numbers of college graduates is near 50% (Yen, 2012)

**I want to make a lot of money.** In the Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) study cited above, 73% of respondents indicated that making more money was a primary motivation for their college attendance. This motivation is closely related to the desire to get a good job because one important characteristic of “good jobs” is their relatively high pay. Another factor to be considered when calculating “high pay” is the total compensation of employment (i.e. medical benefits, retirement) may not be considered by low-income individuals when determining future goals. In addition, the benefits external to the wage is not considered when looking at the disparity between levels of employment compensation. When viewing the characteristic of whether or not a particular position is a good job, some may not consider the whole picture of compensation. For some individuals from a lower socio-economic status, the primary consideration may very well be wages in order to meet the immediate needs of themselves or their families.

Sociologists have identified three broad occupational groups in the United States: white-collar, blue-collar, and service workers (Lamont, 1992). White collar occupations include professional specialty and technical occupations; executive, administrative, and managerial positions; sales positions; and administrative positions (Lamont, 1992). Many
people assume that white-collar jobs always require a bachelor’s degree and always pay the highest wages (Babones, 2010).

Blue-collar jobs, often considered working-class employment, include precision production, craft and repair occupations, machine operation, inspection of manufacturing processes or products, transportation occupations, merchandise handling, equipment cleaning, and laboring (Lamont, 1992). These positions often require some type of additional technical or on-the-job training beyond the high-school degree. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009), pay in the blue-collar sector averaged $15.46 per hour. With variations across particular jobs, moreover, these occupations required little experience. Jobs requiring less experience constituted two-thirds of the blue-collar occupations and averaged between $9 and $12 per hour (BLS, 2009).

Pay for service jobs, which are expected to see the most dramatic increase in job openings through the year 2016 (BLS, 2009), averaged $10.65 per hour. These positions include protective service occupations, food service jobs, and health service positions. Like blue-collar jobs, these positions often require on-the-job training as opposed to formal postsecondary academic preparation (Lamont, 1992).

While some white-collar jobs at the uppermost levels do indeed pay high wages, many positions that require technical or on-the-job training offer comparable wages and do so earlier in the career than typical white-collar jobs, which often require many years of experience to produce high salaries (Babones, 2010). This economic data suggest that the decision to attend college in order to obtain a high-paying job is not well supported by the evidence (Babones, 2010; Goldin & Katz, 2008; Katz & Autor, 1999; Mishel,
Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2005; Morris & Western, 1999; Thomas & Zhang, 2005; Wolniak, Seifert, Reed, & Pascarella, 2008; Rosenbaum et al., 2010). In fact, some recent literature on downward mobility suggests that, despite their college education, many people now face job loss, lack of opportunity for job advancement, and declining wages (Carnevale, Cheah, & Strohl, 2012).

**I want to “be” somebody.** Social status is another incentive for attending an institution of higher education (Brown, 2001; Collins, 2000; Thomas, 2010). Throughout history, post-secondary education was reserved largely for social and economic elites (Brown, 2001; Collins, 2000). One approach to college admissions that institutions employed in the early years of higher education in America was the “guild” approach, whereby the people who were already inside the system of higher education determined who would and would not be admitted (Jencks, Smith, Acland, Bane, Gintis, Michelson, 1972). This system ensured that higher education would remain the province of a wealthy and powerful elite (Collins, 2000; Jencks, et. al., 1972). The advent of state funded public institutions of higher education, however, widened access to colleges and universities, and today most students attend public institutions at which admissions decisions are primarily made on the basis of academic merit (Gelber, 2011).

Because middle-class norms and values—including belief in the value of a college degree—are pervasive, especially in the institutions that provide assistance to people from low socio-economic-status (SES) backgrounds (e.g., social service agencies, schools), it is not surprising that people from low-SES backgrounds come to accept these norms and values (Glass & Nygreen, 2011; Payne, 2005; Thomas, 2010). For such
individuals, completion of a college degree and employment in a white-collar position represent ways to “move up” in a social hierarchy (Collins, 2000). Accepting the middle-class route to adult success often provides low-income students with opportunities for respect and prestige—the chance to “become somebody” (Ansalone, 2001; Payne, 2005; Smith, 2001; Thomas, 2010).

**Doubting the Conventional Wisdom**

Despite widely held beliefs about the value of the four-year college degree, the goal of nearly universal college attendance may not be practicable or even wise. According to some observers (e.g., Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1968; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reisser, 1995; Rodgers, 1989 Schutz, 2009) the challenges for students from working-class backgrounds to assimilate into the middle-class culture of colleges and universities, let alone thrive in that culture, is unclear. In fact, evidence showing that far more low-SES students, in contrast to middle- and upper-SES counterparts, drop out of college offers cause to doubt the feasibility of universal college attendance and completion (Rosenbaum et al., 2010).

Even if practicable, however, public policy that is designed around making higher education universal might be unwise on economic terms. The rate of inflation and the median income have not kept pace with the dramatic increases in the cost of college attendance in recent years (Aud, Hussar, Planty, Snyder, Bianco, Fox, & Drake, 2010). Amplifying the problem, government financial aid in the form of Pell Grants has also failed to keep pace, requiring more and more students to depend on student loan assistance from the government than ever before (Choy & Carroll, 2003; Heller, 2006;
Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004). Approximately, two-thirds of college graduates carry some level of student loan debt, and the majority of such students are from low-income homes; these students are the ones most in need of the anticipated wage benefits thought to result from attainment of the college degree (Eitel & Martin, 2009; King & Bannon, 2002). Furthermore, according to data released by the U.S. Department of Education (2011), rates of student loan default among college graduates have risen steadily since 2005. For students who drop-out of the university, the impact of college debt is even more serious. One study of non-persisters reported that 19% carried “unmanageable” levels of student debt defined as more than 8.6% of their salary (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1999).

In addition, the belief that all persons should strive for a four-year degree as well as policies encouraging near-universal college attendance would seem to require the education sector to create more types of institutions conferring bachelor’s degrees, (community colleges generally only confer associate degrees and certificates) and greater differentiation across such institutions in order to accommodate the variety of individual, family, community, and national purposes. Nevertheless, by expanding and continuing to differentiate college degree programs, the education sector might inadvertently produce a tracking system comparable to the one used with predictable, and predictably negative, consequences by high schools (Kerckhoff, 2002; Rosenbaum, 1976). Such a system would be likely to place differential value on degrees from various types of programs (e.g., programs in certain majors, programs from different institutions). Some research suggests that such a stratified system of tertiary education is already quite evident in the
United States (Ayalon, Grodsky, & Yogev, 2008; Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007). The addition of new baccalaureate granting institutions would be likely to add to the already troubling stratification across degree-granting institutions with varying level of quality and repute.

**Marginalization**

Students are identified as marginalized if they have been “discounted, ignored or subordinated” due to some feature of their identity that they cannot control (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997, p. 19). This feature might reflect students’ behaviors, social or cultural practices, economic status, race or ethnicity, or other identifying characteristic (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). Students may also feel marginalized if they do not fit into the dominant social, cultural, or economic group (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 2012). According to some researchers, students are most often marginalized in the social spaces in which they are most vulnerable, such as a new town or a new school (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997) or university (Tinto, 2012).

Marginalized groups in a university setting often include low-income students, first-generation students, and students who may be different in terms of their abilities, language, race or ethnicity, or culture (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Schlossberg, 1989; Stage & Hossler, 1989). When students from these or other groups are marginalized, they often feel inadequate and stressed (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 2012). According to some researchers, the stress experienced by marginalized students leads them to conclude that they do not belong in college. It often contributes to their alienation and to
a desire to leave the uncomfortable environment; for this reason, marginalized students are more likely than others to drop out of college (Falk 1975; Hirsch & Keniston 1970; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 2012).

**Appalachian marginalization.** Rural Appalachians are among those individuals who experience marginalization when they interact with mainstream institutions (Billings & Blee, 2000; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Weller, 1965). In fact, in some cases, Appalachians are victims of ridicule and derision (Billings & Blee, 2000). In other cases, even when their negative judgments are not overt, people view Appalachians in stereotypical ways, as lazy, unemployed, undereducated, and ignorant. According to some writers, these negative views of “hillbillies” stem from the historic exploitation of rural Appalachia for salt, timber, coal, oil, and gas (Ali & Saunders, 2008; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; deMarrais, 1998). Moreover, novels, movies, newspapers, and other mass media continue to portray Appalachians in unfavorable terms (Billings & Blee, 2000).

Not only do Appalachian students suffer from the marginalization of others, many of them have internalized negative views about their own abilities. Some studies, for example, have found that Appalachian, first-generation, working-class, high school students self-report that lack of social skills and limited intelligence are reasons contributing to their decision not to pursue higher education (Brower, 1992; Rodriguez, 2003). Further, Appalachian students may allow their negative self-perceptions to color their decisions about college attendance. One study, for example, found that while 80% of Appalachian Ohio high school seniors indicated the desired to attend college, just 30% subsequently attended (Spohn, Crowther & Lykins, 1992). This rate was well below the
41% rate for the state as a whole at the time of the study. The study further identified low self-esteem, poverty, and lack of information about higher education as the significant barriers to college attendance.

As described above, aspects of marginalization are concerns for individuals seeking higher education, but the effects of marginalization seem particularly significant for rural Appalachian students considering attendance in higher education. Students may begin to question their decision to attend the university and be successful, often leaving them uncomfortable. The lack of confidence in their abilities and feelings of alienation often contribute to students dropping out of the university altogether.

The Consequences of Non-Persistence

Although, as the discussion above suggested, completion of a four-year degree may not be beneficial to all students, ample evidence suggests that it is beneficial to some (e.g., Brewer & Ehrenberg, 1996; Thomas & Zhang, 2005; Tinto, 2012). For students who complete some college, but drop out before graduating, however, the consequences of college attendance may very well be negative. Moreover, this circumstance affects a large number of young adults: not only do a considerable number of college attendees drop-out, the largest majority of these drop outs come from low-income, families (Glass & Nygreen, 2011; Noddings, 2011).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) determined that the median graduation rate for institutions that serve low-income students was 39% compared with 56% for institutions that have selective admissions and serve fewer low-
income students (2007). The NCES study concluded that graduation rates dropped systematically as the size of the low-income freshmen population increased.

For drop outs, the years following the decision to leave a college or university program may be especially difficult because of the need to pay back sometimes quite large student loans (Gladieux & Perna, 2005; Hirsch, 2008). For many university drop outs, this debt is difficult to manage because they either hold low-paying jobs or are unemployed (Gladieux & Perna, 2005). As Hirsch (2008) commented, “Access into an institution is important, but if students fail to graduate, then it becomes access to debt instead of access to a degree” (p.17). As tuition costs increase, the debt incurred from even a brief period of college attendance can put students in a dire situation financially.

I was unable to find studies that examined the experiences of rural Appalachian students who overcame their initial concerns about attending a four-year college or university program but then decided to withdraw during or following the first year of attendance. Some related studies have examined such experiences among urban students (Farmer-Hinton, 2010) and students from minority groups (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Glass & Nygreen, 2011). This study adds to the literature exploring dynamics of college attendance and dropping out by focusing on rural rather than urban students and students from Appalachian culture rather than students from other cultural groups. This study is unique in that it examines higher education with its promise of class mobility from the viewpoint of low-income, and presumably low-class, individuals who did not persist at the university.
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways a potentially marginalized group of university drop outs make sense of the experience of deciding to attend college, attending college briefly, and then dropping out. The group of students whom the study will focus on are traditional-aged, rural, working-class, Appalachian first-year students who made the decision to leave the university during or immediately after their freshman year.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What were the experiences of first-year, first-generation, working-class, Appalachian students who did not persist during the time period they attended the university?

2. How did these students conceptualize the connection between their college experiences and their decision to leave the university within or after the first year of attendance?

3. What are the former students doing now that they are no longer attending the university full-time?

Significance of the Study

This research sought to understand the higher education experiences of rural, first-generation and often working-class Appalachian university students who made the decision not to persist beyond the first academic year. Findings from this study will contribute to research on persistence and non-persistence in college (e.g., Berkner, Horn, & Clune, 2000; Choy, Horn, Nunez & Chen, 2000; Tinto, 2012; Warburton, Bugarin, &
Nunez, 2000), the relevance of higher education to life in rural and Appalachian communities (e.g., Carter & Robinson, 2002; Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002; DeYoung, 1995; Woodrum, 2004), and the way low-income students think about the benefits and costs of attending college (e.g., Condron, 2011; Whitehurst, 2010).

Research on persistence and non-persistence, for example, tends to treat persistence as an unassailable good and therefore tends also to view those who leave college before graduating as having made an unwise decision. This view fits with what some call a “deficit perspective”—that is, a perspective on certain “others” that assumes that these individuals, groups, or cultures exhibit less desirable attributes and behaviors than mainstream, middle class culture expects (Sato & Lensmire, 2010; Thomas, 2010). From this perspective, the middle-class practice of college attendance represents a better life choice than the alternative practice of not attending college. Clearly, research that cannot create sufficient distance from this perspective will be biased. Other research—research taking a more neutral or even an appreciative perspective—is required in order to produce a richer and more accurate understanding of working class people’s choices regarding college attendance.

As noted earlier, some empirical work provides support for the view that working class people might be making a rational choice when they decide to opt out of college. One recent study (Briggs, 2010), for example, indicated that students drop out in order to obtain full-time employment, raise families, or explore other opportunities, all of which seem reasonable as human ambitions. For individuals from rural Appalachia, where a life devoted to place and family is tantamount to success (Briggs, 2010; Pascarella &
Terenzini, 2005), one can see why pursuing opportunities such as these might be make more sense, at least for some students, than attending college. The current study will add to this empirical work on dropping out as a rational choice by examining Appalachian students’ decisions about college attendance from their own perspectives—neither intentionally from a deficit perspective nor from an intentionally appreciative perspective. Unlike many extant studies, however, I approached this research with the mindset that dropping out of college might be a reasonable alternative with potential benefits for young adults.

In addition to providing a perspective on decision-making about college attendance that adds to the research literature, findings from this study will also help education practitioners—high school teachers and counselors, college educators, school and college administrators—understand the potential impact of their advice on the decision-making of low-income Appalachian students. In particular, it will help them think about the advice they offer regarding the potential value and possible drawbacks of attending a four-year college. As other studies have shown and the proposed study may also reveal, college attendance does not always contribute to well-being in terms of employment, wages, solvency, or family life (e.g., Dube & Graham-Squire, 2006; Hecker, 2005; Glass & Nygreen, 2011; Whitehurst, 2010).

Despite the fact those low-income students’ plans after high school graduation are highly influenced by their high school counselors, changes in counselors’ beliefs and practices may be difficult to affect (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Students in another study shared their perceptions that what they should do after high school was often determined
by the expectations of their high school counselors (Trusty, 2002)—a finding suggesting that students may be following advice that leads to choices that are not the most productive for the adult lives they would prefer. In addition, the conventional view of non-college-bound students as academically incapable tends to limit those students’ opportunity to learn. Notably, educational practices that distinguish curricula on the basis of whether or not students plan to attend college may limit chances for non-college-going students to benefit from an academic curriculum (see e.g., Adler, 1984; Sizer, 1997).

Perhaps the time has come for high school counselors and other educators to consider a broader set of options to recommend in their conversations with students about their futures. The findings of this study may, in fact, provide support for certain options other than college that students might want to pursue after high school. In other words, narratives from the participants in this study may demonstrate to educators that earning a university degree is not the only path to a successful future but that other potentially productive paths also exist.

In addition to significance for researchers and education practitioners, the study’s findings may broaden the horizons of policymakers or contribute to their discussions of policies with potential impact for low-income, rural Appalachian adolescents and young adults. These policies relate to: (1) the location of institutions of higher education (Lopez-Turley, 2009); (2) the distribution of grants and scholarships (e.g., on the basis of financial need or on the basis of merit) (Dynarski, 2002; Ehrenberg, Zhang & Levin, 2006; Pallais & Turner, 2006); and (3) incentives to promote the expansion of local rural economies and job creation in rural communities (Isserman, 2001; Lu, 2011); and (4) the
creation of loan forgiveness programs for students who are not able to secure employment sufficient to repay their college loans (Dell, 2011).

The ability to attend college close to home is often among the most important factors that high school students consider, especially low-income students and those from disadvantaged minority groups (Lopez-Turley, 2009). For rural Appalachian students, remaining close to family and community is an important cultural value (DeYoung & Rademacher, 2004). By definition, policies supporting the establishment and maintenance of community colleges are addressing some of the higher education needs of rural, poor, and minority students, even when they are not explicitly attentive to the cultural values of such students. Findings from this study, however, contribute to policymakers’ understandings of the values and life choices that undergird the need for locating post-secondary institutions in close proximity to students’ home communities.

Another policy issue with potential impact on rural, Appalachian students from low-income homes is the affordability of college. This issue may be even more important than it once was because in recent years the cost of tuition at public institutions of higher education have increased exponentially and at a far much greater pace than family income, especially for those from impoverished backgrounds (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Mortenson, 2000). Despite these economic realities, states have shifted from need-based financial aid to merit-based financial aid (Mortenson, 2000). Policymakers, moreover, are favoring this policy option even though students from low-income families demonstrate far more unmet financial need (and far less “merit”) than their more affluent upper-middle-class counterparts from college-bound programs in well-funded school districts.
In this policy environment, working-class, first-generation college students—namely those with the greatest needs for financial support—are positioned to assume more debt than students who are less in need, especially if they attend higher education not knowing where their career focus lies. Delbanco (2012) posits that students are entering college with narrow para-professional goals and not taking time to discern their possible career paths; however, unlike their middle and upper class counterparts, many working-class and first-generation students cannot afford to take the time of discernment many college students are afforded as the mounting debt from their educations may not be worth it.

Furthermore, these students often must assume this burden even though the returns on their investments in education are less certain and less significant than the return on such investments received by middle-class and affluent students and their families (Mudge & Swiger, 2008; Stokes & Wright, 2010). In many states, aid has changed from need-based to merit-based. Hearing about such circumstances and their consequences from actual constituents may, however, alter the perspectives of policymakers from rural and Appalachian locales. This study provided some of these constituents the opportunity to share their perspectives.

As stated previously, policies that allow rural Appalachians to remain close to their families and local communities contribute significantly to their well-being. Policies focusing on local economic development may have even greater impact, therefore, than policies focusing on support for affordable and convenient opportunities for higher education (Isserman, 2001; Ward & Brown, 2009). Nevertheless, as both Grubb (1996)
and Lu (2011) noted, policies that couple support for economic development with support for post-secondary education related to employment may have the greatest impact. When policymakers understand these dynamics in relationship to the lives of actual constituents, they may gain deeper appreciation for the value of policies supporting the economic development of rural locales within their states.

Similarly, without opportunities to secure employment that is sufficient to enable graduates to pay off their student loans, students and drop-outs alike often face huge financial burdens (Mudge & Swiger, 2008; Stokes & Wright, 2010). Efforts to assist with student debt have included loan forgiveness programs traditionally directed at graduates who take on professional roles within local communities as well as elsewhere: teachers, nurses, physicians, public-service attorneys and military personnel. These programs do not provide relief for individuals who pursue other interests or who are not able to secure employment (Dell, 2011). Policymakers who are attentive to the needs of low-income rural students will concern themselves not only with the provision of needs-based loans but also with the provision of loan deferral and loan forgiveness programs for individuals whose circumstances interfere with their ability to pay back college loans. As suggested earlier, the stories of rural and low-income constituents who face the challenges of college attendance (and the debt it often produces) may help persuade policymakers to consider policies that either help or at least do not harm such individuals.

**Summary**

This chapter provides the background for this study of first-generation Appalachian university drop-outs. The discussion presented evidence of some of the
complications surrounding the expectation that high school graduates can or should move forward in the pursuit of a college degree. This evidence included findings about (1) education requirements for forecasted job openings, (2) wage differentials for positions often categorized as white collar and blue collar, and (3) the struggle of low-income first-year students to make the social class transition to middle class norms expected in a university environment.

Following arguments showing the need for research that examines the post-college activities of rural Appalachian students who decided to drop out of college, the chapter proposed the following research questions:

1. What were the experiences of first-year, first-generation working-class, Appalachian students who did not persist during the time period they attended the university?

2. How did these students conceptualize the connection between their college experiences and their decision to leave the university within or after the first year of attendance?

3. What are the former students doing now that they are no longer attending the university full-time?

The chapter concluded with a discussion of the potential significance of findings in relationship to further research, educational practice, and policy. As a contribution to research, the study captures the perspective of former university students and whether the decision to drop out was a reasonable one in their situation. As a contribution to considerations of effective educational practice, the study examined the role that teachers
and education administration play in affecting the post-graduation plans of high school students. As a contribution to conversations supporting policy, the findings of this study will provide information to policymakers about issues affecting individuals’ decisions to attend (or not attend) college, namely, the location of colleges and other post-secondary options, financial constraints of low-income populations, and the financial burden of attending higher education for both graduates and non-graduates from low-income families and rural areas.
Chapter Two

This chapter examines, in part, a series of events that has led to the current novelty of a national near-mandate of “college for all” in the United States and the extent to which the literature offers support for such a mandate. One might observe that, at present, citizens’ daily lives depend on specialized skills, in construction and auto mechanics, for example, not learned in the university environment (Crawford, 2006; Howard, 2008; Sennett, 2008). Ample reason exists to doubt the wisdom of the mandate, but what testimony does the related literature provide?

This chapter includes the results of attempts around the world to improve the educational status of a nation’s citizens in various ways and includes research on educational attainment in America. It illustrates a story of expectations and failures, with much of the literature drawing implications for failing to complete a four-year college degree. I hope to bring current realities into perspective, in part by honoring those who have led “successful” lives without an academic college degree. Many types of employment that is considered working class (i.e. blue-collar, service-oriented) are vital to a successful economy and do not require a college degree, but rather an associate degree, certificates or other post-secondary education other than the four year degree. Examples of such positions are in the construction, trucking, manufacturing and food industry.

This chapter, in five sections, synthesizes the literature that supports the need for skepticism about this issue. It places the study in the context of the broader scholarship of higher education successes and failures. The first section of literature concerns the
implied promises of the benefits of higher education and delves into the topics of
socialization for professions and introduces credentialing theory and the possibility of an
ulterior motive behind the expectation for a university diploma for all. The second
section considers higher education options in other countries, the effect on national
economies and the value of diversification. One of the hallmarks of American tradition is
diversity and it is examined in the next section on the United States and the dilemma of
globalization, which includes the history of higher education in the United States that will
help place in perspective the aspiration to have the most knowledgeable and contributing
members of a global society. This goal of “college for all” may at first glance seem full of
promise for American citizens, but a closer look at the historical literature reveals that
successful pursuit of higher education is strongly correlated with elevated social status
and previous high academic achievement. The effort to encourage all members of a
society to pursue higher education is, in fact, unique to the United States.

In the third segment, the credentialism in the United States is explored and the
possibility of a global education race similar to the arms race of the Cold War is
considered. Literature relevant to individual decisions about credentialing and attending
college is the focus of the fourth section, and part five investigates the decision to enter
the university environment and its challenges for students from rural Appalachia, often
first-generation students. The discussion includes a look at the importance of
relationships and social class, especially as they relate to assimilation and persistence,
academic under-preparedness, and financial constraints.
Promises of a Brighter Future

Advances in educational attainment across the planet seem to be associated with the spread of entry-level requirements for a wide range of jobs (Drucker, 1993; Leef, 2006; Treiman, 1970). In this light, it is not surprising that the prevalent rhetoric leads high school students and their families to believe that one must attend the university to secure gainful employment and experience success in adulthood (Gallup, 1984; Leef, 2006; Treiman, 1970). Students are increasingly expected to continue their education after high school at four-year colleges and universities. Anything less (e.g., technical or vocational schooling) is a sort of failure in the American imagination (Drucker, 1993; Gallup, 1984; Leef, 2006; Thurow, 1996), and so students increasingly apply to universities, anticipating the promised success of a bachelor’s degree (Gallup, 1984; Leef, 2006; Thurow, 1996).

In fact, a considerable amount of empirical work indicates that higher education plays a vital role in shaping occupational, physical, social, and economical status for degree holders (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Carnevale & Fry, 2000; Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006; Knox, Lindsay, & Kohl, 1993; Pallas, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969; Sewell & Hauser, 1975). Rumors of, and propaganda about, high salaries lure adolescents into pursuing this course of action with the anticipated future payoffs (Boudon 1979; Collins, 1979, 2000; Elster 1979), even if their previous educational attainment has been marginal, thereby setting up a possible situation for failure. Students may, in fact, attend the university, but the result for marginalized students doesn’t equate with the proposed goal for the nation.
The short sightedness of the national push for everyone to attend the university is evident from national leadership downward as government officials and the media have attempted to persuade United States’ citizens to believe that higher education will translate into a happier and more meaningful life.

On the morning of October 5, 2006, President George W. Bush and his education secretary, Margaret Spellings, were visiting a charter public school in Washington, D.C. When the president dropped in on two classrooms, he asked all of the students, who were mostly African-American and living in poverty, if they were planning on going to college. Nearly all of the hands in both classes went up. He told them that he thought that was a good sign, “Going to college is an important goal for the future of the United States of America.” (Tough, 2006, p. 44)

According to Beaver (2010), both Presidents Bush and Clinton used the presidency’s “bully pulpit” to repeat the point. Indeed, Clinton said that he wanted to make college attendance as common as high school attendance (Beaver, 2010). Beaver concludes that Americans believe a college degree to be a requirement for a successful life. Given the force of presidential rhetoric, such views are now widely shared across the public. As demonstrated next, a surplus of studies point to the array of advantages that accompany degree holders.

Pascarelli and Terenzini, (2005) assert that proponents of higher education for all believe that achieving a bachelor’s degree will benefit individuals by serving a dual purpose: (1) to mediate the influence of an individual’s socioeconomic background on
future occupational status and income and (2) to enhance status attainment in ways unrelated to socioeconomic origins such as respect and admiration. But when an individual’s interests lie authentically in areas outside of higher education, as with many skilled trades of the working class, educators tend to presume that the individual is not motivated or concerned with accomplishment (Burnell, 2003; Collins, 1979; Crawford, 2006).

**Socialization for professions via the undergraduate degree.** The evolution of technology in the second half of the 20th century dramatically changed the landscape of work and, according to Randall Collins, originator of credentialing theory; this evolution has had a dramatic effect on the productivity of markets and the structural efficiency of work (Collins, 1979). Even 30 years ago, Collins could point to the common consensus that such change had increased the attractiveness of a university education, with completion of an undergraduate degree the primary route to upward social mobility; however, he and others (e.g., Babones, 2010; Boyer, 1987; Brown, 1995, 2000; Dorn, 1976) could find no evidence that the objective demand for credentials actually existed. On the basis of such a consensus, in other words, as technology advances and employers impose requirements for ever advancing credentials, some cultures assume higher education will provide an ever more certain route, a “ladder of success,” to increased social standing and better wages (Aronowitz, 2000; Grubb 1985; Grubb and Lazerson 2004; Lucas 1994; Thelin 2004).

Accumulation of credentials, under the pretense of securing a better job than if one did not possess the credentials, can eventually lead to an overeducated workforce, as
some nations have experienced, characterized below, will demonstrate. The potential for positions available in the service and manufacturing industries will likely then be filled with individuals possessing credentials, but nonetheless unprepared, or positions will remain empty precisely because appropriately prepared individuals are unavailable. The potential for a lack of individuals willing to provide common services and goods, in the hospitality sector for example, is real in the United States (Khan, 2001).

The practical implications of credentialism will be considered in greater depth in a subsequent section, but a brief introduction to credentialing theory and credentialism is in order here since an undisputed output of universities is credentialed individuals—those who possess degrees. The degrees are part of the socialization of professionals, and degrees often seem to possess value in themselves, separate from any certain set of skills (Arum & Roska, 2011).

The genesis of credentialing theory, which investigates and attempts to explain such phenomena, arguably lies in the work of Max Weber:

The elaboration of diplomas from universities, business and engineering colleges, and the universal clamor for the creation of further educational certificates in all fields serve the formation of a privileged stratum in professional society. Those with the credentials will qualify for the designated positions and enter into a higher level in society than those without (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 1000).

Contemporary credentialing theory posits that higher employment requirements are seen as necessary because complex contemporary workplaces must, allegedly, secure more highly skilled labor (Brown, 2001). The necessary skills, on this questionable view,
are provided by credential-bearing individuals; the credential attests to the possession of whatever skills are required by the given line of work, and thus credentials themselves, at increasingly elevated levels, become the good desired. This substitution of credentials per se for skills, knowledge, and wisdom is known as credentialism (Collins, 1979).

This perceived need for university credentials for employment in the so-called “technology-driven” economy—which Collins (2000) continues to regard as a dubious construct—is one of the main reasons for the national push in the US for attendance at institutions of higher education (Brown, 2001). Unfortunately, substantial economic evidence indicates no clear correlation between academic education and economic development beyond mass literacy (Babones, 2010; Boyer, 1987; Collins, 1979; Kim, 2003; Krymkowski, 1991; Lucas, 1988; Luijkx et al., 2002; Marjoribanks, 1996). The averages, unfortunately are but one way to mask the variances of incomes across platforms such as gender, race and class in what is rapidly becoming a to a society divided by social class (Grubb & Lazerson 2004; Hertz 2006; Mishel et al., 2007). That is, in considering such averages, the increased levels of success has not benefitted the poorest Americans economically (Grubb & Lazerson 2004, 164; Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). The beneficiaries of the “on average” income returns to a degree are disproportionately from more affluent backgrounds. On the basis of such well-established and properly nuanced evidence, policies that encourage all citizens to pursue higher education would possibly culminate in national inefficiency, especially if the substitution of credentials for skills and knowledge is prevalent across occupations. Individuals with credentials are certainly a much needed part of a strong economic driver; however, not all
positions require a bachelor’s degree, and for those positions, the attainment of the credential would be a disservice if the benefits are not realized.

In their recent publication on achievement in higher education, Arum and Roska (2011) argue that contemporary university students are adrift and lack a sense of purpose regarding the rationale behind higher education - that is, aside from earning the credentials. If the expectation is high-paying employment after graduation and the expectation is not actualized for the newly credentialed, what effect might this condition have for future degree aspirants? Not only do many who take up university work not succeed, but success would bring little national payoff, at least on the prevailing utilitarian purpose (i.e., restoring American preeminence in the global rate of educational attainment). Moreover, from the vantage of libratory purpose (thinking, judgment, taste, and wisdom), it is clear that many students are not prepared for the levels of critical reading and writing necessary to engage such purpose (ACT, 2009; Arum & Roska, 2011). One source (ACT, 2009) predicted that only 23% of graduating high school seniors were likely to be successful in their first baccalaureate courses. Further still, if “success” in attaining a degree is not a substantive attainment (attainment of knowledge and skills or of deeper thinking and critique), but is merely a formal one that enhances existing social distinction, then the value of the degree to low-status individuals could be much less than for high-status individuals. Such an insight helps explain why, under the conditions of credentialism, degrees do prove less valuable even to successful students from working-class backgrounds.
Many studies (Babones, 2010; Goldin & Katz, 2008; Katz & Autor, 1999; Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2005; Morris & Western, 1999; Thomas & Zhang, 2005; Wolniak, Seifert, Reed, & Pascarella, 2008) have demonstrated that the financial return on investment for a university degree is not always positive. Student default rates for 2008 averaged 7%. For the fiscal year 2009, the default rate was 8.8%, setting the high to date since 1997 (United States Department of Education, 2011).

Student borrowing, as stated previously, has risen in recent years, as the cost of tuition and fees at colleges and universities has risen at a pace quicker than inflation or family income (Archibald & Feldman, 2008). Levin’s (2011) assessment is the following “with the recession and its high unemployment rates, default rates on college loans may continue to rise for some years. Borrowers who default can face a lifetime of consequences, including inability to borrow for a car or a house, wage garnishment, seizure of tax refunds, or even, in an era when employers increasingly check credit reports, difficulty in getting a job” (p.56).

Approximately one in ten graduates from low-income families is still considered poor according to national poverty guidelines (Institute for Higher Education report, 2010). In addition, studies also indicate that low-income adults are not as likely as their peers than their more affluent peers to attend selective universities that lead, via existing social networks, to high-paying occupations (Brand & Halaby, 2006), and earnings (Black & Smith, 2006; Eide, Brewer, & Ehrenberg, 1998; Thomas & Zhang, 2005).
How can policy makers decide on provisions to support college attendance? Even a brief look at higher education in other nations will provide some insight relevant to the answer—insight not readily accessible within current U.S. policy debates.

**Examples of higher education alternatives.** As previously stated, a central purpose guiding national policy for higher education is the provision of human capital for the nation’s economy. The following section will help readers understand the related alternatives engaged by other nations—alternatives that provide contrasts to the “college for all” position in the United States.

According to some researchers (Hoffman, 2010; Noddings, 2011; Whitehurst, 2010), the relationship between years of schooling and economic output at a national level is complex. A consistent and positive, albeit small, relationship exists in international studies between long-term economic growth and national average educational attainment (Whitehurst, 2010). However, a variety of variables exist that nuance what such a relationship means or implies within a given nation: (1) the national percentage of college graduates, (2) job opportunities vs. citizens’ skill sets, and (3) the diversity of a population within and between nations. These variables, though conceptually simple, provide considerable scope for doubt about the current U.S. aim of increasing the proportion of citizens with bachelor’s credential (Lee, 2012).

Germany and France are interesting examples related to the percentage of college graduates and economic growth. Germany has a stronger national economy than France, but only half as many college graduates among its young adult population (Whitehurst, 2010). France, on the other hand, has grown its percentage of college graduates by 13%
over the past decade while Germany’s percentage of college graduates has remained stable (Whitehurst, 2010). Concurrently, China has substantially increased its output of college graduates from 3.4% in 1990 to 19% in 2004, that is, to the point of glut (OECD, 2005). Taiwan suffers a similar affliction (see Peng & Chen, 2007). Graduates in the two Chinas cannot find suitable employment; under-employment pervades these nations (OECD, 2005; Peng & Chen, 2007).

On the surface, “college for all” seems a noble aspiration for a nation; however, as described above, realizing the goal may harbor negative outcomes for some graduates. Consider the current United States economy: a lack of relevant positions in academically popular fields, consequent employment of college graduates working at positions for which they are overqualified, and rising default rates on student loans. In the U.S., moreover, meager public support for students combined with higher education costs that outstrip inflation even as median income remains stagnant (Glass & Nygreen, 2011; Noddings, 2011; Whitehurst, 2010). The fallout for individual students and society as a whole seems, if not positively evil, at least to exhibit a bad benefit to cost ratio. The goal sounds good, but even the short-term practicalities seem unfavorable.

Another relevant variable is the availability of appropriate jobs (i.e., to support economic vigor) related to citizens’ skill sets (Noddings, 2011; Whitehurst, 2010). In several of the thriving European countries, high quality vocational education and training (VET) are considered essential to national economic vigor (Noddings, 2011). Hoffman (2010) describes the vocational philosophy as follows:
Countries with strong VET systems have a different conception about learning for jobs. They make a distinction between a calling for an occupation and learning the specific skills needed to weld, or solve banking problems or manage the IT system in a corporation...Work is related to active citizenship and thus education and training needed for work are seen as the joint responsibility of the government and ...the social partners (employers and labor unions) (p. 1).

Understanding “callings” and encouraging citizens to find work that is fulfilling to them as well as understanding variables among cultural, intellectual, moral, and social ideas are relevant issues, but they seem absent from the discussion in the United States. In the United States, policy makers seem to conflate the two purposes, and worse, fail to understand how they are related, and, therefore, how their interaction might be generative of economic, social, and individual well-being. Apparently, U.S. policy makers believe so strongly in the “invisible hand” that balances the market, that they consider irrelevant the considerations of obvious importance to Europeans; this blindness might be a cultural and ideological failing (Kosack, 2007; Whitehurst, 2010). I consider this explanation further at the end of this section.

Diversity among and within nations is a third relevant variable (Whitehurst, 2010). One of the most distinctive features of the United States is the diversity of both its people and its institutions of higher education. In the United States, individuals may drop in and out of higher education at any point in their lives, in marked contrast to other developed nations. Elsewhere, access is more difficult, fewer “seats” are available, and State policy does not often entertain individuals’ second thoughts about higher education
participation (i.e., after high school and in early- and mid-adulthood). One chooses (or State selection procedures route one into) VET or university training during adolescence; few have the opportunity to revisit that decision (Bagnall, 2000; Edwards, 2008; Hoffman, 2010; Peng & Wang, 2008).

To accommodate the U.S. outlook and its laissez-faire approach to higher education access, institutions of higher education here exhibit wide variety in size and mission. The United States has, as a result, more than 6,000 institutions of higher education in both public and private sectors—some for-profit, and some non-profit, all of which together offer a dizzying array of programs, degrees, fields, and formats of study. In other developed nations the systems of higher education are considerably smaller, more centrally managed, and far more homogenous when compared to the United States (Whitehurst, 2010).

Although a policy that encourages universal participation seemingly reflects a concern for equality, the extant diversity of the system and its comparative openness is already structured by very sharp social and economic inequality (as compared to the European Union, for instance). For example, the Gini coefficient, which measures the concentration in a distribution of income ranging from 0 (total equality in income) to 1 (one member possess all income for a group) demonstrates this diversity in the United States population. Currently, the U.S. coefficient is 0.45 showing that income here is as unequally distributed as in Uganda (0.43), Nigeria (0.44) and Iran (0.45) (CIA World Fact Book, 2012). Income is far more equally distributed in the United Kingdom (0.34), France (0.32) and Germany (0.27) (World Fact Book, 2012). Predictably, the open U.S.
system replicates, and perhaps exacerbates, exactly this system (Collins, 1979, 2000). The advertised national benefits of a “college for all” policy are overstated; Participation and access are already high.

In order to capitalize on diversity, many nations have considered establishing policies that adjust enrollments in certain major pathways to the employment base: training for positions in IT, healthcare, tourism and engineering technology incorporate internships and partnerships with unions and corporations (Hoffman, 2010). Access to such pathways can be quite broadly based (i.e., across divisions of class, race, and ethnicity), but U.S. policy makers appear, at present, blind to such possibilities—policies that would clearly appeal to the working class (Noddings, 2011; Rosenbaum, Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2010).

Kosack (2007) and Whitehurst (2010) both conclude that policymakers in the U.S. base their decisions on an ideology best described as neoliberal: individuals and employers are actors in a capitalist marketplace that balances demand and supply. Wendell Berry (2009) describes the Unites States’ current economy in this way:

Our economy, having confused necessities with products or commodities that are merely marketable, deliberately reduces the indispensable service of providing needed goods to ‘selling’ or ‘marketing’ products, some of which have never been and will never be needed by anybody. The gullibility of the public thus becomes an economic resource (p. 6).

Berry (2009) goes on to say later that the same may be said of how the American public currently views higher education – something to be purchased without fully considering
whether it is truly needed or will be beneficial. Thus, policy makers fashion reforms that bend the reformed structures to their preferred ideology; the cart precedes the horse.

In comparison, nations that embrace a more active concern for the welfare and satisfaction of their citizens (Kosack, 2007) enjoy a policy culture more active to that end. In other words, in such other nations, policy making facilitates overall social (or public) good and not a mostly private one. In the United States, policy aims to equip individuals with a misguided view of the “best” preparation - a college degree – while the public good is left to the full discretion of the free-for-all marketplace, on this view at any rate.

**Higher Education in the United States and the Dilemma of Globalization**

This history of rhetoric about equality, so at odds with the national and international reality just documented, complicates higher education policy making in the United States. Nonetheless, national leaders have long struggled with the amount and type of education best suited for a democracy.

As the Industrial Revolution proceeded to overtake the United States, the motive to provide mass schooling options seems to have shifted from participation in government to development of skills relevant to employment in industry. This new focus of education, an economically-motivated one, deepened the divide over the purpose of education, but provided a much more widely acceptable warrant for schooling funded by the state (Theobald, 2009). Previous to the Industrial Revolution, higher education was primarily for the elite and for the purpose of broad thinking often reserved for politicians and the decision-makers of a particular population. After the Industrial Revolution and
especially after the world wars and the GI bill came about, the purpose of higher education was for “average” people in order to promote a rich and profitable economy.

Condron (2011) explored educational attainment internationally in relation to wealth distribution. He determined that highly regulated, egalitarian societies with balanced citizen wealth distribution possessed high numbers of academically advanced students and low percentages of very low-skilled students – conditions desired by the United States.

Although these findings have momentous implications for the United States, such matters can barely be raised at this time—even the notion of higher taxes to fund education is seemingly impossible; discourse about wealth and income redistribution has not been seriously heard for decades (Chudgar & Luschei, 2009; Morris & Western, 1999; Smeeding, 2005; Wolff, 2002), though reporting on the concept did surface at the height of the recent recession (e.g., Porter, 2012; Riley, 2012).

From the 1940s to the early 1970s, a period of egalitarian capitalism existed according to researchers (Kenworthy, 2004; Massey, 2007), under which reductions in economic inequality materialized (Condron, 2011). However, since that time, income inequality has increased sharply (Morris & Western, 1999, World Fact Book, 2012), such that the United States is now the most economically unequal among affluent societies (Condron, 2011). The distribution of wealth and income is more lopsided than in any other affluent society (Smeeding, 2005; Wolf, 2002). The United States in this regard is a lot more like troubled nations than like the European Union. How does one reconcile
such a condition with a “democracy”? Reconciliation of extremes of wealth and poverty with democratic intentions is historically unpromising (Hanson, 1995).

The threat to democracy, however, goes even deeper. The owners of capital—particularly large firms—focus on the threat of global competition, especially evident from countries such as China and India. The challenge has materialized past the point of threat and some analysts believe that adaptation is the best the US and European economies can manage (Jacques, 2009). Firms, however, are unlikely to share such a realization widely. Instead, not only financial manipulations (e.g., foreign direct investment in Chinese and Indian enterprises), but the manipulation of individual mindsets in the United States become tactics in the process of making such necessary adaptations (Huang, 2008; Molnar, 1996). China and India between them hold half the world’s population; the population of the US—the world’s third most populous nation—holds just 10% that number. The implications for production, consumption, marketing, and global competition (in various modes, including military) are simply staggering. In this context, the press for “college for all” might be understood as not only a misguided effort, but a desperate one. But it also might be understood as a distraction. If business is historically prone to blame schools for its failures, as Berliner and Biddle (1995) famously argued, then one of the blame-worthy co-conspirators must be citizen-students themselves who supposedly lack the skills for positions in the global marketplace. Hence, the individual co-conspirators need both to understand their guilt (personal lack of competitiveness) and to atone for it (by going to college, no matter the illogic or the cost).
In this way concern for “globalization” supplants concern for democratic governance. Globalization does embed real and present economic challenges, but this condition hardly means that individual citizen-consumers are responsible for the defense of corporate well-being or (even more illogically) for the defense of a massive inequality. It’s perhaps strange, but one can argue—along these lines—that “college for all” is contrary to democratic governance. In any case, such reconciliation of inequality and democracy with the challenges of globalization is hardly what the interests of U.S. capital interests would predictably seek (Molnar, 1996).

**Credentialism in Action in the United States**

The combination of the recent U.S. recession and the desire of many Americans to pursue training relevant to available local employment at a reasonable cost shape the decision to enter higher education, but it is important to note that the attainment of a degree is not the “sole measure of success” for many individuals (Kolb, 2012). Kolb (2012) emphasizes that what matters most is what people can actually do and not the credential itself. This section considers how changes in national outlook have “reformed” higher education as a market since the end of the Second World War. Previously, citizens understood that skill, knowledge, and wisdom were important regardless of the possession of a credential (Aronowitz, 2000; Collins, 1979).

*Credentialism* is the key construct.

In functional terms, credentialism entails the extent to which degrees serve as minimum employment criteria (see Collins, 1979). Brown (2001) defines credentialism as the “growth of culturally-based, stratifying entry barriers to occupations and
organizations” (p. 20). That is, under such a regime, the social outcomes of undergraduate schooling trump the substantive ones, both the intellectual and the utilitarian outcomes.

Even 30 years ago, the United States was “the most credentialized society in the world” and its educational system was correspondingly unique (Collins, 1979, p. 91). Collins (2000) claims that, at present, the high school credential serves only as a gateway to the “lottery” (p. 24) for higher education. It provides access only to the most menial positions in the economy. High school thus seems almost educationally irrelevant to some observers (e.g., Rosenbaum, 2001).

Moreover, the “college for all” ethos in the United States accords lesser status to community college and vocational schooling credentials. The extremely useful and socially important technical and trade skills are themselves disparaged according to astute observers (e.g., Crawford, 2009; Kolb, 2011; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). If other types of education, such as vocational education or certificate programs, were considered beneficial to positions in the labor market, then that acceptance might affect or even promote individuals who have chosen alternate educational paths. Such trades are essential to communities and businesses, and their neglect strikes some observers as strange and even culturally debilitating (e.g., Crawford, 2009).

Increasingly, businesses require a baccalaureate degree as a contingency of employment. The typical argument is that global competition demands such corporate behavior, but researchers have found no empirical correlation across national boundaries between globalization and returns to university education (Babones, 2010; Collins, 2000).
“Although completing a bachelor’s degree in the United States has noticeable economic benefits for some, these benefits are always calculated ‘on the average’” (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004, p. 162). Two points seem relevant. First, according to some observers, the content of public school education through at least the baccalaureate degree consists mainly of assimilating middle-class cultural habits rather than actual job skills (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brown, 2001; Crawford, 2009; Collins, 1979, 2000). Second, the baccalaureate degree is on the verge of inheriting a bequest from the saga of the high school diploma, namely that it signifies no particularly valuable accomplishment (Arum & Roksa, 2010). Smelter (2009) even asserts that “college has been ‘dumbed down’ to the point it is the new high school” (p. 127). In this light, the stakes for getting a job have merely been raised, not the knowledge demands to successfully conduct the job (Tomlinson, 2008).

**Confronting the impracticality of credentialism.** According to the relevant theoretical and empirical literature, the instrumental purposes of more and more schooling—embodied in credentialism—are actually out of step with the practicality one might expect from an instrumental regime. The arrangement is not only inefficient, but, one might argue, strikingly impractical. One can judge the scheme “practical” only if practicality consists in the imposition of quite arbitrary barriers to employment, and surely such barriers would constitute a perverse view of what is practical. Why should such a scheme prevail? One reason may concern the aversion to manual labor that prevails in many countries (Burkeman, 2010; M. Crawford, 2009; R. Crawford, 1987; Harvey, 1989; Sennett, 2008; Vlaardingerbroek & El-Masri, 2008).
In the United States, a need exists for—indeed, a scarcity exists of—skilled workers in many trades, possibly as a result of the cultural dilemma just described (i.e., an impractical instrumental regime centered on an inflated value given to prestigious credentials). As Crawford (2009) observes:

While manufacturing jobs have certainly left our shores to a disturbing degree, the manual trades have not. If you need a deck built, or your car fixed, the Chinese are of no help. Because they are in China. And in fact there are reported labor shortages in both construction and auto repair. Yet the trades and manufacturing are lumped together in the mind of the pundit class as “blue collar” and their requiem is intoned. (p.8)

Crawford repairs motorcycles professionally and holds a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Chicago (his pricey credentials arguably help legitimize his complaint). He asserts that the contemporary “knowledge worker” lacks the practical and applicable skills required to imagine, design, and create an actual product, and possesses only a general knowledge—a somewhat vague experience—of the influences that impinge upon the position held. This lack of practical knowledge contrasts sharply with the craftsman who is involved in the creation of his product from beginning to end and has personally invested himself in it (Berry, 2010; Crawford, 2009). Anderson (1964) describes a potter who described this concept in the following way:

I like to do things from the beginning to the end. Oh, I could work in a
Northern factory and make a lot of money, but then I would see only one part of the whole object. Every piece would be the same. Nothing would ever be my own.

The knowledge worker, on Crawford’s view, seeks to learn about *the new*, whereas the craftsman’s quest is to determine the right and wrong way to accomplish tasks (Crawford, 2009). A knowledge worker, Crawford argues, seeks general knowledge of a product and its abilities as opposed to the craftsman who wants to determine whether the product works or not, and how to fix it. While it is important to educate engineers to design safe automobiles, it is equally important to have the skilled repairman to fix the automobile. Society requires that both types exist, though Crawford doubts—like Brown and Collins—that undergraduate schooling contributes much to practical accomplishment in *any* particular profession. Perhaps this troubling insight explains why Crawford now repairs motorcycles instead of teaching philosophy to undergraduates.

**Contexts of Decisions about Attending College**

This section considers literature about relevant contexts of individuals’ decisions about acquiring credentials, the bachelor’s degree, as relative to this study. The contexts initially concern the role of college for individuals in general, for rural students, followed by first-generation working-class contexts, and lastly Appalachian backgrounds with the latter section developed at considerable length because the dilemmas of Appalachian students are the focus of the present study.
**Individual contexts.** The time between adolescence and adulthood is a time for discernment of goals and the path that an individual wishes to consider for their future plans. Delbanco (2012) posited that college is designed for that time and provides a vehicle for the determination of how individuals wish to make a meaningful life for themselves. While seemingly an advocate for four year institutions, he explained how society needs all levels of institutions in order to provide for a healthy democracy. He described higher education as an “incubator of citizenry” to develop individuals who will contribute to society. For many individuals, this may be true, but for this study’s population, the luxury of taking the time for discernment may not be practical.

**Rural contexts.** American optimism is indeed relentlessly pushing all young people toward higher credentialization. A large literature exists on the dynamics of such over-production internationally (e.g., Feonova & Spiridonova, 2004; Jalowiecki & Gorzalek, 2004; Tansel & Güngör, 2003), but a national literature documents the similar trouble in rural areas in the United States, which are perennial net losers in the flow of educational credentials (e.g., Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Hektner, 1995; Huang, Weng, Zhang, & Cohen, 1997). The findings of several studies have demonstrated that the young people of rural America base their educational aspirations on what they have experienced which are the realities, occupations and lifestyles of rural life and place and have set their sights on such experiences which is very different from their higher income peers (Davidson, 1996; Elder, King, & Conger, 1996; Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996; Jamieson, 2000). In the words of one researcher who summed it up plainly, “when moving up implies moving out,” youth in rural areas often attempt or make education decisions
based on financially viable options in their communities (Hektner, 1995 p. 3)—a choice that strikes national observers as irrational, according to some researchers (e.g., Bickel, Banks, & Spatig, 1991).

One researcher points out that life aspirations of rural youth are influenced more by family members than those of non-rural youth, and as such, they form aspirations that will allow them to remain closer to home (C. W. Howley, 2006). As implied previously, for some, the aspiration of wanting to remain local includes not pursuing university enrollment, since oftentimes local jobs do not require the credential. To attend a university and obtain a bachelor’s degree would be impractical in this sense.

Discussion turns next to more specific considerations and influences that affect the decisions of working-class and first-generation in the United States as they consider the path that higher-education policy and cultural norms have invited them to follow.

**First-generation working-class contexts.** For many students, the decision to pursue post-secondary education occurs after careful consideration and well before entry into a university, as most students formulate their plans in early to late high schools educational plans between eighth and tenth grades (Hossler & Stage, 1987). By 12\textsuperscript{th} grade, a much smaller percentage of first generation individuals (53\%) expected to earn a college degree compared to their counterparts (90\%) (Choy, 2011). According to at least one report, first-generation students have reported receiving less encouragement and support or have often been discouraged from attending college (Choy, 2001). In short, the children whose parents lack the credential are less likely to aspire to college attendance, and less likely to receive support if they do.
Many studies substantiate Ishitani’s (2001) findings that first-generation college students may be at greatest risk for dropping out during their first academic year (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Ishitani, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Quinn, 2004). Such findings are logical since the first year is the sharpest cultural shock for most students, though it would be especially sharp, as the literature suggests, for working-class college students (see below). Students who are from the largely rural Appalachian region who are also first-generation students might, of course, predictably experience additional risks.

**Appalachian contexts.** Much of the research on first-generation college students focuses on the influences related to either accessing or persisting in higher education. Little empirical, qualitative research exists on higher education students from the Appalachian region, however.

Ali and McWhirter (2006) assert that individuals from rural Appalachia are a “distinct cultural group” (p.3). They often experience marginalization from conventional culture in the United States (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004) and are often stereotyped as ignorant, lazy, undereducated, and unemployed (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). The stereotypes of "redneck", “hick”, and "hillbilly" still influence how the American mainstream regards people of Appalachian culture (Backman, 1990; Bailey, 1997; Biggers, 2006; Hartigan, 1997; Obermiiler, 1999), yet many Appalachian people consider themselves as members of a distinct and legitimate cultural community (Biggers, 2006; Eller, 1994; Jones, 2002). Nonetheless, the dismissive stereotypes persist, and much of this rural area struggles with widespread and persistent poverty (deMarrairs, 1998).
In this light, both legitimate cultural identity and related commitments (e.g., preference to remain close to family and community) as well as dismissive stereotyping influence the sorts of work that Appalachian students pursue. Rural Appalachian youth also contend with the suspicion of local people about the supposed value and need for higher education as necessary for meaningful employment (Ali & McWhiter, 2006; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Neither the national economy, nor the prerogatives of the national educational system, some observers argue, have served Appalachians very well (e.g., DeYoung, 1995; Eller, 2008; Gaventa, 1980). For this reason, one might argue, native Appalachians remain comparatively suspicious of formal schooling—and with arguable justification (DeYoung 1995; Woodrum, 2004).

The Decision to Attend College and Challenges to Consider

Many Appalachian students, in light of the conclusions of the foregoing literatures, confront a quandary when considering higher education. A variety of issues are relevant as inhabitants of Appalachia, and as first-generation, and they will be examined, in turn, below: (1) social relationships, including assimilation skills; (2) academic preparedness and the value of education; and (3) financial constraints (cost of university education). These issues affect all students in some fashion, but, for rural working-class Appalachian families, and their first-generation degree aspirants, each issue embeds additional challenges based on the nuances of Appalachian culture and status.

Social relationships. Batteau (1991) studied the culture of Appalachians and contends that “close, social relationships form in rural, mountain communities” (87).
These relationships harbor great importance for Appalachian people and there are based on family associations meaning for those born and raised in rural Appalachia, and are based on family associations, both immediate and extended, and entrain strong connections to place, religion, and an identity that is tenable in a common history.

According to McDonough (adopting Bourdieu’s term) different social classes develop “habiti” (everyday practices) that may cause individuals to want to go to places more like where they live.

In general, the transition from home to a university campus may often be an isolating experience for students, especially if the student’s family network is not supportive of the student’s choice to attend higher education (Tinto, 1993). Hektner (1995) determined that the internal conflict over whether to stay in the local area or to leave was greater for rural students than for non-rural students. Perhaps such conflicts are more intense still for working-class Appalachian students and their families; “familism” is a construct that sociologists sometimes apply to the Appalachian outlook (e.g., Crissman, 1989).

Due to the rural locations of most families in Appalachia, attending the university often means either traveling long distances to reach the nearest university or moving out of the local area entirely. For many students, leaving home can be an exciting time, but for working-class Appalachian students, this process often can be a difficult, lonely experience—especially if the family doesn’t condone the student leaving home for college (Egan, 1993).
Howley, Harmon, and Leopold (1996) studied gifted, rural, Appalachian students who aspired to higher education. They found that these students often faced a difficult dichotomy – the desire to obtain a university degree (and presumably eventual professional employment) and the desire to remain close to family and the rural community. The “push” from their discontent with their rural communities and the “pull” of the more urban environment was experienced more strongly for this group than for less academically talented students from Appalachia (Howley et al., 1996). Other studies also describe this “place-bound” characteristic among the Appalachian population and found that for many families, going to college meant moving away and therefore, discouraged youth from furthering their education (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Carter & Robinson, 2002).

Most rural Appalachian families fear that their children will leave the area and move “up and out” (Carter & Robinson, 2002). Whereas middle-class families often view the transition to college a rite of passage into adulthood, many first-generation students experience an uneasy, sometimes fearful, experience when making the journey into higher education (Tinto, 1975).

**The assimilation challenge.** As noted previously, scholars have long held that higher education plays a role in social stratification processes (Collins, 1971, 1979; Ladd & Yeskel, 2005; Spring, 1976). Specifically, researchers have investigated the empirical effects of attending college on social class structure and the shifting membership across classes (Baker & Velez, 1996; Karen, 2002; Roska et al., 2007). Many scholars (Bowen et al., 2005; Lubrano, 2004; McMillan & Tate, 1998) agree that even though working-
class students now have greater access to higher education than such students had in
generations past, they do not persist through to graduation at a comparable rate to that of
students from middle-class backgrounds, indicating that perhaps they did not assimilate
into the middle-class norms at the university or were not adequately prepared or
appropriately supported as they navigated the new culture.

Much of the research on first-generation college attendance in the United States,
therefore, addresses the experiences of undergraduate students in baccalaureate programs
(Find more current ones - Choy, 2001; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora,
1996). Many of these working-class college students felt they lacked appropriate social
skills (Brower, 1992; Rodriguez, 2003), and acknowledged they felt less academically
prepared when compared to their middle- and upper-middle-class peers (Berkner &
Chavez, 1997; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Kojaku & Nunez, 1998; Warburton, Bugarin, &
Nunez, 2001),

**Academic preparedness.** The previous subsection considered the difficulties
working-class students confront in their attempts to assimilate into the social culture of
the university, an education quite apart from the official academic one, constituting a
challenge not often required of their middle-class peers. Unfortunately, they confront
additional educational challenges in addressing the official curriculum of coursework and
producing assignments to university standards.

One factor often cited by low-income, first-generation students regarding their
thoughts about attending an institution of higher education is their perception of academic
preparedness. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) studied high school students in rural
Appalachia and determined there were a variety of matters influencing one’s decision to attend college (1) their ultimate educational goals; (2) their high school curriculum; (3) their perceptions of being prepared to handle college coursework; (4) their perceived intelligence; and (5) their comfort level in an educational setting (p.5). According to Attewell and Domina (2008), students with a lower socio-economic status take easier courses.

In a qualitative study conducted by Reid and Moore (2008), first-generation university students described what skills they felt they lacked when they reached the university classroom. A 4.0-GPA student in high school described her sense of preparation for college in comparison to her suburban classmates:

I feel like I was less prepared than those who attended [suburban] schools because they have different resources… They have ACT/SAT preparation. They have a lot of experience dealing with computers…They knew what to expect once they got to college…They already had the opportunity to dissect in a laboratory. We didn’t have the resources to dissect or do anything of that nature in biology class (p.252).

Another student in that study expressed regrets about ill-preparation in high school, claiming that “the school I was at, I literally did nothing” (Reid & Moore, 2008, p. 253). And another student confessed, “I took pre-calculus in high school and they took the same class, but they knew stuff that I still don’t know” (Reid & Moore, 2008. p. 253).

Perceptions of the knowledge and skills taught at the university also influence the decision to pursue higher education. The perceptions of the value and benefit of the
information dispensed at the university and its usefulness was a strong predictor of students’ decisions to attend (Hardre, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009). The liberal arts curriculum required of most baccalaureate programs may dissuade students from attending or persisting at the university as one study revealed that students were more likely to continue at the university if they felt competent and that they were developing skills in a particular area (Hardre, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009).

Lack of academic preparation and interest in the liberal arts may be a serious impediment for those working-class students who decide to pursue higher education, however, financial constraints also ranked high on the list for students entertaining the idea of pursuing higher education.

**Financial constraints.** In addition to difficulties with social assimilation and lack of academic preparation for higher education, many students described financial impediments as significant components contributing to their decision not to attend college (Spohn, Crowther & Lykins, 1992). Tuition costs have risen more quickly than family income, for low-income families and have not kept pace with tuition costs (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Mortenson, 2000).

Originally, the goal of federal financial aid to college students was to expand higher education access to low-income families (Choy & Carroll, 2003; Eitel & Martin, 2009). Although opportunities for funding have expanded and have demonstrated a positive impact on persistence according to some studies (e.g., Baker & Velez, 1996), the result of current policy, according to other researchers, is a *reduction* in outright grants and a relative shift to student debt (Choy & Carroll, 2003). Tuition and fees increases at
institutions, that are not matched by grants (need based) for lower income students are limiting options for these potential students. Given the forgoing analysis, the conclusion to not pursue the university education is rational (Bickel et al., 1991).

In addition, states have shifted traditional need based aid to merit based even though students from the lowest income families may suffer (Mortenson, 2000), and even though students from low-income families demonstrate far more unmet financial need (and far less “merit” than their more academically-prepared and affluent upper-middle-class counterparts [Choy & Carroll, 2003; Eitel & Martin, 2009; Hogarth & Hilgert, 2002]). Working-class, first-generation college students are thus positioned to assume more debt than other students, even though it is a well-substantiated fact that the returns to education vary by class background (Mudge & Swiger, 2008; Stokes & Wright, 2010), so that, even if they complete their studies, working-class students will therefore encounter continued disproportionate burdens after college!

With respect to Appalachian first-generation students, Spohn and colleagues (1992) investigated the influences associated with the rural high school students’ low rates of pursuit of higher education in central Appalachia. They found that the costs connected with college attendance were the major obstacle for students. In comparison to their expectations for income from employment after high school, the opportunity costs of attending college were simply too high.

The following comments from two individuals from the Spohn (1992) study illustrate the importance of pursuing immediate employment rather than higher education:
(first individual) A lot of people that might even be able to go to college have to take care of our parents or help our parents….They can’t afford for us to leave, for having us—helping trying to support things around here. (p. 803).

(second individual) If … I am in college full-time, there’s no way I can work. So who’s going to pay for my truck? Who’s going to pay for all my bills that I have? My parents don’t have extra money to pay. They have extra bills and stuff. (p. 803).

For those who do enroll in college, however, debt management is a condition that influences persistence and completion. Student loans are common for the majority of students attending higher education (Eitel & Martin, 2009); however, one study (Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004) implies that, in general, first-generation students are debt-averse; they avoid accumulating debt at any educational level. This aversion is likely a rational choice, but in some cases it might be due to family experiences of debt or limited knowledge of financial options related to higher education in particular (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Middle-class students benefit from student loans and remain optimistic about repayment when they leave higher education. By contrast, working-class students seem to regard the risk of borrowing jointly with other risk factors (the need to work while taking college courses, inadequate academic preparation, and cultural displacement). Such joint risks put many working-class and low-income students at risk for dropping out and not acquiring the desired credential, thus being stuck with a debt that purchased nothing of value (Gladieux & Perna, 2005).
Higher costs of attending college influence the decision to attend college, but the costs may also have a direct impact on the decisions of many to persist and complete their degrees. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), in 2008, the median income for recent graduates with a bachelor’s degree was $46,000. For a typical, middle-class young adult, it would be difficult to balance such debt with that income level; therefore, it is critical that working-class individuals evaluate whether jobs sufficient to discharge such debt will be widely available, especially if, as many are, they are committed to staying near family and community. It seems an unlikely proposition at best in many parts of Appalachia.

**Conclusion**

Despite extensive searches, I have been unable to find any empirical studies that investigated the experience of rural working-class, Appalachian individuals who attempted to attend the university in pursuit of the bachelor’s degree, but withdrew early in the process, and what they are engaged in currently. In my view, driving all students to acquire a baccalaureate credential is a de facto policy that begs for a segment of the population not to fit, and Appalachian working-class students seem a logical target for such treatment. Quite possibly, for some or many such students, more harm would ensue than if they had ventured out into the world in their own way and on their own authentic terms (see Burnell, 2003, for the nature of such terms). This study aims to recapture the university experience and determine what can be learned from it for the benefit of addressing the prevalent cultural and educational dilemmas documented in this chapter.
Moving forward after perceived failure ("dropping out") may be a daunting task for some; however, this researcher hopes to discover what "life after the university" contains for the rural, first-generation, Appalachian students who leave Ohio University during their first academic year.
Chapter Three

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of, rural, working-class, Appalachian students who made the decision to leave Ohio University during or immediately following their freshman year. Previous research with similar types of students has focused on generating strategies to recruit them to college and to retain them once enrolled (Dalton, Moore & Whittaker, 2009; Hand & Payne, 2009; Heldman, 2008; Kather, 2010; Wilson & Gore, 2009). Few studies, by contrast, have investigated students’ experiences of leaving a university and the events in their lives following that decision.

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What were the experiences of first-year, first-generation, working-class, Appalachian students who did not persist during the time period they attended the university?
2. How did these students conceptualize the connection between their college experiences and their decision to leave the university within or after the first year of attendance?
3. What are the former students doing now that they are no longer attending the university full-time?

Methodology

Research in the social sciences, which focuses on the study of human beings with their complex, changeable, and malleable minds and social arrangements, confronts a range of important questions about reality and truth. Understanding how a social science
researcher views reality and truth is important because it helps explain that researcher’s choices about relevant research questions and appropriate research methods.

In general, for instance, social scientists that use quantitative methods base their work on commitments to what some philosophers and scientists call the “positivist perspective” on reality and truth (Bloomberg, 2007; Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). This perspective relies on a realist view of the world which posits as a fundamental assumption the claim that social phenomena, like physical phenomena, exist independently from humans and operate according to predictable rules (Guba, 1989). Often construing the social world in terms of cause and effect relationships, these social scientists attempt to surface value-free propositions about the mechanisms that control human behavior. They consider such propositions to represent “truth.”

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), positivism is only one of four philosophical paradigms that typically inform social science research. These authors position the four paradigms along a continuum from realism to constructivism and contend that each paradigm embodies interwoven perspectives on reality, truth, and methods for learning about phenomena in the social world.

The assumptions of the four paradigms differ, explaining and perhaps also supporting the need for varied approaches to research in the social sciences. On one side of the continuum of social-science paradigms is positivism—a perspective based on the belief that an objective reality exists apart from the human beings who perceive it. For positivists, knowledge represents scientists’ best efforts to identify propositions corresponding accurately to external reality.
Adjacent to positivism on the continuum lies post-positivism. Like positivism, this perspective rests on the premise that reality exists apart from the observer, but it differs from positivism in its view of truth. Rather than assuming, as positivism does, that researchers can reveal the direct correspondence between reality and true claims about reality, post-positivism assumes that research offers imperfect tools for describing reality (Kuhn, 1962). Because these tools are imperfect and probabilistic, post-positivists offer contingent claims about truth and open up their contingent claims to doubt. On-going doubt, from this perspective, requires researchers continually to work to falsify truth claims. Post-positivist researchers treat the truth claims that persist in the face of efforts to falsify them as better approximations of the truth than less carefully scrutinized truth claims (Popper, 1959).

Next along the continuum is critical theory—a paradigm that bases its view of knowledge on the assumption that real processes determine social interaction, but that these real processes are often hidden or even purposefully disguised. Seeing value in skepticism in much the same way as post-positivists do, critical theorists direct attention toward what is wrong with particular descriptions of social reality (Horkheimer, 1982). By first uncovering inadequate and misleading truth claims, critical theory opens up the possibility not only for more accurate statements about truth, but also for progressive efforts to improve social reality (Horkheimer, 1982).

On the far end of their continuum, Lincoln and Guba (2000) placed the constructivist paradigm. They saw this paradigm as having the greatest allegiance to the premises of idealism (in contrast to those of realism). For idealists, reality exists in the
mind of the observer (Oxford, 1997). Truth, on this view, rests on subjective perception
or, in some variants, on inter-subjective agreement. A relatively new branch of idealism,
constructivism focuses more on knowledge than on truth. It builds on the insight that
individuals construct knowledge (either primarily within their own minds or primarily
through interaction with a cultural group) using previous knowledge to make sense of

Some authors distinguish between two approaches to constructivism—a conservative,
individualistic approach and a progressive, social constructionist approach (Dewey, 1938;
Elkind, 2005; Foucault, 1998; Piaget, 1932; Schifler & Simon, 1992). My perspective
corresponds most closely to the latter approach, fitting in well with Elkind's (2005)
operational definition of constructivism: "What constructivists argue is that the basis for
accepting what is real and independent of our cognitions is dependent upon social
consensus" (p. 328).

As with constructivism, idealist premises clearly form the basis for a fifth
paradigm, postmodernism, which Lincoln and Guba did not discuss. Perhaps they thought
of postmodernism as a variant of constructivism, but other writers view postmodernism
as sufficiently different from constructivism to warrant its consideration as a separate
perspective (English, 2003; Grogan, 2004).

Like constructivists, postmodern theorists believe that social groups construct
knowledge; like critical theorists, they believe that these groups construct knowledge in
order to exercise political agency. Where postmodern theorists differ from proponents of
these two earlier perspectives is in their claims about scale and fluidity. Notably, they
maintain that the conditions that produce truth and support power relations exist in a complex and dynamic web of personal relationships—not in the exercise of large-scale political forces or pervasive ideas (Best & Kellner, 1989). According to postmodern theorists, this web of relationships supports conditions enabling tyranny to come into existence for given periods of time, but it also supports conditions enabling individuals and groups to resist tyranny. Unlike progressives in the modernist camp (including critical theorists), postmodern theorists do not seek liberation in the form of universal freedoms for people in general. Rather, they imagine a web of particular struggles on behalf of provisional freedoms. Like truth, freedom in the view of postmodern theorists has many definitions depending on the historical time period, the culture, and the interests of individuals and groups within the culture. Just as they define truth as a fluid collection of multiple and competing ideas, so too do they define freedom as contingent, fluid, and largely dependent on ideation (and therefore language). Many progressive critics of postmodern thinking (Haber, 1994; Harvey, 1989; McGowan, 1991), including those who agree with postmodern thinkers that truth is fluid, fault postmodernists for seeing freedom in this relativistic way.

Reviewing these five paradigms in consideration of my own stance as a researcher, I see the greatest alignment with the constructivist views. My own experience suggests that culture influences experience, and experience produces knowledge. Because I grew up in a relatively isolated rural environment where I rarely found myself more than about 30 miles from home, my understanding of the world outside of this circumscribed region was limited. When I left the area to attend a large university in an
urban setting, I evaluated new experiences within the social construction of my rural upbringing. My view of reality was shaped by my tendency to evaluate new experiences at the university in relation to my prior, socially constructed knowledge. This knowledge served as a useful guide to the interpretation of new experiences, but it also imposed limits. Nevertheless, part of my early life experiences involved support for academic exploration. My instructors encouraged me to consider ideas that challenged my assumptions, even when the consideration moved me beyond my comfort zone. This encouragement allowed me to adjust with relative ease to the academic requirements of the university I attended.

My prior experience, however, did not prepare me for interacting with people from different races, ethnicities, and social-class backgrounds. Nor did my prior experience prepare me for interacting with people whose academic abilities exceeded my own.

In the community in which I grew up, all families but one were Catholic, and everyone was White. My parents had always expressed caution when we had traveled to places where we encountered people who were not White. I took this cautious attitude with me to the university. As a freshman, I lived in a dormitory with women of different races and beliefs. My initial interactions with these women and with other people from backgrounds that differed from my own were hesitant, but as I became more acquainted with them and came to appreciate the differences, I began to embrace a more open and accepting attitude.
I had also entered the university believing that my academic abilities were very high. I had ranked in the top five of my graduating high school class. Because of my academic capabilities, my teachers and guidance counselors assumed that I belonged at the university and would thrive in that environment. Nevertheless, when I entered college classrooms, I soon learned that the university enrolled many students with high academic abilities. Whereas once I saw myself as special because of my intelligence, I came to see that many others had talents that equaled or exceeded mine. As a result, I lost confidence in my abilities. I needed to construct a new view about myself in relationship to others.

My study gave me the opportunity to hear from participants stories about how the social construction of phenomena such as “academic rigor,” “intellectual ability,” “high school rank in class,” “educators’ expectations,” and “diversity” influenced decisions regarding college attendance, both the initial decision to attend and the later decision to stop attending. Because this study explored the reality that participants create for themselves in reference to prior cultural assumptions, it fits with some tenets of constructivist thinking as well as some tenets of postmodernist thinking.

According to Bloomberg (2007), constructivist commitments often support the formulation of research questions that are best answered using qualitative methods. Qualitative research tends to be exploratory in nature, helping the researcher understand social phenomena in terms of their meaning to participants or their role in shaping the truths that participants believe.

As noted above, my research questions focused on the meaning that participants construct for themselves through cultural understandings and personal experiences, and
my role as a researcher was to find ways for participants to self-disclose about these experiences and their meaning. These research questions reflected my constructivist perspective and supported the use of a qualitative approach to data gathering and analysis. This approach fits with Merriam’s (2002) description of qualitative research as a method for finding out “how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 38).

Among the various qualitative approaches to social science research, the approach that guided this study most resembles that used by cognitive anthropologists. This approach focuses on the study of the cognitive characteristics of cultural systems (D’Andrade, 1995; Frake, 1969; Goodenough, 1956; Romney, 1999; Tyler, 1969). According to D’Andrade (1995), for example, cognitive anthropology investigates cultural representations that link culture and the operation of the mind. Because my study concerns the sets of meanings that individuals attach to college attendance—meanings that come from their participation in Appalachian culture—it provided insight into how that culture shapes thinking about identity, accomplishment, and self-worth. Not only did the study reveal patterns among a group of individuals, it also suggested commonalities in thinking that reflect life in Appalachian culture.

In keeping with the constructivist and culturist views of knowledge as contingent and often contested, I pursued the investigation with an open mind and an attitude of humility. These dispositions lead me to treat the study as exploratory and its findings as tentative. In keeping with the view that not all responses to particular questions should or would be similar for each participant from a particular culture (Romney, 1999), I
considered the narrative provided by each participant as reflective of individual sense-making as well as cultural sense-making. This approach enabled me to distinguish, at least provisionally, between coincidental patterns and commonly held cultural beliefs (Frake, 1969)—a distinction that helped me guard against stereotyping.

Methods

This section describes how I conducted this research study. Discussion in this section treats the following issues: (1) research design, (2) participants, (3) the sequence of interviews, (4) the characteristics of effective open-ended interviews, (5) field notes, (6) data collection and organization, and (7) data analysis.

Research design. This study was exploratory in nature because it sought an understanding of each participant’s reasons for leaving the university and how his or her reasons fit with broader personal and cultural meanings. Exploratory research seeks preliminary understandings of social phenomena that have not been studied in detail (Krueger, 1994). This type of research is useful for theory building, but does not support hypothesis testing (Krueger, 1994). Moreover, precisely because exploratory research seeks a fuller understanding of an ill-defined domain, qualitative methods are often appropriate (Creswell, 2002; Flick, 2002; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006; Merriam, 2002).

In keeping with the aims of the study, I relied on face-to-face and Skype interviews with the participants as the primary method of data collection. I used the Dolbeare and Schuman (Schuman, 1982) three-interview model, as described by Seidman (1998). Using this model, researchers sequence three interviews with study participants as a way to gain a deep understanding of how their experiences relate to the issue under
investigation. The first interview in the sequence focused on the life history of the participant, the second focused on those participant experiences with the greatest salience to the research question, and the third asked the participant to reflect on the meaning of his or her experiences.

**Participants.** This study sought to interview people who may be difficult to locate (because universities may be less interested in maintaining contact with dropouts as compared, for example, to alumni). Furthermore, in American society, “dropping out” is generally regarded as a failure, and, therefore, a cause of shame.

Potential subjects who are not readily accessible for interviewing are referred to as hard-to-reach populations (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Several sources, particularly in anthropological, sociological, and medical research, describe the difficulty in locating “hard-to-reach” participants for research (Besculides, Trebino, & Nelson, 2012; Cortis, 2012; Issel, Forrestal, Wheatley; Slaughter & Schultz, 2011; Weiss, 1994).

Most sources advise the use of key informants and snowball sampling to develop access (Besculides, Trebino & Nelson, 2012; Cortis, 2012; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Issel, Forrestal, Wheatley & Schultz, 2011; Weiss, 1994). This study used both techniques.

Weiss (1994) described a process to recruit potential participants through the use of key informants as one device that increases the likelihood of reaching individuals from difficult to reach populations. He described the employment of key informants as a device to develop relationships with an orienting figure when there is a mutual friend or acquaintance (Weiss, 1994).
Key informants provided an initial pool of contacts for this study. Key informants included members of the local community, colleagues working with similar students and families, and acquaintances familiar with Appalachian, first-generation, first-year students, who were non-persisters. By Appalachian, I mean students from across the Appalachian region as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (2011). I located key informants through my everyday actions with colleagues, friends, acquaintances that I came into contact with in restaurants, physician’s offices and other places that I frequented. I preferred to conduct the series of three interviews in a face-to-face mode; however, some of the participants suggested and preferred to conduct the interviews via Skype. In the interest of building rapport and being accommodating, those interviews were conducted over Skype and recorded with appropriate software.

I arranged interviews with all individuals nominated by key informants, a measure that also helped maintain my credibility with key informants (Weiss, 1994). Actual participants did not, in fact, exhibit all attributes, but the key story pertains to this domain, and individuals who did not match the main storyline provided stories that nonetheless helped to illuminate it more fully.

I approached potential key informants by explaining my study and asking if they knew individuals with the sorts of experiences and characteristics of interest to the study. I asked for referrals of individuals they knew who met the criteria for participation. In addition, I asked the key informants to mention my interest in speaking with the referred individual regarding their perspectives on their first-year experience and seek permission to provide me with their contact information.
After I obtained the referral information from the key informant, I got in touch with the referred individual using the contact method provided (i.e. email, phone numbers). I introduced myself, mentioned the mutual relationship with the key informant, described the purpose of my study and verified that the individual exhibited qualifications relevant to the study (e.g., first-generation Appalachian who left higher education within the first year of attendance).

**Snowball sampling.** Snowball sampling is a method in which the researcher collects data on members of the goal population she can locate, then asks those individuals to provide referrals to locate other members of that study population whom they know (Babbie, 2001).

Some qualitative research includes populations that are difficult to locate (e.g. drug addicts, homeless people, individuals with HIV or AIDS) due to some type of social stigma, behavior or aspect that makes them socially marginalized (Besculides, Trebino & Nelson, 2012; Goodman, 2011; Sadlert, Lee, Lim & Fullerton, 2010). College dropouts may be considered socially marginalized since they did not meet the presumed national goal of obtaining a bachelor’s degree and be less likely to want to identify themselves; therefore, snowball sampling was also an appropriate research method when studying this population.

I used snowball sampling in conjunction with key informants to access potential participants for my study. After I interviewed the individual referred to me by a key informant, I asked him or her to help me identify others with experiences similar to their own (snow-balling).
Collecting data through interviews. Interviewing is one way to explore the meanings that participants attach to their experiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Kvale, 1996; Lincoln & Guba; 2000; McCracken, 1988; Rubin & Rubin, 1995, 2012; Spradley, 1979). Qualitative methodologists talk about two kinds of open-ended interviews—unstructured and semi-structured interviews – both of which seek a deep understanding of an event or phenomenon. In particular, both unstructured and semi-structured interviews give participants the opportunity to discuss experiences and what those experiences mean in an extended oral narration; and both approaches can provide researchers with data that has greater breadth, depth, and nuance than typically can be gathered using structured interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Spradley, 1979).

Often used by ethnographic researchers, unstructured interviews tend to take place informally during participant observation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2006). Qualitative researchers whose studies require more focus than ethnographies permit, often use semi-structured interviews, which rely on a limited set of initial questions to help guide the commentary of participants as well as follow-up questions to elicit extended responses as the interviews progress (Kvale, 1996; Miller, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Although semi-structured interviews permit the researcher to establish and maintain focus, they also provide opportunities for interviewers to adjust questions in ways that help participants tell their stories in sufficient depth (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

As indicated previously, I conducted a series of three semi-structured interviews with each participant. Each interview had a different emphasis; therefore, I developed three interview schedules—one to guide each conversation. In the first interview, I sought
to understand the participant’s prior educational experiences and how he or she made the
decision to attend the university. In the second interview, I explored the participant’s
experiences at the university and how he or she made sense of the events associated with
his or her decision to leave the university. The final interview elicited information about
the consequences for the participant of his or her decision to leave the university.

**The sequence of interviews.** Although each interview in the three-interview
sequence had a different focus, taken together the information from the three interviews
provided a detailed picture of each individual’s experience of deciding to attend college,
actually attending college, and then deciding to leave college. In addition, the stories that
the interviews elicited provided insights into how the participants made sense of their
transitions from high school to adult life within the context of Appalachian communities.

In the first interview with each participant, I attempted to build rapport and then
asked questions relating to his or her pre-college educational experiences. I created a
friendly, but business-like ambiance by starting the interview with a few general
questions about the participant’s background (e.g., questions about his or her current
place of residence, birth place, and so on). Then, I moved onto questions that allowed me
to understand the participant’s background (e.g., For how many generations has your
family lived in this area?). Next I asked questions focusing on the participant’s prior
school experiences (e.g., What was your elementary school experience like?). Finally, I
used questions to elicit the participant’s account of why and how he or she decided to
attend an institution of higher education (e.g., When did you start thinking about
college?). I have provided the questions that guided this interview in Appendix C.
The second interview delved into specifics about each participant’s first-year university experience, beginning with questions about the participant’s preparations for and expectations about starting college on a residential campus. This interview explored the participant’s academic and social experiences as well as the interaction between the norms and expectations of his or her home and community and those of the university. I started this interview with a general question such as “What did you expect college to be like?” Then I asked follow-up and probing questions until the interviewee had provided a detailed picture of his or her expectations of college. Next, I asked about his or her actual experiences in classes, with peers, and with family members during the term(s) when he or she was enrolled. As I followed-up on responses to these questions, I sought to elicit commentary that offers reflections on how those experiences affected the participant’s views about university attendance. Finally, I asked the participant to explain why he or she made the decision to leave the university. The questions that guided the second interview are included in Appendix D.

The final interview considered the participant’s experiences after leaving the university and how his or her college attendance and leave-taking contributed to making sense of adult life within an Appalachian community. In addition to asking each participant to speak about the ways attendance at the university has affected his or her life since leaving and the choices he or she is now making, I also asked questions about life satisfaction, relationships with others, and plans for the future. Seidman (2006) emphasized the value of the third interview for promoting the types of reflection that encourage participants to explore past experiences in order to clarify the linkages
between their life stories and their current choices and circumstances. In Appendix E, I have included the questions that I used to guide the third interview.

**Characteristics of effective interviews.** Qualitative interviews, unlike many ordinary conversations, involve interactions between strangers; therefore, interviewers need to use certain techniques in order to increase the likelihood that the stranger (i.e., the interviewee) will provide accurate and detailed information that is pertinent to the research question. Rubin and Rubin (2012) refer to the interviewing process as a “conversation partnership” with a stranger (p. 7) —a partnership that requires the interviewer to establish rapport, provide structure, ensure psychological safety and protect confidentiality, and encourage the participant’s sustained engagement.

An important set of techniques that interviewers use functions to assure that participants feel comfortable during their interviews (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 1995, 2012; Seidman, 2006; Spradley, 1979). Establishing rapport is the first step toward making the interviewee comfortable (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, 2012).

According to some researchers, the process of establishing and maintaining rapport is particularly important in interviews that ask individuals to talk about their cultures (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Spradley, 1979). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) advised that efforts to maintain rapport depend on the interviewer’s ability to “fit in” with the interviewee’s culture; so the interviewer’s appearance, speech, and behavior must be acceptable to the participant. As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) commented, rapport is “tantamount to trust, and trust is the foundation for acquiring the fullest, most accurate disclosure a respondent is able to make” (p. 79). Smiling and showing interest in what
each participant is saying help interviewers build rapport and elicit deeper responses (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

I structured each interview using Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) guidelines for exploratory studies. These researchers characterized semi-structured interviewing as a process of “opening the floodgates” (p. 123) by using a few general questions to encourage the participant to talk about relevant experiences. In response to general questions of this type, participants impose their own meanings on the experiences of interest to the researcher. Sometimes what they talk about differs from what the researcher expects, and this outcome, though perhaps disconcerting, provides insights about the character of the participants and their ways of thinking about their experiences.

These research methodologists, however, also acknowledge that in some cases initial comments from participants do not respond closely enough to the questions of most interest to a researcher. Therefore, interviewers often react to these initial comments by posing follow-up questions that seek more detailed information about the stories and examples that the participant shared in response to a broadly focused interview question. The answers to follow-up questions often provide the depth, richness, and nuance that help the researcher understand the participant’s experience thoroughly and reconstruct that experience credibly during the data analysis and interpretation phase of the research process.

Researchers typically develop follow-up questions in advance of their interviews; but sometimes they need to create follow-up questions during the interview itself. This type of question is sometimes referred to as a “prompt” or “probe” (Corbetta, 2003).
Prompts may be “questions, comments, or gestures” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 118) that the researcher uses to encourage the participant to keep talking about something. Probes may ask for an additional idea, clarification, or example; or they might steer a conversation back to the research topic by encouraging the participant to provide more information about a particular issue that he or she mentioned earlier in the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Moments of silence are also an important part of the interview, typically occurring after the interviewer poses a question to the participant. Silence allows the participant to reflect on the question: he or she is likely to break the silence when ready to respond. Participants tend to find long silences uncomfortable and usually begin talking in order to fill the silence (Seidman, 2006). During those times and because of the value of silence, I waited patiently after posing a question. Instead of continuing to talk, I used nods, smiles, and body language to encourage the participant to respond (see e.g., Seidman, 2006).

Another technique for increasing the effectiveness of interviews is active listening—an approach that supports participants’ efforts to share their stories by demonstrating interest in what they are saying. According to Seidman (2006, p. 84), the first principle of interviewing is “Listen more; talk less.” Except for asking questions, many qualitative methodologists recommend that the interviewer remain nearly silent throughout the entire conversation (e.g., Rubin & Rubin, 1996, 2012).

Unlike the kind of active listening that occurs in a therapeutic setting, active listening in a qualitative interview uses fewer verbal prompts and more prompts that
involve body language (Weiss, 1995). My approach to active listening entailed making eye contact, leaning in toward the participant, asking follow-up questions, and repeating the participant’s words when framing probes and prompts in response to something he or she said (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2006). Responding with short phrases such as, “go on” or “tell me more” is one approach for remaining engaged with what the participant is saying.

According to some methodologists, the way narratives are told, not just the literal meaning of the words used, also may reveal what the participant is trying to emphasize or hide (e.g., Rubin & Rubin, 2012). How he or she tells the story often suggests the participant’s view of causation or the complexity of a situation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For this reason, among others, it was important that I listened carefully for the tacit meanings that each participant communicates through the characteristics of his or her storytelling. According to some methodologists, such meanings may point to deeply held cultural beliefs or values (e.g., Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Also, following guidance from qualitative methodologists, I attempted to communicate a neutral stance during each interview in an effort to keep my behavior from influencing the responses of participants (e.g., Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2006). Of course, as Rubin and Rubin have argued, researchers inevitably bring their own personalities, knowledge, and cultural experiences to the research process (p. 17). Nevertheless, I tried to limit my influence on the process by maintaining a calm and supportive demeanor throughout the interviews and accepting graciously whatever
Field notes. To record possible contextual influences on the interviewing process and outcomes, researchers often develop field notes following each interview (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). While conducting a face-to-face interview, for example, the interviewer can observe events in the setting that might have an influence on the content of the interview. The interviewer can also observe the participant’s appearance, demeanor, and body language. With telephone interviews fewer such observations are possible.

Because I conducted both face-to-face and telephone interviews, I used field notes only when I had something of interest to record such as an event that seemed unusual or out of place in the interview setting, words or phrases subvocalized by a participant, or repeated references to a particular person or situation. Although sometimes field notes are sketchy—just a few words to remind the researcher of what he or she observed, I used a more detailed narrative approach to recording relevant information.

I wrote up the descriptive field notes as soon as was practicable after an interview, recording details that helped me remember or visualize the participant, the interview setting, and any pertinent events (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). I kept all field notes in one electronic file. I reread the field notes from the first interview with a participant before conducting the second interview with him or her and reread field notes from both the first and second interviews before conducting the third. I reviewed field notes as part of the
data analysis process, particularly when I checked to see how strongly the actual data supported potential emergent themes,

**Reflective journal.** Sometimes, I needed to reflect on comments made by participants, particularly comments to which I found myself having an emotional reaction. Some methodologists recommend using a reflective journal in order to record memos or comments of this type (Clarke, 2005; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lichtman, 2006; Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Ortlipp, M, 2008). In addition, researchers sometimes use their reflective journals to keep track of emerging ideas about what the data mean (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lichtman, 2006; Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Ortlipp, 2008; Saldana, 2009)

I used a reflective journal to accomplish both of these purposes by using my smartphone to keep reflective notes of this type and then transferring those notes to a file on my computer. I used password protection for the messages on my smartphone and the file on my computer so that only I could access my reflections about the study.

**Data Collection and Organization**

The interviews were conducted at times and places or methods that were convenient for them. Some of the interviews were face-to-face and others were via Skype.

**Recording and transcription of interviews.** According to Creswell (2002), interviewers need to follow careful plans for recording and transcribing interviews. In particular, interviewers should be sure to use functional equipment and to follow consistent procedures for downloading, storing, and labeling audio files from interviews
(Creswell, 2002). Interviewers also should consider transcription to be the first stage of the data analysis process (Seidman, 2006).

For the recording of interviews, I used two or sometimes three audio recording devices as a fail-safe arrangement in case of mechanical failure or researcher error: a digital voice recorder, smartphone application or a recording application for Skype interviews.

In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, I assigned pseudonyms to each participant when he or she agreed to participate in the study. I developed a code sheet for myself so that I knew which pseudonym referred to which participant. With the exception of that document, no other document or file contained or can be identified using a participant’s name.

I saved copies of the audio files and transcripts in a password-protected computer file in my home office and in the “cloud” using the software program Idrive to store and encrypt the data. I kept hard copies of relevant documents (e.g., signed consent forms, printed copies of field notes) in locked files within my home office. I plan to destroy these electronic and paper recordings and documents once I have completed this study and published its findings.

As Seidman (2006) claimed, transcription should be the responsibility of the researcher because transcription enables the researcher to revisit the interview and reflect on its content and emotional tone. In a sense, transcription provides the first step in the process of data analysis. Following Seidman’s advice, therefore, I diligently transcribed the interviews myself as soon as possible after their completion.
Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis allows researchers to process and make sense of the large amounts of data they collect through interviews and observations. Data analysis provides researchers with opportunities to draw valid conclusions from qualitative data through a progressive process of sorting, categorizing, and looking for patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Creswell, 2002; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Seidman, 2006).

Based on recommendations from several qualitative methodologists, I used a multi-step process for analyzing the interview data and field notes from this study. First, I gained a global understanding of what the transcripts said by reading all of them and bracketing or highlighting interesting material. Next, I went back to the transcripts for each participant and created a profile characterizing his or her story.

Once I completed the profiles for all participants, I used analytic matrices to identify similarities and differences across participants. I returned to the data that I originally bracketed and selected all passages that related to each important commonality and difference that I had identified in the matrices. Following this process of selecting categorized quotes from the transcripts and field notes, I used inductive coding to distinguish relevant concepts within each set of categorized quotes. Lastly, I examined the structures of codes within categories and reviewed quotes that did not fit the structure (i.e., outliers) to identify emergent themes. Below, I describe how I conducted each of these steps in greater detail.
Initial reading of the transcripts. I began formal analysis of the interview data once I had conducted and transcribed all of the interviews. That approach allowed me to concentrate on collecting and transcribing the before turning to the work of data analysis.

As an initial step in the process of data analysis, I read through all of the interview transcripts and field notes in order to remind myself of their content and identify the content that seems most important (see e.g., Creswell, 2002; Seidman, 2006). Following Seidman’s (2006) advice, I placed all relevant passages in brackets and used markers to highlight them as I engaged in this careful first reading of the data (see also Marshall, 1981; Mostyn, 1985). Through this process of selecting relevant text, I created a data set that was both more manageable and more closely focused on my research question (see e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1984). Because I did not want to remove any data with potential relevance to the study, I excluded from brackets only those data that were clearly tangential to the study’s focus.

Profiles of participants. Using a procedure that Seidman (2006) described, I produced a profile of each participant by first compiling all of the bracketed data from his or her interviews (and related field notes) into one electronic file. I then used that data to develop a summary of what is most important to that participant. Following each generalization about the participant, I included all quotes supporting that generalization.

Analytic matrices. Once the profiles were developed, I looked for commonalities and differences in the information shared by participants and created initial categories. I treated the category labels as tentative at this stage. On-going work with the data over the course of the analysis enabled me to determine the best words or
phrases to use for the eventual name of each category. Later in the data analysis process, I determined if some categories could be combined or discarded in order to make better sense of the data (Seidman, 2006).

Next, I constructed a matrix listing the categories on one axis and the participants’ names on the other (see Miles & Huberman, 1984; Seidman, 2006). In the cells of the matrix, I included the quotes that revealed the salience of each category to each participant (see e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1984).

I clustered the categories into three groups—categories that were highly salient, those that were partially salient, and those that were not very salient. Organizing the categories in this way allowed me to identify categories that made sense of data from most participants, those that made sense of data for distinct subsets of participants, and those that were unique to individual participants. My expectation was that by comparing the categories in this way, I would be able to see larger patterns within the categories and, through this process, identify emergent themes (see e.g., Creswell, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 2006), which is what occurred.

**Coding.** The next step in the data analysis process was coding. Coding involved organizing the data in conceptual units that are smaller than categories. With the sequence of analysis steps I chose to use, I coded all of the bracketed data category by category. First, I coded the data within one category, then the data in the next category, and so on. When I found that I was using the same codes in two or more categories, I reviewed the quotes in those categories to determine if those categories should either be merged or linked conceptually. This approach to coding represented an adaptation of the
advice provided by various methodologists (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1984; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2006; Wolcott, 1994).

Once the coding for the most salient categories had been completed, I continued the coding process by locating and coding the data in the less salient categories (i.e., the categories that are partially salient and those that are not very salient), looking for information related to subsets of participants and noting similarities and differences across individual participants. Throughout that process I remained attentive to the patterns that inconsistent or contradictory data (Seidman, 2006).

**Analysis of outliers.** Several researchers (Kvale, 1996; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Rowan, 1981; Seidman, 2006) talked about the importance of treating carefully any data that seem contradictory or inconsistent. Rowan (1981) and Seidman (2006), for example, advised researchers not to force a participant’s words into a particular category or to exclude material that does not seem to fit into an emerging analytical scheme. Instead, these researchers recommended using material that seemed contradictory or inconsistent to determine if an individual’s perspective or a specific event actually fell outside of the set of emerging patterns or if the analytic scheme was too rigid to accommodate nuanced illustrations of an already existing category or theme. As Onwuegbuzie and Leech (1997, p. 242) noted, analysis of possible outliers is a valuable exercise because it “strengthen[s] conclusions by testing the generalities of findings.”
Reexamining the categories to identify emergent themes. Once I completed the coding within categories, I re-examined the categories to determine if (1) they were sufficiently inclusive, (2) they mostly incorporated different codes, and (3) their names reflected their content. I also compared the categorized data with the outliers to make sure that excluded quotes did not represent nuanced representations of an idea implicit in a category.

Using the final set of categories I developed, I drew a concept map to show relationships among categories. Once I was satisfied with the accuracy of the concept map, I drilled down to the level of codes within categories to expand it. Then using the expanded concept map, I identified the patterns or categories that represented emergent themes—that is, the claims that explained trends or relationships in the data set. I reread all of the data that belonged to a potential theme and all outlier data to test the fit between the initial set of emergent themes and the data. I considered the fit to be good when the set of emergent themes explained the data by (1) incorporating most of it and (2) clearly establishing a basis for distinguishing outlier data from data that fits the analytic scheme.

Credibility

In a general sense, a study’s credibility relates to the degree to which its findings can be treated as true (Creswell, 2002; Lichtman, 2006) and measure what you intend to measure. Systematic procedures for establishing the credibility of studies came from theoretical considerations of the study designs that would improve the likelihood that findings from experiments would represent the truth. With respect to experiments in
social science fields, some researchers believe that the truth of greatest importance relates to cause and effect (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Although many studies in the social sciences (including education) are not experiments, efforts to ensure the credibility of studies are still important. In quantitative studies, validity concerns center around how the design of an experiment or correlational study can enable researchers to draw accurate inferences from the data collected and analyzed (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). According to Creswell (2002), study credibility even pertains in some ways to qualitative studies.

Much of what is written about credibility relates to features of study design that work to reduce threats to credibility (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). Campbell and Stanley (1963) described 12 threats to credibility including history, maturation, testing, instrumentation, statistical regression, selection bias, attrition or experimental mortality, selection interactions, testing-treatment interactions, selection-treatment interaction, reactive effects or situational effects, and multiple treatment effects. Since the publication of this original list, methodologists (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Kirk & Miller, 1986; Erickson, 1989) have continued to add to and qualify the threats described by Campbell and Stanley.

The purpose of study design was to develop research methods that minimize threats to credibility (Creswell, 2009). According to Creswell (2009), certain research methods work to minimize some of these threats. For example, random assignment of participants to the different groups in an experiment helps researchers address the threats of selection bias, statistical regression, and attrition (Creswell, 2009).
As noted above, quantitative studies that are not experiments also face credibility threats, and researchers look for ways to minimize these threats through design features (Creswell, 2002; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Shadish, Cooke & Campbell, 2002). Some researchers, for example, have considered ways to design correlational studies with the strong likelihood of supporting valid inferences (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Creswell, 2002). Incorporating control variables is one way to address the threat associated with possible confounding variables (Creswell, 2009).

In general, methodologists talk about two kinds of study credibility—internal and external validity.

According to Cook and Campbell (1979), internal validity is the degree to which a study design enables one to make a correct inference regarding the causal relationship between two variables in an experiment. In a broader sense, internal validity represents the degree to which the design of any research study allows researchers to make correct inferences from the data they collect and analyze. External validity, by contrast, is the “extent to which the results of a study can be generalized to groups of people other than those participating in the study” (Bracht & Glass, 1968). External validity concerns generalizability across population groups, settings, times, outcomes, and treatment variations (Creswell, 2009).

**Internal validity.** Drawing parallels to the sort of internal validity that quantitative methodologists (e.g., Campbell & Stanley, 1963) talk about, some researchers (Creswell, 2002; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1986) have described ways to increase the *internal validity* of qualitative studies. They propose
several techniques that help researchers increase the likelihood that the inferences they make from the data are accurate. In this study I used three frequently recommended techniques for improving internal validity: prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, and member-checking.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1986), prolonged engagement requires substantial involvement at the data collection phase of a study as a way for the researcher to keep from distorting what he or she observes and hears. Prolonged engagement allows the researcher to build sufficient rapport with participants to gain their trust (Creswell, 2009; Guba, 1989). And participants who trust a researcher are more likely to tell their stories fully and honestly (Creswell, 2009; Guba, 1989). Prolonged engagement also enables the researcher to understand the context—including, in some cases, the culture—that helps make sense of the experiences that participants report (Creswell, 2009).

My research design incorporated prolonged engagement by involving each participant in a series of three interviews. This approach gave me time to build rapport with each participant over a period of several weeks or months.

A second strategy for ensuring internal validity involves efforts to disclose negative cases (often called “outliers”) or data that appear inconsistent with the predominant findings of a study (Guba, 1989). Guba (1989) explained negative case analysis as the process of revisiting an initial set of working themes and revising them until the analysis accounts for trends across all cases in a data set. Kidder’s (1981) perspective on negative case analysis is less demanding than Guba’s in that it permits
outliers to exist alongside explanatory themes. In other words, with Kidder’s method, the researcher acknowledges outliers but does not need to find explanatory claims broad enough to incorporate them. For Kidder, a study’s set of explanatory claims (i.e., statements of patterns or themes in the data) needs to account for most of what participants reveal about their experiences or a cultural phenomenon, but not all of it. Descriptions of outliers should, however, accompany the description of themes (or patterns). Using Kidder’s (1981) approach, I carefully examined any data that seemed contradictory or inconsistent to determine if my themes were too narrow or if the data pointed to the existence of a true outlier.

My final approach for ensuring the study’s internal validity was to use the process of “member checking.” Lincoln and Guba (1989) referred to member checking as “the single most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 239). Member checking involves testing summaries of data from particular participants or emerging interpretations of data from a group of participants by verifying preliminary analyses with the participants who supplied the data. The process may be formal or informal and often occurs continuously throughout the collection and analysis stages (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). By verifying information with the participants, the researcher is able to correct errors in his or her decisions about the most important patterns in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Member checking also offers the participant a chance to clarify specific information, add more detail, or elaborate on points made in the original interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).
I conducted member checks with the participants after I developed each participant’s profile. I arranged to share the profile via an email exchange with the participant and shared the profiles with the participants. Only one participant responded to their profile and that individual corrected a small error in the manuscript which did not have any bearing or influence on the data.

**External validity.** As with internal validity, the notion of external validity, which concerns the applicability of research findings to people, situations, or events other than those investigated in a particular study, is a concern that researchers address when they design quantitative studies. Some researchers, however, see parallels between external validity and what they term the “external credibility” of qualitative studies (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Ryen & Weil, 2008). Presenting full and detailed descriptions (referred to as rich, thick description by Geertz, 1973), corroborating information from multiple sources (e.g., both observations and interviews) or multiple researchers—that is, using the technique known as triangulation\(^1\), and comparing emergent themes with findings from prior research are some strategies used to improve the external validity of qualitative research (Creswell, 2002; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

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\(^1\) According to several researchers (Creswell, 2002; Denzin, 1997; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), triangulation can be used to improve both the internal and the external credibility of qualitative studies. This technique involves the incorporation of multiple sources of data (e.g., interviews, observations, and artifacts), multiple researchers, or multiple data analysis procedures. I will triangulate across data sources to a limited extent in an effort to improve internal credibility. Except for consulting with my dissertation chair and methodologist, however, I will not incorporate formal procedures for triangulating across researchers or data analysis methods.
Because generalizability is not a significant goal of this type of research, researchers tend to offer fewer strategies for improving the external validity of qualitative research than they do for improving its internal validity (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Yin, 2003). Nevertheless, some qualitative methodologists see a need to identify and address potential threats to external validity (Creswell, 2009). According to Creswell (2009), for example, the external validity of a qualitative study is likely to be compromised when participants are selected to reflect a narrow set of characteristics or when the phenomenon under investigation is unique to a particular context or time period (Creswell, 2009). Of course, the purpose of some qualitative research is to tell the story of a unique group of individuals, a specific context, or a specific time period (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

With this study, my design produced findings that resonated with individuals. In order for readers to determine its applicability, I reported my findings using rich, thick description. In my reporting of findings, I also provided a description of the types of communities in which my participants lived and the colleges that they attended during their freshman year. By using these approaches, I will help readers determine if the participants in my study resemble individuals or groups of students whom they know and to whom findings might apply. These approaches will also help readers compare and contrast their communities and workplaces with those of the participants in the study.

One way that I tried to ensure that I reported thick descriptions in the final report was to produce participant profiles that were thorough and detailed. Therefore,
when I wrote the profiles, I supported summary statements with relevant quotes as well as relevant excerpts from my field notes and observations.

**Limitations**

Limitations are possible weaknesses of a study’s design that may affect the validity of its findings (Creswell, 2002). Researchers should acknowledge the limitations of a study in order to inform readers of the strength of the evidence supporting its findings and conclusions, thereby giving them a guide to the credibility of its results (Creswell, 2002). They should also acknowledge its limitations so that other researchers who might want to conduct a similar study are aware of the likely consequences of particular design features and can find ways to improve upon the original design (Creswell, 2002). Although researchers try to reduce the limitations associated with their research designs, even studies with significant limitations can provide a beginning point for investigating an issue, although, of course, their findings should not be considered definitive (Babbie, 2010).

One limitation of this study may be researcher bias—a circumstance that inevitably results from the fact that, like any researcher, I bring to the study certain assumptions, perceptions, and values. For example, as I mentioned previously, I was a first-generation, working-class college student who left an isolated rural, environment for a residential university setting. My personal history will no doubt influence such features of the research as (1) the way I frame the research question, (2) my stance toward participants, and (3) the way I interpret the data. To reduce the threat of researcher bias, however, I kept a reflections journal in which I recorded my thoughts
and musings about the research. In journal entries I continually monitored my perspective in relationship to my observations and emerging interpretations. In addition, the process of member checking provided me with the opportunity to examine the extent to which my own biases may have been affecting how I saw (and therefore portray) participants.

Social desirability bias may also compromise the study’s credibility. According to Toh and associates (2006), social desirability bias results from participants’ need for approval. This need prompts participants to over-report experiences, personal traits, or practices that they believe the researcher thinks are desirable or to under-report experiences, personal traits, or practices that they believe the researcher thinks are undesirable (Bowman & Hill, 2011). Participants may describe positive experiences or share stories about particular events or places on or near campus in an effort to identify with or impress me (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Van Maanen, 1983).

According to some researchers (e.g., Hyman, Cobb, Fledman, Hart, & Stember, 1954; Sennett & Cobb, 1972), participants tend to censor the information they provide when they view a researcher as being from a higher social class than they are. Although I could not directly influence participants’ perceptions of my social class, I attempted to minimize external markers of social class. For example, I wore wear ordinary clothing such as jeans and a sweatshirt (not designer fashions) and no jewelry other than my wedding ring to interviews.
Delimitations

As noted above in the discussion of external validity, the unique character of the settings and participants that qualitative studies examine limits the external validity of their findings (Lichtman, 2006). Theoretical claims (e.g., emergent themes) that are made with respect to one setting or group of participants may or may not apply to other settings or other groups of participants. The participants in this study were rural, Appalachian, and working-class; they were former community college, college or university students who dropped out during or at the end of their first-year of college attendance. Because of the specificity of this group of participants, findings from this study will not be able to be applied directly to other participant groups or other settings. Nevertheless, as discussed above, the use of thick description will allow readers of the study to determine if the experiences of participants in this proposed study resemble those of individuals or groups with which they are familiar or with whom they work.

Ethical Considerations

Social science researchers must conduct studies in a manner that minimizes any potential harm to participants (Lichtman, 2006). Certain standard practices—such as conducting interviews in private, maintaining participants’ confidentiality, and reporting potentially damaging information in ways that disguise participants’ identity—shield participants from potential harm (Creswell, 2009; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Other practices such as obtaining informed consent and keeping raw data in locked files also provide protection to participants. Ohio University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviews all studies.
that involve human subjects to ensure that proper protections are in place. My proposal was accepted and approved by the IRB for study.

**Operational Definitions**

Appalachian student. I will consider a student to be Appalachian if his or her address of residence on the university application for admission is located within one of the 420 Appalachian counties as identified by ARC (2011).

First-generation student. The 1998 Higher Education Act Amendments (1999) considers students “first generation” if neither parent graduated from a four-year college or university or if the student primarily resided with and received support from only one parent who had not earned a baccalaureate degree. Ohio University uses this definition and asks applicants to provide information about their parents’ levels of education. I will use the information on applications to determine whether or not a particular non-returning student is or is not “first generation.”

First-year. I considered students to be in their first year if the number of credit hours for which they have matriculated (either at Ohio University or at another university) does not exceed 48 quarter hours or 30 semester hours.

Middle-class. In this study, I considered middle-class families as those who had at least one parent who attended college.

Traditional-age. For this study, students in higher education are considered traditional age if they are less than 25 years of age when they first entered a post-secondary institution.
Working-class. For the purpose of this study, I equated “first generation” status with “working class” class location because parents who have not attended college rarely hold professional or managerial positions, but rather tend to work as skilled or unskilled laborers.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the methodology I used for my study. It begins with a description of the suppositions on which I based my study and my research questions followed by a review of how various qualitative researchers view reality and truth. In consideration of these different ontological and epistemological paradigms, I discussed my constructivist and post-modernist assumptions followed by a brief description of how my background positioned me in relation to the study.

In the section on methods, I provided an in-depth description of the research design and the methods I used for collecting data. This section presents the approaches I used for selecting participants, conducting a series of three in-depth interviews, and writing field notes, and keeping a reflective journal. Following discussion of data collection, I outlined the steps in the data analysis process. The process involves reading of transcripts, development of individual participant profiles, and using matrices to compare and contrast patterns across participants.

In the last part of the chapter, I described strategies for promoting the internal and external credibility of the study. I explained how several strategies—prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, member-checking, and the use of thick description assisted me in producing a study whose findings are credible and may prove to be
applicable in some ways to other similar groups of participants and other similar settings.

The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of ethical research practices and operational definitions of relevant variables.
Chapter Four

Each participant in this study was a first-generation, first-year former college student from rural Appalachia. As part of my cross-analysis of each participant’s data, I developed profiles that helped me organize and make sense of their stories. Each profile was then shared with the corresponding participant for member checking. The following synopsis of each participant was developed from a combination of the interview, field notes, journal writings, and the impressions in addition to the experiences of this researcher. In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants in this study, the participants’ names have all been changed and the names of the colleges or universities were masked.

Participant Synopses

Joey Anderson summary. Joey Anderson is a 28 year old Caucasian male who works full-time as a natural resources and environmental education agent near a major metropolitan area in Appalachia. He is married and the father of a male toddler.

Background. Joey grew up in a rural farming community, the oldest child of married parents. His father worked in construction and his mother was a homemaker. He has a sister who is 18 months younger than him and who became pregnant when she was in high school. She has since earned her GED. When Joes was two or three years old, his parents purchased an acre of farmland. The family temporarily lived in a trailer on the property while his father cleared the land and built their home upon it. His parents, sister and niece still live in that house. He describes his maternal grandfather as a “military man” who set the expectation that Joey would attend college and not enter the military.
Joey loved living in the country “running in the woods, looking at rocks, digging around in the creek and fishin’ and huntin’ and all that stuff.” He looks back now and appreciates the fact that he could ride his bike around and go to his friends’ homes and spend the night or go camping. He misses living in the area:

I miss it. (chuckles) I live about 15 min. out of [a major city] now when I am outside (at night) it's not completely dark because of all the city lights around and it’s never completely quiet… going back… I really crave to be back in that quiet, almost slower pace, you know? Easier going, you know, you’re driving up and down [the road], and whether you know person [coming] from the other direction or not, you kinda throw your hand up off the steering wheel [in a waving motion] and that’s just what ya do. Yeah, yeah, I miss that. I really, really cherish having grown up in that little setting. And I think what I've done since then has actually tied to it in a way.

**Salient characteristics.** Joey is an outgoing individual who volunteered to participate in this study after hearing about it from another participant. He readily shared his experiences as they related to the questions posed, and he seemed to genuinely enjoy reflecting upon his past. During our conversations, Joey often discussed various relationships with others and his strong sense of values was obvious throughout his answers.

*Relationships.* In each of our conversations, Joey would talk about various individuals that he felt impacted him while growing up and lessons that he learned. He described how he tries to maintain those relationships and has used social media to try to
locate some of the individuals, not only to reminisce about their times together, but to share with them what an impact they have made on him and his decisions in life.

Building and maintaining relationships is a significant part of who Joey is, and these various relationships have helped mold Joey’s views.

*Relationships with family.* Joey described how he felt his parents taught him vital lessons as he was growing up and how now, as an adult, he sees how the lessons he was taught as a child have influenced many of his decisions. He describes how when he was around 13 or 14 years old, he began working with his father in his construction and remodeling business to save money for the future:

…so by the time I was about 13, I was old enough to go work for Dad. But they [his mom and dad], they knew the value of making it a job not a “you’re coming in to work with me cause I need the help.” The work made money [and] to help, so it was, it was 5 bucks an hour, under the table, so I wasn’t being taxed or anything out of it. But every week, he’d make me write down my time and give it to Mom. She’d write me a check that I put in the bank. I think the truck [he wanted to buy when he was 16] might've been 15 hundred bucks or something, but I did it…. I had enough to go to buy the little pickup truck, so it was [what] they, they had in mind all along …that that's (the vehicle) what I'm going to need a couple years, and they weren’t going to just give it to me, though. They were gonna make me work for it, and making it [money] in a couple years’ time versus I had never worked before or they were gonna have to buy me something [to drive]. They knew. They knew how they… they had plan and (chuckles)…
Joey’s maternal grandfather was also an influential part of his life. Joey told me how his grandfather valued higher education and had offered to pay his daughter’s (Joey’s mom) college education, but she had left college to get married (to Joey’s father). The grandfather was now making the same offer to Joey and wanted to make his grandfather proud.

Well from the time I was young my grandfather said he didn’t want me to become a military man. So from a young age, I guess, I thought I was expected to go to college. So even though I didn’t know what I wanted to do, I felt like I had to go. I wanted these people [parents and grandfather] to be proud of me. Grandpa was somebody that getting his seal of approval was just known that that was a good thing. If you could get a degree for yourself then you would get a pat on the back [from him].

Relationships with friends. Joey mentioned three friends that seemed different from his family and how [unwittingly at the time] they exposed him to new things, and shaped his beliefs and impressions.

Mark – Joey met Mark when they were in sixth grade together. Mark had moved with his family into the area from Canada. Mark’s father was a computer programmer, and Joey describes the family as “a really good family.” Mark introduced Joey to things that he had never seen or heard of before (i.e. the word, “eh” tacked onto the end of sentences, British comedy, and comic books). Joey describes himself as “a nerdy kid” and stated that being Mark’s friend was really cool.
Charlie – Joey met Charlie one day when he was riding his four-wheeler into the wooded area near his home. Charlie lived with his dad whom Joey describes as a “rough character with a tough personality who worked at an area farm operation as a mechanic. Charlie began working at the farm and helped Joey get a job there when he was 16. Joey preformed general labors duties, “weed-eating the roadside, working with the cows and running the tractors and (I) thought it was the coolest thing.” Soon, Joey was entertaining the idea of becoming a farmer and running a large operation since he enjoyed the work so much and the opportunity to work outside.

Ron –Ron and Joey became close friends during his first term at the university. Ron was the same age and had gone through the same school system as Joey, but their paths didn’t really cross until they were both in the same class at the local university. Ron was one of only a few African-Americans who lived in the area. Ron and Joey shared an affinity for fishing, so they would often go fishing at the pond on the farm where Joey worked. Later on, Ron began working at the farm, and Joey shares how he felt when the other workers expressed their prejudice:

He was definitely one of the minorities. and in my circle of very agriculture, pretty old-school [individuals] every now and then I would hear a joke or something that would tick me off because you know this guy, [Ron] had become a friend of mine and I was never one to use language that …in that offensive way, but I ran into some of that and it was an awkward…
Education. Joey participated in the gifted program at his school and performed well academically. He stated that he always knew that he would continue his education as he was pushed to go to college by his grandfather.

It [college education] was really pushed by my grandfather who was also a lieutenant colonel in World War II...that P.O.W. and through that whole gamut, and he did not want to see me go that route so...like I...I knew all along that my route was supposed to be to go with, “ you finish high school, go to college, get a job...had he not talked to me about it?... but that would be probably one of the earliest things I really remember [thinking about college].

Joey shared that most of his friends attended the vocational school his Junior and Senior years in high school, he continued at the high school:

A majority of the guys I was hanging...with by then, being the farm kid and the...you know the country kid, like, most of them ended up going the vocational school route, and again with my grandfather, that would never have fly...flown. He knew I was smart enough to not be a vocational school [student] and, you know, don't go straight out of high school [to the workforce], go to college, then into the... to the workforce. . so I went through ...I went through college prep classes, heck, I did some the upper-level college classes, I mean high school classes, but I didn't know any....have any close... no groups of friends within the school.
Joey states that for him, it must have been a last-minute decision to attend the local university after high school as he has no recollection of talking with guidance counselors about the process of applying to the university or registering for classes:

I don't even remember applying for college…or how you see these things about [people] applying to college and getting an acceptance letter and being all excited, or getting a rejection letter and “man, what are we gonna do now?” I don’t remember any of that. It wasn't a huge deal [to go to college]. I'm guessing my grades and things were good enough to get on [at the university]. [Like I] had Pell Grants and some different low-income grants and whatever else, and I just slipped right on in. I really don't remember. It was it was just something I knew I'm supposed to do, so I …that’s what I did. I think that is really the downfall of it. I didn’t really have any close friends who went to college.

Joey doesn’t remember declaring a major and supposes that he took general studies courses. He stated, “I had no idea what I am doing and why I was there. I just knew I was supposed to do it (chuckles). He remembers feeling pressure from his grandfather to attend college and thought that as long as he was doing that (going to college), then his family will be satisfied.

[If] I am doing it, then, it will all be fine. And I didn’t know what I was doing, but I was going [to college] and doing it (laughs). And I hated it! [going to college] (laughs again)…I just didn’t feel like it was giving me what college should [be giving me]. High school is mandatory, and yes, you can quit, but college is not [mandatory], and I went in with the idea that I was expected to go,
and had to go, but knowing that I really didn’t [have to go], so when I got there, and I wasn’t finding what I hoped for, and I wasn’t happy with the things they were teaching…I thought it was stupid. I remember being really frustrated with some of that. I had a couple of classes that I really did not like, and I felt really had nothing to do with what I wanted to do and that irritated me…There was really just no, “This is why I am here,” or “This is what my goal is.” so I was meeting people who would ask what my major was, and I was like, “I dunno.”

Joey recalled the incident that led to his decision to withdraw from the university:

I got ripped by the instructor who said that putting calves in cages was inhumane! [I was] not necessarily saying that I was entirely OK with it, but I was taking the stance that if you raised a calf in a pen, that is what they know. They are not higher thinking animals. They do not know that other calves were in the wild field. So, I took that stance and really got beat up for it. That and among other things, and it kinda turned into “screw you guys.” I am not here learning what I want to know, and I don’t need this. And you know, I am not getting out of it what I expect and on top of it getting things like that [incident]. So I got pretty jaded pretty quick or tired of it after that [incident]. There is one aspect or part of my life that I really do enjoy, which is the farm, so why would I go through this [attending college] which is hell, instead of riding around on a tractor?

Joey said he was warned about being placed on academic probation if he did not complete his classes. He shared that he “couldn’t give two pennies” about his classes at that point in time, and he withdrew from the university approximately half way through
his second term. The weather was becoming conducive to farming and he was more interested in returning to the farm than going to college:

I gave it [college] a shot. The weather was getting good. I was starting to get tired of the things I didn’t like there [at the university] and the days were getting longer and the guys who were working at the farm were really rolling and getting a lot of good work since the weather was getting warmer, and I really wanted to get back to what I loved.

Joey worked at the farm throughout the summer and fall after withdrawing from the university. It was during the fall that he came upon a man on one of the back roads near where he lived. Joey did not recognize the man and inquired about his activities:

He said he was doing his internships with one of the area wild life management areas just on [one of] the back roads, and I said, “Yeah, I just went fishing in one of the ponds there.” He started talking about what he was doing, and he talked about how he took a handling class at [a community college], and I looked into it, and ended up working with some of the guys he had been talking about. Like with the snakes…both venomous and non-venomous. They [the community college] have a large aviary where he has some birds like a red-tailed hawk and stuff. He has some non-releasable birds of prey that he uses for some programs and stuff talking about handling these wild animals, and it was things that I’d seen before and knew about, but no idea that people could have of a hawk sitting on her arm while they fed it rat pieces, and I thought that was awesome. I loved working with the cows anyway, and I was already kind of into the animal thing, and I
remember hearing from him and [the man he met on the back road] is the reason why I signed up and started attending the community college.

Joey graduated with an associate degree from that community college and went on to complete a bachelor’s degree at a university in another state.

So I really took that growing up and runnin’ in the woods and looking at rocks and digging around in the creek and fishin’ and huntin’ and all that stuff and kinda made it into what I get paid for now.

**Carol Arnold summary.** Carol Arnold is a 56 year old Director of Communications for a four-year university. She is divorced and has three grown children from this marriage. She has re-married and lives approximately 45 miles from the small rural village in which she was raised. Carol is currently working on a doctorate degree in mass communications at the university where she is employed full-time.

**Background.** Carol was born the younger of 2 children to parents who were married for 64 years. Her father was a crop farmer and construction worker; her mother was a homemaker. Her brother is seven years older and works in construction. Carol married her first husband the summer after their high school graduation; they were high school sweethearts - he was the captain of the football team, and she was the captain of the cheerleading squad. Carol had dreamed of going to college since she was young, however, she decided she would like to take a year off after high school before she would attend college.
Although her husband had been offered several college athletic scholarships, he chose to enter the workforce after graduation and obtained employment as a coalminer. After graduation, Carol continued her position as a grocery store clerk that she began while in high school. Carol also remained involved at her local high school assisting in various positions at her former high school such as year book organizer and cheerleading advisor. The following fall (one year after high school graduation), she entered a small private liberal arts college approximately 20 miles from her home.

**Salient characteristics.** Traditional and determined are just two of the characteristics that initially struck me when meeting with Carol. Carol was very outgoing and forthright in her interview and readily shared her experiences often going on tangents recalling memories that stemmed from her answers. Her words relayed the two important aspects of her life: traditional ways and dedication to goals.

**Traditional ways.** With bubbling energy and exuberance, she entered the room where we were meeting, and readily shared a synopsis of her life beginning with a description of her family and the area where she was raised:

….So a very traditional, rural Southeastern family. I grew up, as I said, just outside of the little village, so not a farm exactly, but not in town, or what would be considered a town, and went to a small high school of about, there were probably around 350 - 400 students [in] four grades when I was there… So I grew up with what you would think of this “traditional” American upbringing, values, kind of thing ya know… went to church every Sunday, very active in the church, it was… that was the social part of the community. That's where this community
gathered. That or the high school basketball games, ya know, out there, and so it was very much kind of a *Mayberry RFD* kind of thing.

Her love and appreciation of family was apparent during our conversations as she often referred to the support she received from her parents and her eagerness for reading.

I was so very lucky that they [her parents] encouraged me to do that [read]. That is one thing I will have to say my, both my parents truly are...were - my father is passed away; my mother is still alive with Alzheimer's - were very intelligent, but not… and they both have high school educations, but that was all that was needed…My mother used to read to me a lot when I was little. She actually would read out loud to me. I can remember being sick and…and in bed or going to bed, and she would read. she always had books for me, uh, and she would read those and by the time… well before I was in school she was reading what they would now refer to as chapter books to me, so I would get a chapter read to me…When I was young…..you had to… you had to plan a trip to the library because the library was in [the county seat]. You know, it was the county library…and while I checked out a lot of things, it was usually through bookmobiles, and bookmobiles came to town when I was little….. I used to go and my mom would take me every…. I think they came every two weeks, and we would check out a two foot high stack of books! I loved it! ... I give my mother a lot of credit.

Although I jokingly said if I was ever told I couldn’t do something…I don’t think my mother ever told me I couldn't do things. She was… it… she never blatantly said, “You can be anything you want to be,” but she never said, “Oh Carol, you
can’t do that!” so I never had a reason to think I couldn’t be whatever I wanted to be.

Dedication to goals. Carol is also a determined individual as evidenced by her statement above and her educational achievements as an adult, but that resolve to learn and accomplish was evident as she was growing up:

I developed this “don't tell me I can't do it because I'm going to prove to you that I can attitude, and I did it all the way through school as well, so um, I taught myself to type when I was in fifth grade because my father informed me that…. we had an old typewriter that had come from the school you know with the covered keys and the manual, and he didn't want me playing with the type, so he said, “No you can't play with it; you have to know how to use the letters of the….they were covered of course… right? So, so in fifth grade I… I drew a chart that looked like the keys of a typewriter …. in an encyclopedia or something. I drew a chart. I put it on the wall, and I taught myself how to type because, because he told me I couldn't. Dad actually was pretty good about that…not discouraging me from doing anything. He was kind of a perfectionist, so like this typing, he was fine once I said I was going to teach myself how to do it, “You should do it right” that was always kind of his [mantra]…..whatever you're gonna do, you should do it right… you are… you should take your time, you should think about it, and you should do it right.

Education. Carol learned at a young age, that education was important through the actions she saw around her every day:
He (her father) was always really good about giving you challenges. So you needed to measure certain things. It might be…how we…. do you add things together or how would you be putting those kind of learning things into applications. So you didn’t know you're having to [learn something], not specific necessarily to homework, but specific learning-how-to-do certain things.

Carol discovered that remembering things came easy to her as she remembered, often in great detail, her school experiences as a child. Her desire to learn new things was often met with positive reinforcement:

I really was very fortunate, like I said, I had teachers who saw it [her aptitude for learning] quickly and allowed me to run with my interest, so I was up reciting poetry in front of the classroom by fourth grade, and I would, (laughing) now [that] I look at it, I do think I was being used (laughs), so when we’d have guests come in… like the principal was visiting, or the superintendent, the teacher would put me up front, having me recite some of the poetry we had been studying (full rolling laugh) At that time, I loved it, so it was okay… I loved learning so much!

Carol was placed into the gifted program at school and was able to expand her interests which included reading classical literature such as Shakespeare and Jane Eyre and submitting book reports on what she read in seventh grade.

Since Carol attended a small school district, there was not much opportunity to complete advanced classes, nor was there an expectation that one would pursue higher education:
Only a small percentage of us went to college and I had scholarships to go to school, but of course it was much more important to get married [to] my high school sweetheart. But we had dated…he was the football captain, and I was the cheerleading captain, and it was just appropriate right? (sarcastically) and so that’s why I put it [college] off for a year and then I didn't have honors scholarships anymore because well, I waited [to go to college]. I had visited other schools, all of them small privates [colleges] and all of them in [the state], but I chose [name of college] mainly because it was close to home. The boyfriend’s at home, so you have to stay home. … His coach lined him up [to go to college], so [he] could have [attended college]. He had football scholarships. He said “Nah, who wants to go to college? I don't need that,” and he became a coal miner (laughs). We had a lot of money as he made a great income…Ya know, my mom never said, “You need to go to [college],” although my mom didn't say I shouldn’t. My dad supported it [going to college]. When I said I wanna get married and she said that's fine. “We’ll pay for a wedding or we’ll pay for you to go to college. You can have your choice. You’re a grown-up now” (chuckles at the memory). What are ya gonna do? I was in love. It wasn’t hard [to make a decision] (laughs). It wasn’t hard. Yeah, but when I decided the next year to go (to college), it was really interesting because now I've lived away from home for a year. My mom took me school shopping and bought me a wardrobe to wear to college. It was kinda neat this... just kind of really being sure I have all the things I needed to get started. It was kind of like (mimics her mom speaking), “I don't
know how to walk you through the things you found out about, but I can do these…these things for you.”

Carol felt that she was academically prepared to attend college as she had graduated at the top her high school class of 100 students; however, she found that even though she had been highly involved and social in her high school and community, she was ill prepared for the social environment at the college:

From a social standpoint that was tougher [than the academics] because of being…. Going to a college [where everyone was] very preppy and ….very preppy, East Coast proper, you know, so, I was basically a commuter student, so I was at a disadvantage and wasn't part of the social fabric of the campus at all.

Not only did she feel a social strain related to peer interactions, she also felt at a disadvantage related to the social equity needed to navigate the college environment:

There were pretty much no services or support for commuting students because they just didn't have the people…. that unless you, unless you commuted from two blocks away, I mean that was, you were not really a commuter, and to commute from out of town to [name of college]… and so I was, I was just a lost student. I mean I really was, I was. I did the things that… I didn't know what I was supposed to do, and I had come from…. the disadvantage of the small town was you come from a place…. especially where academically, like I said, I was… I was at the top of my class. I was socially very…I was the cheerleader, I was the yearbook editor. I was the… I was all those things in a small pond. I was a big fish in a small pond, so you know all the ropes [in high school], you know
all the people to talk to, you know all the processes… and then I came to this place [college] where all the people are foreign to me. I didn't even know who to ask because [when] you come from a small…you know …in a small school your principal may also be serving you lunch (laughs). It’s just the way it is (laughs) and possibly cleaning up afterward, and he is probably, most definitely a coach (laughs) of yours. It’s just. it's just kind of the way life is [in a rural area school] this and ….so yeah, it was…. it's not that anybody treated me badly, but nobody knew that I needed help… and I didn't know to go ask, or who to ask if I did [want to go ask for help] for those kind of things [problems or questions in college]. The other thing is that academics came so easily to me that when I was… and I had no problems with any of my classes, but I didn't know that I should…everything had always been so easy, [that] I didn't know I should go ask how I should do something. Because I had just always been able to...I always just kind of knew how to do it (laughs). So although I, although I did well that first year…academically… even if it hadn’t happened that we were starting a family - and that’s what you do [get married then have kids] - … Although… I cried and cried, “Oh no, I just started this [going to college]. I'm not sure if……. I'm not sure if…… I would have been able at that point [18 and in college] be armed [have the social knowledge] to, to finish anyway. I may very well have been…you know, a stop out victim anyway [due to her perceived lack of social knowledge in college].
Carol mentioned several areas where she was unsure how to proceed. When it came time to register for courses, students would walk up to the table for each department and the list of courses that were offered for the upcoming semester. Even though Carol had spoken with an advisor previously, this process was foreign to her:

Well, I had no idea…… here's how I handled it the first time I registered, I stood in line, and I followed, and I watched what the people in front of me did. (laughs) You know, it was like the very simplest of things [that I didn’t know how to do when I went to college]. You walked to the table, and you said “I need to get in such and such class,” and they would check on the roster and say okay you've been added, [and] they’d write it on your thing.

When the time came to actually attend class, Carol found even more frustration and anxiety. She was used to one building for a high school, and found that college was structured very differently with specific departments located in certain buildings and classrooms in several buildings:

…so those kind of things [different department and different buildings] were odd [to me] and knowing your way around campus?... there was nothing that said…there was an orientation, but there was… there was nothing that required me to be there since I had not moved onto campus. There was no one encouraging me that I needed to be there for orientation so …. all of a sudden, there were these….all of these multiple buildings. How can I know which one to go into? Again, I learned a lot simply by watching other people, and I would see them in
one class, talk [to them] a little bit and find out all they… where? ….Oh they are
gonna go here to this class…”

Sometimes that tactic did not work for Carol. She recalled a time when she found
herself in the wrong place at the wrong time:

Okay, so I had class in Andrews when I looked at my schedule. Okay, Andrews 2
something or the other, and it was…. I don't remember what class I was supposed
to be in, but I went in and sat down, and I pretty quickly, as the professor started
talking, realized this was not [the] class I was taking [registered to take], and I
was like.. was like, “It’s going to be really embarrassing if I decide to leave,” and
so [the instructor] calls the role…my names not on it…. but that is not unusual
[on the first day of class]. Ya know, he was not shocked by that… “oh okay you
just”… and I sat there. I actually discussed whatever…. it was the first class. It
wasn’t real in depth. And I left, and I looked and it [her schedule]… was in……
it was a different time. My class started (at) 10. This was a nine or something like
that. I'd misread my schedule, but I was petrified! I was like, “Oh my God!” I
was saying [to myself] how embarrassing, how terribly embarrassing to sit there
and go [terrified sound and fearful look on her face].

Soon after the semester began, Carol discovered she was pregnant with her first
child, which added to her feeling of being “different” from the other college girls her age.

It was like, “I am really different than everybody here,” because it wasn't like I’m
a college girl that's pregnant [unexpected and upset like some college girls would
be]. It was alright, I am a married woman, and we are starting our family. It was
happy and sad, you know? I was kind of in denial that first semester….nah, that
can’t be what it is…it must be something else, that there's something else
[happening to her].

Carol continued her college studies and began her second term. The degree of
separation that Carol had already been feeling between herself and her perception of her peers became more obvious to her, and she began to ponder her future. In the past, Carol had routinely juggled multiple roles and activities, however, this time it seemed different. She wasn’t sure she would be able to handle the roles of college student and mother simultaneously. In addition, Carol was experiencing the fatigue common in pregnancy and found it more difficult to be motivated to attend classes.

Carol vaguely remembered there were financial aid consequences if a student withdrew from classes, so she remained enrolled in the courses despite not attending them. Near the end of the term, she was contacted by one of her professors who was concerned that she had been missing class:

…in my head, it was like, “I am gonna have to pay back that money, and it's already been paid [with financial aid], so I can't withdrawal [from classes]. I just won’t go to class, and so thank goodness, I am really happy I went to a small school because when it came near time where it was cut off for withdrawal, he ... actually, he made a point to call me personally at home and check on me because I hadn't been there [in class] and you know, I told him what was going on and no, I am just gonna let it [classes] go because I can’t pay…. afford to pay it back…. He says, “No, you don't have to pay that back [immediately] and when you apply
for financial aid again, you know, you'll be able to justify that there was a reason, medically, that you were leaving...I was like, Oh?...really?.. I had been thinking it was shameful that I was unable to finish, and so, therefore, I can never show my face again [on campus] because now I'll have this thing hanging over that I just left [college] and I owed them money... so I can't say enough of about how important those kind of touches were to me..... to kind of say it’s [going to college] still something I can do..... just maybe not right now, but it's something I can do...

Seventeen years later, with three children, several years of employment experience and amidst a divorce, Carol decided to pursue her college degree once more at the same small private college near her hometown. Again, she felt different from the other students. She was older and considered a non-traditional student now, so again socially different from the other students on campus. Carol recalled another time when a personal touch by someone at the college made a difference to her:

...a very similar thing happened [the second time she went back to college] because I was going through a divorce and my advisor who had taken... a very real interest in me and was worried about me..... I was going through a divorce that time and she would keep tabs on....if I had not been there for a while... she would just... just keep tabs and if I hadn't been around for a week or so, she called to check on me... just make sure everything was okay with me personally as well ........how wonderful that was, and it probably was.... it was the difference in that second time of me [attending college] knowing that I could go
ahead and somebody was gonna notice if I didn't [go to class] and the first time [she went to college], it was the difference in me saying, oh, I can come back [to college] albeit, it was 17 years later.

**Patty Brown summary.** Patty Brown is a Caucasian 29 year old single mother of two boys with different fathers. Her oldest is eight years old and bi-racial. Her youngest is three years old and Caucasian. She is currently employed full-time as a registered nurse at a hospital near her hometown where she lives with her sons. Patty has a boyfriend who also has children and Patty regularly cares for his four children when he is away. She recently began an online bachelor’s degree nursing program at a local university which is affiliated with her current employer. Patty has a speech impediment and requested that the interview be conducted via email in which I attached the questions for each interview and she responded back with answers on the same document. We exchanged several emails in order for me to capture the depth and richness of her story.

**Background.** Patty was born to married parents and shares the designation of being the youngest in the family with her twin brother. She has two older sisters, one of whom has a mental disability due to a lack of oxygen at birth. Patty’s oldest sister is a single mom, as well, and has an 18 year old daughter (Patty’s niece) who recently graduated high school and intends to attend a four year university in the local area. Patty described her sibling dynamics in this way:

We never really got along very well growing up. We fought a lot.

I think [names her oldest sister] felt overshadowed by [sister with disability]’s extra needs and parental guidance, then [her twin brother] and I came along and
she was just kind of forgotten. She left home at eighteen, and we didn’t see her much at all. Until she had [her child], then she was in and out of our lives all the time. [Her twin brother] always felt that I was favored over him because I participated in sports and clubs in school, and he also was always resentful toward me because academics came with ease for me and was very difficult for him. He was actually held back in first grade. A lot of the kids were held back that year. So we didn’t spend time in class together. I don’t [think] that he ever really knew of kids teasing me [about her speech impediment] because we weren’t in the same classes.

Patty described the area where she grew up:

I grew-up in a small hometown, a country setting. We were a half hour or more from town or a store. We lived in a double wide house; it wasn’t the best, but it was a safe place. When I was in kindergarten our house burnt down, and we lost everything including baby pictures and such. We had neighbors pretty close, probably within a couple hundred yards. The trailers next door were rentals, so people were always coming and going [moving in and out].

Patty described her home life as strained for various reasons. Her father is an alcoholic which has had a significant effect on the family. Patty describes how his alcoholism affected her growing up:

My dad’s alcoholism was never discussed, ever. I personally have a lot of resentment toward my dad for it. You could tell that it upset my mom, but she never chose to do anything about it. I can’t even tell you the number of DUI’s
and wrecks he had while driving. To my knowledge, there was never any physical fights from his drinking, only yelling and emotional abuse. Over the years, his alcoholism has greatly decreased, but he received a public intoxication last year. He may have received counseling through FACTS or some other publically funded program. I don’t really know.

**Salient characteristics.** Patty is outgoing and a “people person”. When we initially spoke over the phone setting up the interview schedule, she struck me as a determined and focused woman who sets goals and works hard to achieve them. She seems determined to make the best life she can for herself and her two sons, whom she adores, and acknowledges that education is her path to the “better life” she seeks for them. Despite her driven personality, I sensed vulnerability in her social interactions (likely related to her experiences with her speech impediment) and her social relationships (likely related to her father’s alcoholism) that created obstacles for her as she strove to continue her education.

**Speech impediment.** Patty is particularly sensitive about her speech impediment and its impact on her relationships with others:

We, my brother and I, were both in speech classes in elementary [school]. He had additional speech classes at the local hospital. My particular impediment has to do with “rolling my r’s”. It didn’t really matter how many speech classes I had, it didn’t change anything. I still struggle today with my speech and how people respond to me.

She also feels that her speech continues to impact her significantly as an adult:
I actually was Valedictorian of my high school class and considered not giving my Valedictorian speech because of my impediment. It has been an issue that I have been faced with my entire life; my earliest memories are from reading aloud in class in third grade. I have trouble to this day with people, thinking that I am talking, “baby talk”. It is a struggle for me in phone conversations with people who don't know me. They can never tell what I am saying and I often have to either hang up and call back when someone is with me that can talk for me, or have someone else on hand before I make the call.

**Social interactions.** Another obstacle to Patty experiencing positive social relationships was the effect of her father’s alcoholism on peer and dating relationships:

I never invited any of my friends to my home because of my dad’s drinking and he was…is not a very nice person. He was always yelling and screaming and picking fights with mom and us kids, even if he wasn’t drunk. Not many of my friends knew of my dad’s problem.

Patty had a relationship with a boy in high school that continued into her college days. While attending college, she became pregnant with her first child. Despite the pregnancy, she made a plan to continue with her educational goals and not allow the situation to be an obstacle to her goals.

**Education.** Patty was initially brief when describing her experiences in elementary school.

I always just went to school, came home and did homework. I don’t recall a lot of memories from elementary school. I remember a Chinese-themed dinner in
second grade. I remember reading in small groups in third and fourth grades. It was always ‘embarrassing’ or hurtful for me to read aloud in class because of my speech impediment. Kids made fun of me then. I still struggle today with my speech and how people respond to me.

There was another reason why Patty was resistant to discussing her younger years in school:

I tend to try to block out a lot of my early school years. My dad was an alcoholic and there’s many nights I remember hiding in the corner of my bedroom not sleeping, because I knew he’d come home drunk and yell and fight with my mom all night. There was a particular time in second grade that I remember rounding the corner in the hallway of my school and a teacher asking me what was wrong? And I just cried. It was a very scary situation to deal with as a child. As I advance through school, I remember less and less of these events.

Patty was more willing to discuss her high school activities and seemed more at ease with the subject matter

I came more to life so to speak in high school. I was able to find friends that I related to a lot more. I took honors classes in high school without any difficulties. I hung out with my friends a lot and found a lot of support and encouragement from them…we weren’t into drinking or drugs or sex. We just hung out watched movies or television, participated in different school activities and supported one another in the different sports that we played….Academics was never a struggle for me. School work always came easy to me. I started to play sports, volleyball
and softball at this age. It gave me something fun to do that I was good at. I also
began joining clubs, such as Beta Club, National Honor Society, Pride,
S.A.D.D…. Beta Club is an academic club where you must have a B average or
higher to participate in. We would sponsor school dances, have fundraisers,
participate in the Special Olympics for mentally challenged students, sponsor
families at Christmas time. Pride was a group of students who promoted a
drug/alcohol free lifestyle. We would perform skits/dances promoting
drug/alcohol free lifestyles both in our school and communities.

Growing up, Patty said she always wanted to be a teacher or a nurse. Her mother
is a licensed practical nurse at a local nursing home, so that was a big influence on her.
She loved school, so being a teacher seemed like something she might also want to
pursue in the future. She described her thoughts on attending college in this way:

I always knew I had to go to college to have a better life than I did growing up.
There really wasn’t a choice of if I was going or not. I had many discussions with
guidance counselors. The guidance counselors pretty much gave us all the pieces
we needed to get into college; we just had to do the leg work. I never really
discussed college with my parents because I knew they couldn’t help me. It was
all up to me. I think because of my academic success, they, Mom just assumed
that I would go to college. I know that I filled out the FAFSA and whatnot, but I
don’t recall really having help from my parents to do so. I know that I would
have had to have their income and such, but I just don’t recall.
Patty was diligent in her research on potential colleges she was considering in order to make the best decision for her:

We begun college visits our sophomore year of high school, so maybe 15-16 years old. Basically I just utilized them [guidance counselors] for financial aid and scholarship help. I visited a community college and a 4 year college. I only applied at the one [the community college]. I turned down a four-year scholarship to the University of [name], because they had a terrible reputation for their nursing program and passage of state boards. [Name of university] has a standing offer for any class valedictorian for a 4 year scholarship [she was her class valedictorian]; I am unsure of the monetary amount. I don’t recall where, but their (there are) publications on the percent of students passing the state nursing boards and [the university’s] passage rate was very low. At the time I graduated high school in 2002, the nursing program at [the university] was also on probation with the Ohio Board of Nursing, so that means that they were not an accredited school by the board of nursing. I choose to attend [the community college] because they have a wonderful reputation and a great passage rate on state boards. Patty felt well prepared academically for college as she had graduated at the top of her class. Financially, she had earned several local scholarships and grants in addition to federal school loans that were applied to her higher education costs. Despite the fact that the community college was over an hour away from her home, she planned to commute and looked forward to having “more control” over her life:
The ability to focus on something I was interested in. Being able to have more control over my life…Just finally being able to take my nursing classes, feeling like I was making progress toward my future, my dreams.

However, after “a couple of months,” she moved in with her boyfriend and his parents because she “had enough of my dad being mean to my mother and all us kids, so I moved out.”

Patty began her studies at the community college the fall following her high school graduation. During her second term at the community college, she discovered she was pregnant. She was half way through her licensed practical nursing (LPN) certificate, so in order to better manage her education while pregnant, she stopped taking clinical courses [which she considered “easier”] and focused on completing her general education courses and leave the clinical rotations to be completed if she returned to her studies after she had her baby. She describes that time period in her life as being “scared and nervous because it definitely wasn’t planned.”

For the next year, Patty focused on being a good mother to her son and considered her options for her future:

I received help through a program at job and family services called WIA. It was supposed to help you obtain a degree…I also received food stamps…I also had support from [her son’s] paternal grandparents. They always helped me out when needed…

As Patty prepared to resume her studies at the community college to complete her LPN certificate and associate degree, her struggles continued:
I started out living with [her son’s] Dad and his parents, but ended up moving back in with my parents. There was a lot of drama with Nathan’s dad and I knew if I didn’t get out of the situation, I was going to quit school….I had to take a retention test to go back to LPN program. I didn’t pass them the first time, so I had to take them a second time…The people I originally started the LPN program with had graduated.

Patty had minimal social support during this time period. Although she lived with her parents during this period, the arrangement was stressful for her. Her mother was supportive of her attempts to continue her education, but her other social supports had diminished:

For a while I maintained several of my high school friendships and boyfriend [son’s father]. After a while those friendships and boyfriend disappeared…. [so] I attended classes fulltime and [her son] was in daycare paid for through [State Department of] Job and Family Services.

Patty completed her LPN certificate and obtained employment at a local corrections facility. During this time, she began dating a co-worker and planned on returning to school to complete an associate of science degree in order to become a registered nurse. Her oldest son was four years old at this time, and she felt she could handle the workload of classes and full-time employment. Her decision to continue her studies to become a registered nurse became solidifed when she learned that she was pregnant:
I had pondered returning to school well before I became pregnant with [her second child], but becoming pregnant with him forced me to finish my RN because I couldn’t financially care for 2 children as a single mother on my LPN income.

Patty returned to the same community college after the birth of her second son. She graduated with the Associate in Science degree and passed exams to become a registered nurse.

Despite her academic accomplishments and the need for registered nurses, Patty found it difficult at first to secure employment as an RN, which she attributes in part to her speech impediment. After several months, she was able to obtain a position at a hospital approximately 45 minutes from her home which she worked for a year until she secured a position at a local hospital five minutes from her home that she shares with her two sons. She expresses a positive outlook for her future:

Well, especially since earning my RN degree, I don’t really have to worry about having a job. I can go almost anywhere and get a job. With a few years of experience under my belt, I have a lot of options. I am starting my BSN at [a local university] online this month. I want to obtain my BSN and possibly masters because I want to be able to advance into leadership and management roles in the future. I am contemplating my masters so that I could teach nursing. I also feel safe with my RN. I was laid off at my first LPN job because the hospital was doing away with LPN’s to go to All RN care. I enjoyed being a LPN, but didn’t have the job security that I needed as a single mother…My
current job is less than 5 minutes from my home. I am working the cardiac care unit in my hometown. It makes a huge difference to me being able to provide care and make a difference in the very hospital and community that I grew up in.

**Kevin Ford Summary.** Kevin Ford, a 21-year-old Caucasian male, lives in a small, rural, predominately white, Southeastern Ohio town with a population of approximately 14,000. He is currently employed in two positions – vending sales and landscape maintenance. He shares a rental house with two of his friends.

**Background.** Kevin was born in a metropolitan area, the eldest of two sons to a middle-class family. The nuclear family of four moved to the small, rural Ohio town when he was approximately five years old in order to be closer to his dad’s side of the family. When Kevin was approximately seven years old, his parents divorced. Both have since remarried – his father when he was 13 and his mother a year ago. Kevin has one full-blooded brother. On his father’s side, he has two step-brothers – one a year older and one a year younger, a step-sister who is three years younger, and a half-sister who is 10 years younger. On his mother’s side, he has a half-sister who is 10 years older and a half-brother who is eight years older. His parents shared parenting responsibilities, and Kevin, along with his younger brother, spent alternating weeks with each parent. Kevin attended the same elementary school for first through fifth grades despite the multiple changes in the homes where his parents lived after the divorce. Kevin is not averse to taking chances in his life and describes some risk-taking opportunities in the interview – trying to climb the corporate ladder at his first job, jumping off a high bridge into a river, buying houses, remodeling them and reselling them at for-profit and planning to move to another state.
with his brother when he graduates. Needless to say, he is willing to tackle new pursuits and that is evident as he considers his options for higher education and his future.

**Salient characteristics.** During our conversations, Kevin repeatedly returned to two topics: relationships, especially with family and friends, and the importance of work and money. The two areas played significant roles in his development both educationally and personally as often seen in residents of Appalachia.

*Relationships.* Kevin’s story of his childhood contained many references to family and friends. Jake is a social individual, so it was no surprise to me that he placed a lot of importance on relationships. Although Kevin alluded to man types of relationships during his interviews, the main focus was definitely on his family and friends as he grew into a man.

Relationships with family. Kevin comes from a large and complex blended family with many step and half siblings, but he and his full-blooded brother, Jacob, appear to have a special bond. He and his brother have not only experienced the family transitions together, but also spend time together outside of family events. Kevin reflected a sense of responsibility in helping his brother achieve his goals despite his visual disability - Jacob became legally-blind from a degenerative disease when in elementary school – and possibly at the expense of putting his own future plans on hold. The bond with his brother appeared to be very strong and seemed to provide a sense of consistency for Kevin, especially in dealing with his complex family situation as he often referred to both himself and his brother in his examples. They often do things together like hang out with mutual friends, play sports, explore the outdoors, and take risks.
When asked about what he liked to do when he was in school, he responded with the following, which also included mention of his brother:

… A lot of sports (chuckles). More sports and more sports. I played 3 sports. Kevin played 3 sports, my step-brothers played sports. Just a lot of sports. I played football, basketball and baseball. Kevin played soccer, basketball and baseball. Everybody was always playing something and my parents were always driving us around.

The two brothers engaged in some risky behaviors as described below which seemed like a common thread the interview:

I have jumped off the train bridge [into the river] a few times last summer (chuckles). I did that probably 50 times last summer. My brother probably 100 [times].

Another reference to his brother was made when I asked him about his experiences with his high school guidance counselor as described in more detail later when planning for college:

I don’t think they did a very good job with helping kids plan for the future whether that is college or whatever. I still see it with my little brother [and his experiences with guidance counselors at the school], too.

Relationships with friends. Kevin often referred to his relationships with friends and maintaining friendships and how they impacted his transitions into new school buildings as he grew older. He seemed to enjoy having so many different types of friends as a result of having so many siblings and opportunities to meet others.
… it was cool having all our friends in [name of town where mother resides] then a lot of friends in [name of town where father lives] cause that’s where we were at [friends’ homes] basically when we weren’t in school.

Kevin experienced two transitional periods in his schooling where he went to a new building and met new people – elementary to middle school and middle school to high school. He describes the high school transition and his attitude toward his friendships in the passage below:

I did have a lot of friend changes in high school. Not really friend changes I guess, like I don’t have any enemies or anything. Not like, people I was friends, was really good friends with, I hate now or anything like…that is crazy……I guess you could say that like it wasn’t like cool anything but that is when you [get to] high school people are already, like divided up into a cliques or groups, I guess. I was just friends with everybody. I didn’t like belong to any cliques or anything. I was friends with this group and with that group and then the basketball team, like that. I was just friends with everybody. I did not have like a set group of friends. I have some friends that are older than me and some friends that are younger than me like Jacob’s friends. My older brother… had friends when he lived at our house, and I didn’t hang around with them since they were a lot older than me, but now I do hang around with them sometimes. It’s like the age difference fades away.

Many of Kevin’s friends also had college plans. I asked him about that:
A lot of my friends went to [name of university]. I mean a lot of them. Some went to [names more colleges]. One to [name of college…a few, a good amount of friends went to (name of school he attended.

*Working and saving money.* Kevin gave me the impression that he is a planner. Kevin mentioned several times how he has worked to save money for one reason or another – saved to pay off a car and to purchase a different one, saved money to invest in a house flipping venture, saved money to go to college, and currently saving money to move away in the near future. In the passage below, he refers to his plan to move with his brother in the near future:

[My plan is to]…You know save up some more money working here, move down there, get a job, and living in something kinda cheap and have enough money saved up to go back to school ya know, so that’s my plan.

I found it interesting that along with saving money for a house purchase, Kevin is concerned with building good credit at a relatively young age which confirmed my impression that he is a planner.

…I had some money saved up by then and was working on building my credit. I mean I don’t have the [that much] money that I had saved up then, but I was building up good credit…
**Education.** When asked about his memories of attending K-12 schools, he mentioned the transitions to the middle and high schools, his plans for higher education, his dismay with the lack of assistance he received from the high school guidance department and what led to his withdrawing from higher education.

When asked about the transition from a small elementary school to a larger middle school setting, he felt he adjusted well to the change, but again refers to his brother’s experience in addition to his own experience, as he indicates in the following passage:

I think I adjusted pretty well [to middle school]. I liked the change. I thought it was pretty cool. I did fine, never had any problems or anything. I had to study more, but that was to be expected. [His younger brother] had a harder time adjusting to it.

Kevin indicated that he began considering college attendance in middle school and he felt he knew at a relatively young age that he wanted to go to a four year school.

Probably middle school. I remember talking with my friends about it and stuff. “Oh yeah, I am definitely going to go to a 4 year school.” Back then, I had no doubt about it. “That is exactly what I am going to do after high school is to go to a 4 year school.” Not really knowing anything, well, not necessarily not knowing anything, but not knowing what I wanted to do, just that I was going.

In high school, he still had plans to go to college, and had applied to two out-of-town four year schools and two community colleges – one local and one out-of-town, but opted to attend a local community college since he was working for a pizza company as a
driver and the company had already promoted him to assistant manager. The company had also expressed a desire to promote him to manager of another location in the near future.

Kevin states that his decision to withdraw from the community college during his second quarter was due to two reasons – the possibility of a job promotion that did not immediately require the completion of an academic degree and his interest in attending a school that offered more degree programs:

I had started working at Dominoes in like March [of his senior year], so I was learning things about being a manager, and [then started] going to school [at the community college], but I wasn’t there very long. I was 18 years old and there [at the college] about 6 months. I completed one quarter and started the second one, but then I dropped out.

Kevin indicated that he had considered the option of changing schools to a different college in a major city before the opportunity for advancement at his job presented itself. With the new employment opportunity, he decided not to continue with his educational plans in higher education at a new college. He felt he was making good money without a degree and wasn’t sure what he wanted to pursue anyway:

…I was making decent money as a delivery driver and so I was kinda, school kinda was just…I was kinda not really… Like I said I wasn’t really set on it [going to college] like I was before. I was just taking classes and not really knowing what I wanted to do there, so I applied to some others [schools]. I was thinking of moving to [a different college]. I knew some guys who were going to
[college there], and I was gonna move in with them, and go to [the community college], but that’s when that [promotion opportunity at his job] thing came up. If they hadn’t been talking about that, I might have gone up [to the other college]. But since this… talking about giving me a store, I decided not to go up [there]… I had already been thinking about it [changing schools] but when the [promotion opportunity] thing came along, then it was definite that I was gonna leave [college].

When I questioned Kevin about his preparations for college, he expressed frustration with his high school guidance counselor not being helpful in choosing schools and majors based on his interests:

I never really felt like I was …like helping me with trying to figure out a good school for me. I felt like the guidance counselors did not do much more than showing me what I need to do and tell me how to apply to schools. Like I said, maybe that is me just being ignorant, and wanting them to do more for me, but I just felt like they didn’t help me much but were making it appear like they were helping us [finish] the high school days or more set on getting kids to graduate and getting kids to be enrolled in school and I mean maybe I'm too ….. I just felt like it sometimes they really didn't help you as much as they would make it look like they were trying to help you.

Kevin then described what factored into his decision to attend college and how it came about that he applied to certain schools. First, he described the input from his guidance counselor:
(Pauses) I don’t know. I think with the … kinda of … I got … got talked into [name of in-state 4 year school and then “if you don’t get in, here is another school you can go to.” … then I applied to a [community college] and [regional campus of an in-state 4 year school] on my own.

He also received input from others, including friends and family, as well as guidance counselors about where to attend college:

I had people I had talked to and they suggested it. Back then I thought I knew what or had a better idea of what I wanted to do [go into business], but I knew or I thought then that I had a better idea.

When asked, Kevin gave me some examples of friends who have also made changes to their original college plans:

… I have had some friends who have gone in and out of a few schools. My cousin who is a good friend of mine went to [names a school, then 2 other schools his cousin transferred to later on]. He works at a ski resort now. He plans to go to Colorado to finish up his biology degree. One of my buddy’s goes to [names a college], [then] he went to, then went to [names a college] and that is where he is now.

**Future plans.** Kevin’s future plans include moving to another state with his younger brother, Jacob, after he graduates from high school this year. His brother intends to pursue filming and production of outdoor adventures and is looking into going to colleges out of state that have programs related to his interests. Kevin has also developed an interest in film and production since he has been helping his brother with outdoor
filming and production. His brother’s future educational plans will have an impact on
Kevin’s educational plans for the future as well. Kevin described the process of
researching where they should move and his plans for the future and seemed skeptical
about his future plans coming to fruition:

Every time Jacob finds a school he’s interested in, we go look up the city and see
what the cost of living is there. Is there opportunities for young people to go do
things? Actually, one place we have been looking at is Asheville, NC, and it says
that within the past 10 years, it is like one of the top 5 most growing areas in the
country um, lots of jobs in the area for young people, but we have been looking at
stuff like that and I haven’t applied for jobs or anything like that yet. But so that is
my plan to just go, get down there, and get a job right away and maybe start
looking for a better job and you know, I hope that I find something, but I also
wanna get back into school, too. You know save up some more money working
here, move down there get a job and living in something kinda cheap and have
enough money saved up to go back to school ya know, so that’s my plan, and as
we both know, nothing ever goes as planned, so that is what I planned so far
(laughs).

Shelley Morgan summary. Shelley Morgan is a 20 year old Caucasian woman
currently attending a major university located within a metropolitan area in the Midwest
area of Appalachia. She is a senior in the school of journalism pursuing a public relations
course of study. She has a part-time job and works approximately 20 hours during the
week when in school.
Background. Shelley spent the early years of her life in a densely populated municipality, 11 miles from a major Midwest city, until the completion of her second grade year when her family moved out to a rural suburb approximately 30 miles from the same city. She is the eldest of 2 siblings, and she has a sister who is 3 years her junior. Her parents are married, both self-employed, and considered middle-class according to Shelly. Shelley describes her home life growing up as “fun” and comfortable” and that she enjoys spending time with her parents and participating in activities as a family.

She began dating her current boyfriend her senior year of high school, and they have been together for 3 years. He is one year younger than her and attends the same university as Shelley attends now.

Shelley participated in a variety of unique extracurricular activities since she was not interested in sports: she played the violin, was involved in theatre and the orchestra, was on the forensic team and was the band manager.

Shelley began her higher education career at a university other than where she currently attends and was located within a rural town, nearly three and a half hours away from her parent’s home. She attended one academic year before transferring to her current university, which is located only one hour away from her parent’s home. She states that she initially declared a major in education before changing to undecided at freshman orientation. When she transferred to the new university, she declared broadcast journalism as her major before switching to her current major in public relations.

Salient characteristics. Shelley struck me as a bit shy and reserved at first, but as we conversed, she became more open and readily shared her experiences with me,
although I got the sense that she was trying to gauge my responses to her answers, perhaps to seek my approval. She also seemed like she was open to trying new things, but lacked the confidence to stick with them. These qualities seem to be prevalent in her descriptions of her social experiences in general.

Relationships were the main theme in all of her stories. She recounted several experiences involving relationships with others that impacted her college decisions. Three of them seem most impactful to her – relationships with family, with friends and with teachers.

*Relationships with family.* Shelley’s love for her family was obvious as she mentioned her parents frequently during our conversations. When asked to describe her life growing up, she responded with the following:

….My parents would play with us and stuff. .. it was fun, it was, umm, comfortable. Like it was…. I like being around my parents, you know? Some kids are like, “I hate my parents”, but I have never said that ever. Cause I love my parents and being around them.

When I asked her who helped her the most in choosing a college, she mentions how her family was involved in the process:

Actually my sophomore year [of high school] I looked at going to Penn State. My dad took me on a tour there, (pause) my dad went to Waynesburg, so he took me [there, too]…. My first visit (pause) I think I went with both my parents for the first one and I don’t think it was a visit, I think it was an open house.
Shelley has a lot of respect for her parents and values their opinions and guidance. She referred to this throughout her interviews.

*Relationships with friends.* Family relationships weren’t the only relationships impactful on Shelley’s decision to go to college. Friendships and social atmosphere are also important to Shelley and an area that she brought up often during our conversations. When describing life outside of classes and academics, she often spoke of her friends and activities in which she participated. She described her friends and herself as not like other teens:

We weren’t like the typical, like I met a lot of them in middle school we weren’t like typical middle school or high school kids. Like, we wouldn’t go out drinking. We would go to someone's house and watch a movie in stuff like that.

She was particularly concerned about leaving her friends behind when she went away to college as she had friends of various ages:

I was really nervous about it – because all my friends are at home and how my boyfriend [had] still another year of high school. A lot of my friends were younger or they're going to schools that were completely way across the country or… I think the closest one to me went to the College of [name of school] (laughs) which was 3 hours away [from her new school].

She was also nervous about how she was going to meet people when she got to college. She describes attending a freshmen mixer on campus the weekend before classes start and there is no one that she knows yet other than a boy who went to her old school
that she really did not know well, and her 2 new roommates that she met the day before. She made friends with her roommate’s high school friends:

Becca [one of Shelley’s roommates] and I, we met up with our high school friends and we all kind of bonded. Her high school friends and my high school friend, we all came together as a group and so that is who I sort of hung out with for most of fall quarter, (pause), well it's from that first day, so that is nice to have connections right off the bat, so that was cool.

*Relationships with instructors.* A third area of importance to Shelley is relationships with her instructors. She mentioned how she placed a lot of value on other’s comments she was selecting courses:

…I was like, “Oh I wanna look up my teachers and stuff,” and then [I] was like, “Oh no, not that one.” (laughs)… actually I signed up for a health class, but I looked on that rate your professors.com that helps us look up professors and the teacher that I had for that health class apparently was horrible and the comments said really don't take this class. So I went on to drop the class.

Shelley had replaced the health class with sociology and had a sociology instructor that made such an impact that she considered adding the sociology minor to her degree plan:

I ended up really liking it [the sociology class], despite the fact that I was really nervous about that teacher [based on ratemyprofessor.com reviews]. She was really strict but a good teacher. I liked the way she taught. I think that (pause) motivated me and made me do well in the class… she's really friendly and funny.
Like, she kinda had that that thing that you want out of the teacher. Like, she's a good teacher, but she joked around; she wasn't too serious (pause) and she challenges at the same time. I really liked that.

Shelly discussed how her instructor for the first-year orientation course was also her academic advisor and how happy she was that she liked her advisor. She also described how she like that the orientation courses was designed to be part of a learning community where she was able to meet “a good mix of people.” Including some she would never imagine herself befriending, but appreciated the diversity.

Education. Shelley started her college search when she was a sophomore in high school when her dad took her to a major university. This visit motivated her to start planning for college since she felt that visiting college was what was expected of students her age. She went on several visits to both large and small colleges and universities. She didn't want a “really small campus”, so when she visited the campus, she knew it was the one:

I… I liked the campus. I liked the atmosphere. It’s similar to here [her current school]. I like that it’s a big school, but it’s still … umm… you still kinda know people, but it’s not too huge…. I, like, but ….I like that was far enough [away from home] that I was like ready to get out of the house, and ready for this [going to college]…. (pause) the buildings. They all have the same brick, not like here [her current college] which is totally different, which I kinda like too, but (pause)…I liked the brick streets; I thought that was really unique. You don’t see a lot of that anymore (pauses). I liked the look of it. I thought that it looked like a
college that I could see myself walking around. I could see myself going in and out of there (mimics pointing to buildings), living in dorms, I pictured myself going there. Which I think is why I chose there [the first college she attended] because really everywhere else, I went I didn’t picture myself there.

Shelley stated that she mostly discussed her college plans with her parents. She felt that conversations with her guidance counselors were not really “productive” with respect to the college process. She felt that the guidance counselors met with students to assess grades and ask about what colleges they were considering and that was it. She indicated that one of her college applications was sent in late by the counselor.

*Concerns about going to college.* Shelley describes getting accepted to college as “a big deal” to her family She was concerned about some things, and she thought about what she wouldn’t like about college:

I didn’t think that I would like living in a dorm without air conditioning. Which I ended up in. I thought, “oh, I would not like that.” But most of them are that way. I was worried about that. I got assigned to live in a triple…. I was worried about what if I don’t like my roommate or she’s crazy. What if they party all night and wake me up all hours of the night saying come get me from this party (uses a falsetto voice). I was worried about the food, little things like that. “Are the dining halls any good?” I wondered about the distance [from home]. I was far enough away from home to be on my own and have my own space, but if I needed something it would like take my mom all day to get there and back pretty
much [the campus was three and a half hours from home]. And it was a boring drive.

When she was preparing to move, she experienced conflicting emotions, but tried to hide them from others like her parents and grandmother, so they would not worry about her:

I had mixed feelings about it. I wasn't sure about like being away from my parents and living on my own, and (pause) like the classes. Were they going to be harder than high school? Everybody says it's harder and more work, or is it less work? (pause), like living in the dorm. Is it gonna be weird? Like, am I gonna like my roommates? So I was very, I don't know….questionable about it. I wasn't so sure [about going to college]… then I was nervous about like, I am kinda shy and would people like me? What-if this, what-if that...What if I don't like being away from home? So that whole thing I was thinking about, so... I was really anxious.

*Decision to be different.* Once Shelley arrived on campus for her first term, she stated that she was excited about “starting a new chapter in my life book.” She decided she wanted to be different than she had been in high school:

I had a feeling of being more outgoing, and I wanted to try to change myself and not be shy like I was in high school. I know some people may want to maintain their personality, but I was thinking, “I can become a completely different person and people wouldn’t even know.”

She then described that despite her initial inclination to try that approach, she soon returned to her natural personality of being shy around those she did not know well.
...eventually, as I went through [time on campus] and I wasn't branching out as much as I thought.... Obviously, I can't really change who I am deep down, so I'm not gonna try. I'm just going to be myself. I'll stick to who I know and meet people through them or when I want to join clubs and stuff that's when I'll meet my group of friends.

*Having to withdraw from college.* After the first term at the university, there was a winter break that spanned the time from Thanksgiving to the beginning of the following year. Shelley describes the winter term as a difficult one for several reasons starting with the return to school after the long recess:

Winter quarter was terrible (becomes somber at the memory). We had that long six-week break, so I just got used to being back home, and I was loving being home and then I had to leave again (mimics moaning). I have to go back. Like, I was legitimately upset because I was like crying and just (makes a distressed sound). I was really upset about coming back just because I'm so used to being at home with my family. I was like, “Oh I have to go back,” but I liked it, but still I wasn’t so sure I liked college. I knew I did well academically, but was worried about, like socially. I joined a couple clubs (her first term), but they ended up being not really what I was looking for so I kinda stopped those.

Once she returned to the university, she had some difficult experiences – tough professors, lower grades than she was used to getting in high school, roommate drama and an unexpected call from her mother:
…about halfway through winter quarter … is when my mom told me [that Shelley had to leave the university at the end of the academic year]. She said, “We can’t afford”… she called me to say, “We can’t afford for you to go there [the university] anymore, and I was like I was bawling my eyes out, “Like, this is the school I chose! I can’t believe this is happening to me!”

Shelley describes how after she learned she would not be returning the next academic year, she was glad that she not made any close friends or joined clubs that she had liked as it would be easier to make the adjustment to leave. She told of how she knew she wanted to stay in school despite the family financial situation, so she discussed with her parents what options she had to transfer to another school. Shelley and her family reconsidered the schools where Shelley had previously applied with respect to the cost of attendance. Ultimately, she transferred to a school that was an hour away from her family, had offered her a significant amount of financial aid, and was the university that her boyfriend planned to attend that following fall.

**Future plans.** Shelley reminisces that she has no regrets about the chain of events that led her to her current university:

It was experience, highs and lows, but I don't regret going there, like part of me wishes I would've come here [current university] in the first place, but at the same time I’m like, you know, I experienced someplace else. I had highs, lows you know, but I…I got to go to the school of my choice. I wouldn’t say I chose wrong, but it didn't really work out (pause), so I mean I came out of it with a positive attitude.
Shelley intends to complete a bachelor’s degree in public relations at her new institution.

**Drew Nardella summary.** Drew Nardella is a 33 year old Caucasian male who is employed full-time as a paramedic with the local fire department. He lives with his wife, daughter and step-daughter in the same town in which he was raised.

**Background.** Drew is the only child of married parents in socio-economically depressed rural area. Drew had a close relationship to his paternal grandmother who lived next door to his home for several years and provided child care for him before and after school while his parents were at work. Both of his parents were employed full-time at the nearby university as classified employees. His father worked in the shipping and receiving area of the medical college and his mother worked in the university computer center. When he was in middle school, he would visit his parents at work and was intrigued by the various machines and technology he saw.

Both of his parents also had part-time employment and he describes his parents and early life in the following way:

They worked… they worked, they worked, they worked. My dad had a part-time job. My mom did cakes on the side as part-time work. Also, we really always had everything we needed. It was true of course that sometimes we were tight, but we weren’t using public assistance, umm…not there’s anything wrong with that I’m just saying we were… yeah, we did really well and had computers before anybody else that I know of…they the people I was around were, well we were
well-off I guess, we weren’t nothing… we weren’t rich by any means but to have something was better than most of them had.

**Salient characteristics.** Drew struck me as quiet and reserved. He was articulate, thoughtful, and detailed in his responses to my questions, however. He seemed somewhat uncomfortable during our first meeting and avoided making direct eye contact; however, he would often inject humor into his responses. He took time to think about his answers and sometimes would try to figure out “where I was going” with my line of questioning or what I wanted him to say despite my reassurances that I wasn’t looking for any particular responses. Drew’s limited social experience was likely a factor in his hesitancy in answering my questions even though he had readily volunteered his time to be involved in my study.

**Relationships with family.** As an only child and grandchild, Drew seemed to have everything he wanted. He would talk about his parents working hard to provide for his family, and how his parents encouraged him to become involved in activities such as learning to play an instrument or take on a hobby. Drew, possibly because he was an only child, gravitated toward activities he could do alone such as reading or video games, never really choosing typical activities like sports or clubs at school.

Drew’s primary caretaker growing up was his paternal grandmother who lived next door to his family. As the only grandchild, he was again doted upon and spent time engaged in isolating activities. He spoke quite fondly of his grandmother:

I have some fond memories of my grandmother. She gave me everything (choke in his voice). One day she made me wear these corduroy pants that had pictures of
cookie monster big bird on them. I got made fun of so bad for that! She just made me wear them (chuckles) Yeah, she made me wear them and it was horrible.

Drew described his parents as being supportive of his academics and interests. They often encouraged him to do his best and were encouraging when he had difficulty:

My parents are…they’re very, very, very supportive. Very. Maybe to a fault, but very supportive. They always told me good job… good job. You know you can do better next time… you know, you're doing good job… you did good there… you could hear a… really supportive of me all through my entire….I remember fighting about homework. We used to but heads. I didn’t want to do it, I had to do it. Having to sit at the table, yelling. It was horrible; but yeah, they were real, real supportive of me.

Lack of peer relationships. As stated previously, Drew typically shied away from group activities and preferred to occupy himself with activities he could do alone. He particularly enjoyed video games and working on a computer, even though it was an older model, which his mother was able to secure as she worked in a computer services department at the local university. The operations he could perform on a computer were mesmerizing to him. He excitedly shared examples of his experiences on the computer:

I remember I made a webpage… yeah. It was one of the guys at the help desk over in CSC. He gave me a big print out of everything... (pause), wow! (he is enjoying the memory) Yeah, that would give him a printout of his webpage, and I kind of took that and made it my own. I guess that is how I learned HTML. I also remember going in there just using the Internet back when Webcrawler was the
main search engine. The… I don’t remember if it was high school or middle school? High school probably we had dial-up networking from home. We were part of a trial group in Athens that tried dial-up networking; that was fun. We had the 9600 Bd modem… it was smokin’ fast. Yeah, for a dial-up, it was smoking fast. (chuckles). I got that opportunity through my mom’s job in the unit at computer services, which was great.

Drew described that himself as a loner while growing up as he didn’t mention many friends or interactions other than with his teachers as significant. Likely due to his interests and involvement in isolating activities, he avoided interactions with peers in school. This characteristic followed him to college.

**Education.** Drew shared a few experiences from his early schooling years. He remembers a few of the teachers and how he liked their easy-going natures. Teachers seemed to be an important part of his education as he progressed in school. He shared his experiences in second grade with his first male teacher:

I remember him he was a cool character. He was laid back mostly. There were several behavior problems in the classroom and he to deal with those and restrain them and just cool as a cucumber when he did it… I don’t know exactly what their problems were – maybe just a product of their environment… He was… he seemed to be generally concerned with what he was teaching then and how he was teaching.

Drew recalled that he got into trouble sometimes while he was in school and he seemed indifferent to his punishments:
They’d [teachers] say something and I would say, “Really?” I think this is the way it is. And I’d get a detention. Then I’d go over to Ms. Lowe’s class and get one over there and then back to Ms. Slattery and she’d say you have detention on this day and I’d say I can’t because I have detention with Ms. Lowden that day. And she [Mrs. Lafferty] would say, “Well that is too bad.” I remember that I was in detention for like a week! It’s funny looking back.

Drew shared that he was involved in the talented and gifted program where he learned to play chess, and that he was a bit of a loner outside of school. He describes how his parents had gotten a large wooden play set they called “The Climber.” He fondly recalls how his mom would allow the teachers to bring their classes over to his house to play on the play set:

Mom would offer it up [for the teacher’s to use with their students] and they would come over. Not to say we were well-off, but we had a lot of things and they [his parents] shared a lot with people. I thought it was cool, yeah. Yeah. It felt good cause it is not that school is so great because it was my parents and my place, and they would all want to come over and have a good time. Yeah, I liked it. It was fun. Like I said, we weren’t rich, but…

Other than chess, Drew preferred to do activities on his computer rather than other school related activities. He recalls that he would often assist the physical education teacher with setting up the equipment in the gymnasium for that day’s activities. He states that he really did not enjoy school overall and did not want to complete homework often “butting heads” with his mother about having to complete his assignments.
In high school, he remained unenthused about his studies. He recalled taking very basic courses even though he believed he could have done well in harder ones. He states that he just “didn’t have the want to” to do better in school. His guidance counselors and one teacher had suggested a more challenging schedule:

Umm, they [guidance counselors] had suggested it. You know they would say, “you sure you don’t want to consider it [higher level courses]? Maybe take one blah blah blah blah blah [name of a course]?” No, I am good with this one [he would say]. It was the least amount of effort possible I guess. (pause) my senior year, I took some honor classes and I did really well with them. And I liked it and I had fun that year. Mr. Clark, the government teacher said, “C’mon you can do better than that one [class], and he said, “I’m just gonna sign you up for Honors World History.” …and that was his recommendation, so that is what I got signed up for. I took Honors Latin 2 and I took Honors Physics. Ya know it kinda surprised me. I would remember all the capital names for world history.

Drew expressed that he enjoyed science and computer related courses the most. He shared times when he would do activities on the computers where his mother worked and the joy he derived from creating web pages or making print-outs of what he had designed on the computer.

Drew described himself as a teenager as “a portly fellow”. The summer after his Junior year in high school he took up bicycling with his friend. He lost nearly 100 lbs. by the end of his senior year. Proud of his accomplishment, he even had his senior pictures taken with his bike.
After his graduation from high school, he attended the same university where his parents were employed because the university provided a tuition waiver benefit to family members of employees. He explained that attending the university was expected of him and there was no deciding where he would attend college:

It [attending the university] was expected of me. I didn’t think about doing it. I guess my Junior year I started thinking about I gotta go to college, so that is what I did [went to the university]...It was kind of a no-brainer. It [the university] is in my backyard and I got the tuition waiver, so I am going to [the university] and that is what I did.

After graduation from high school, Drew and one of his friends decided to join the local volunteer fire department. He felt that he was “one of the family” and the excitement was great for him:

…it’s kind of what took over my life. I got lights and sirens in my vehicle, fighting fires, the EMT thing took over. I made friends there…

The excitement over his firefighting and emergency medical technician duties soon impacted his studies. He recalls this time when his pager went off in the middle of an exam:

We [his classmate who was also on the volunteer squad] were taking the test and (starts to laugh while talking) and we looked at each other and were like OK, and we just left…Yeah, it was in the middle of the exam… the exams weren’t (searching for word to describe). … I guess not really what you think of an exam, what a typical person would think of as an exam, I guess. It was a casual type, “go
and take your test” kind of thing, so it wasn’t really a big deal I don’t think. I didn’t finish the test… I did not like that class at all. I don’t think I was prepared for the amount of studying required for college courses cause I just breezed through high school. You can’t really do that in college.

Drew had intended to work towards an engineering technology program. He expressed his frustration with the liberal arts requirements:

I mean do I really need that? I mean I understand the whole breadth of knowledge kinda thing, but holy cow. That doesn’t really have anything to do with computers….at least I don’t think.

Drew stated that while college was expected of him, there wasn’t much mention of what it meant to go to college and what to expect when he was there. He describes how he went “through the motions,” but the only things that really excited him about going to the university were that he would have the opportunity to work more with computers.

They [his parents] expected it [going to college] of me. My uncle expected it of me. Everyone expected it of me. I didn’t really talk to them about it. I just…you are going to college [mimics his parents]. So I went through the motions, I signed up for classes, I went to classes. I was excited to go, “Yeah, alright, I am gonna do all this computer stuff!”

Drew soon found out that he did not enjoy being in the classroom. He had other designs on where he wanted to be and how he wanted to be involved at the university:
Mom was just do the best you can, and I was a student employee at CNS [where his mom worked] and that was more important to me than going to class. I felt like I would learn more by doing as opposed to sitting classroom. I have…. it just didn't seem like it was good for me. I didn't enjoy it. I did enjoy hanging out with the techs at CNS and see how to fix problems and see all the new things in the brand-new Pentium II processor when it first came out and you know, be friends with the director and it just seemed more appealing to me than going to classes…I don’t know that I had a clue [about the expectations of him]. All I knew was that I had to take classes other than what was required for my major, but I don’t think I had no idea the amount or the reaches of it…

There were also some social worries that accompanied Drew to the university. He describes himself as sort of a “geek” and that he had no plans to become involved on campus or to try to make friends. He describes his main concerns about attending the university:

Just class after class after class. Homework, papers, etc. And honestly just a bunch of people I didn't fit in with…Fitting in. I think that was my big one. (pause) yeah just fitting in pretty much. Not the classes really, just fitting in. A bunch of new people. A social anxiety kind of thing.

At the end of his first term, Drew was placed on academic probation due to his low academic performance, and he was required to meet with his advisor regarding his status. He did not feel that the meetings were productive:
I had to see an advisor. I was on academic probation for a while, so I had to see an advisor, who was not helpful, but anyway, yeah...I had to take a “welcome to [name of university]. Here’s how to develop good study habits” kind of classes...and I...yeah, I didn’t wanna do it. The gentleman [advisor]... just seemed like I was yet another student. I felt I suppose that he seemed like he had a ton of other things he would rather have been doing. I suppose that might have made me feel like I didn't care either, but I'm afraid I was already there [not caring). He was not helpful. He was not encouraging...he didn’t care why...I guess...why I was on academic probation. It just ...It was you need to study better and go to class. Yeah...he didn’t care [why I was on probation].

Drew recalled that when he was registering for the next term’s courses “he was more concerned about scheduling my courses early in the week, so I could be done.” He stated that he even though he didn’t want to attend the university or register for new courses; he felt he had to continue with his attendance:

It has been drilled into my head and that's what you have to do.... you go to college..... you know? No ifs, ands, or buts.... that's what you need to do. It’s is expected that if you want to get anywhere in the world, you have to have a college degree. You can't do anything without it.

At the end of his last term, Drew had made the decision to not return to the university. He describes how he came to the decision:

During my last quarter, I don't know if there's anything in particular that made me choose not to come back with things. I can remember just that I didn't want to
come back and I didn't...... I’d stopped taking classes...... I stopped attending classes. I just didn’t do anything. I just didn’t care. I don’t think there was any one event that made me decide not to….not to go to class.

As a result, his GPA had not improved and he was academically dismissed from the university.

There were no parental repercussions from his decision to leave the university. He describes how his parents, as he had mentioned previously, were supportive of his decision: “My parents are so supportive, it's kind of sickening. (pause) I really wish sometimes that they had not been so supportive maybe sometimes.” When asked what he would have preferred to do after high school, he quipped the following:

I would have loved to have just sat back and had my parents take care of me while I ate Cheetos, but seriously I don't know. I knew I had to work. I guess you could say my parents gave me that impression. They were the hardest working persons that I knew and they still are. They are role models to me. If you want something badly enough you have to work for it or at least find a way to get it in an upstanding, productive citizen type of way. Public assistance wasn't an option. It’s just not what we [his family] were about, in my opinion.

Drew decided to get a job “cause I couldn’t just slum around the rest of my life.” He began working as a 911 emergency dispatcher, but left after a few months as he found it to be too overwhelming. He tried to return to higher education at a nearby community college where he completed two courses related to fire safety before he left to pursue
training as a paramedic. He is currently employed as a paramedic with a local fire department.

**Jack Peters summary.** Jack Peters is a 39 year old full-time, self-employed medical professional who lives with his wife and their two daughters in the same town in which he was raised. Jack is an involved father to his daughters and has recently received a patent for a medical device he developed. He sponsors local children’s sports leagues in addition to working with the local high school football team.

**Background.** Jack was born in a rural area of West Virginia. He is the middle child born to married parents and has an older sister and a younger brother. When he was 2 years old, his large extended family, which included his paternal grandmother and two uncles and their families, moved to another West Virginia town that was closer to a metropolitan area for work at a steel mill. Jack was surrounded by his extended family while growing up as they all lived within close proximity to one another.

I lived a block away from the school and she [his grandmother] lived two blocks away from the school, so we’d go to her house. My cousin lived next door to her [grandmother] and my other…well Uncle Michael lived outside of town, but they would … they were like 2 miles away and … my whole family is full of cousins…. she [his grandmother] had nine children and three of them moved [relocated for work] in that move, and my aunt and uncle, and another aunt moved… moved in [to town], and then another moved into town, so really most of them relocated to… to this area.
Jack’s mother graduated from high school and obtained her licensed practical nursing (LPN) certificate after her oldest child was born. His father worked in a manufacturing plant and never finished high school. When Jack was approximately 13 years old, his father became unemployed for the next five years, and the family lived off his mother’s income as an LPN. Jack describes this to be a difficult time for him and his family:

My father was unemployed for five years, so we lived off my mom’s income as a nurse at that point in time. That's when he got serious about him not having his education. I was probably 13 or 14 at the time. I was in about 8th or 9th grade, so that was a transition for me too… [I learned)] that unemployment sucks! He [his father] just sat and stewed in a zone, with his remorse about us and him not being educated and not even being able to go out and find another job because of his [lack of] education. It was a….a tough time financially.

Salient characteristics. Jack is a high energy, determined individual who possesses a strong work ethic. Throughout our discussion, Jack often referred to the importance of working heard, saving money and obtaining a higher education.

Strong work ethic. From the time he was a young boy, he has worked to earn money.

I've always had a job from the time I was probably five years old. I used to help my grandmother doing yard sales and things like [that]. And she would always go buy things, like a whole yard sale and bring it back to her house. There were things that were broken and needed fixed, and so this really is how I started
working. She would pay me to fix things, so I was good at it, so I would do it all the time…so I turned 16. I worked at [a fast food restaurant] for a little while. I worked at [a grocery store] bagging groceries…I worked at the go cart place behind the mall four summers in a row. I always had a job.

Jack told me that often worked multiple jobs throughout the year, participated in several sports [soccer was his favorite] all while attending school. Even now, Jack works a seasonal position with a high school sports team in addition to his full-time work at his medical practice. Providing a stable and generous home life are important to Jack, so I expect that he will continue to exert his energies toward that end,

*Desire to be financially stable.* Jack learned at a young age that he did not want to struggle financially. He described the role his sister played in shaping his plans for the future:

…she was a bit of a wildcat… so she's out of the house and pregnant by the time she was 15 or 16, and so then she had a son…so he lived with us most of time since my sister worked and was trying to go to school on the side. Same thing repeats itself… My parents took care of her child while she was trying to go out and get an education, so my nephew, he was there… I was very careful about things and like…pregnancy and… you know. I…I…about school in general. But like, in general, not that I want to go to college so I don’t end up like… I always knew that I would have a job to support myself and not have to be like her and struggle the way that she did starting off.

His father also played a significant role in his attitude toward money:
[The manufacturing plant where his father was employed] closed down around 1985. Then my father was unemployed for five years, so we lived off my mom’s income as a nurse’s aid at that point in time. That’s when he got serious about him not having his education. I was probably 13 or 14 at the time. I was in about 8th or 9th grade, so that was a transition for me too. So…It was…(pause), unemployment sucks! He just sat and stewed in a zone, with his remorse about us and him not being educated and not even being able to go out and find another job because of his education. It was a tough time financially and… as far as nobody telling me what was going on and that I should do this or that [homework]. It was tough to go through that especially when your friends are now wearing suits and tuxedos to dances and things…and that you just…..yeah….

Jack learned through his father’s experience that lack of an education was detrimental to having a job and being financially stable, so he began to get serious about his education.

**Education.** Jack had little desire for school when he was young. He doesn’t remember his parents being involved or monitoring his progress:

…Education was never a really big thing, so I have struggled through school because they never really pushed it, and I never really tried or exerted myself…. I really had a hard time… because of laziness and just nobody is, you know, telling me that I should do this [homework].

There was, however, one incident stood out that caught his mother’s attention regarding his lack of attention to his studies:
Fifth-grade was really my worst. I didn’t like my teacher. I didn't want to be at school. I didn’t want to do school work, and it was a real tough year for me and (pause) I can still remember that teacher’s just whole expression. I had to write this report on all the woodland Indians, and it was supposed to be two pages, and I think whatever I (chuckles at the memory) wrote was copied out of the… of the that encyclopedia and only came out to one page, so I can remember like writing 2 or 3 words per line and double spacing. Writing big just so I can fill out the 2 pages and …then the teacher made me stay in from recess (chuckles)! The teacher made me stay in from recess for five months (sarcastically exaggerates) before she even called my mom (he laughs at the exaggeration). That's when it all blew up … (laughs) and that’s when they [his parents] started taking a more active part in my… my education at that point. It took me a… a long time to get to that point to figure out that doing things was a lot easier than trying to get out of things…

It wasn’t until he was in high school that he began to take his academics seriously. Around the tenth grade, Jack began to consider the option of attending college after high school. His father’s experience was a big influence on his decision:

I was motivated to…to…to go to college to get a job where I didn’t struggle and have to worry about if I lost my job…having to go through that transitional period of unemployment and [no] money… At that point I wanted something I could count on…one job that pays well, make a decent living and that I can have a family and support , you know, you know….the history with my father. I don't
care what I’m doing. You just gotta get out there and make some money. Go
support your… you and whoever else you think.

During the time when Jack’s father was unemployed, he would tell Jack that he
needed a two-year college degree just to be seen for an interview. “You have to get a two
year degree to get a job” (mimicking his dad’s voice).

Jack met his future wife, who lived approximately 45 miles away from Jack’s
home, when they were each in the 11\textsuperscript{th} grade. She was a positive influence on Jack and
his pursuit of higher education:

I would just hang around her all the time, and you know, away from my
delinquent friends that I was hanging out with from before that really were in the
remedial classes that I was, so after that point I used to travel down there [to
where she lived] and see her a lot and I was lots more motivated for school after
that point. I realized I could do whatever I wanted to do.

She worked in a medical practice after school and Jack would sit with her until she was
finished. Jack became interested in the activities of the doctor and soon began thinking
about a career in medicine. He shared this idea with his guidance counselor:

When I told my guidance counselor that, he goes through my list of grade point
averages in all the classes I've taken, he tells me that I would be better suited to be
a fireman or a policeman, so taking this “god of wisdom's” advice, I thought,
“uhhh okay.” So I went into criminal justice…I never showed up, just partying
with my friends and have a good time and all that kind of stuff… I just wasn’t
interested in those classes…I suppose I expected it to be a continuation of what
high school was before, which was easy. I …school was always easy, but only if I applied myself. And I just didn’t know if I wanted to apply myself at that point in time. ….when you get steered a couple of different directions….by my guidance counselor….and all that kinda stuff, so…

Jack had limited input about how to go about getting into college. He had been working all through high school and most of his immediate peer group did not go on to college. Those that did went away to school on athletic scholarships or had parents who were paying the fees to go to college and not using federal financial aid, so he had little knowledge about of the financial aid options available to him through the community college, so he took on paying for it himself:

I paid for all of it myself. That is why I chose to go to (names college) because I can… I can pay for it myself. My mom…. I didn't have the money my first semester, [so] my mom said well if you go I’ll, I’ll pay for anything just pay me back. so I was always three months behind on school, so that while I was taking classes, I was saving the money to pay it back, and I …I financed it all through 90 day notes through the bank and they didn't require me to have a cosigner if under $1500. At that time I was working at a job, had a car and bills that was in my own name at that point in time, so I’d just paid for it myself.

Jack began the criminal justice program the fall after he graduated high school, but soon he was skipping classes and spending time hanging out in the student lounge and playing card games. He would ask others to share their notes with him, and he would go to classes when there was an exam.
That first semester I just went [to class] for maybe like a month, then I was playing cards and having a good time talking to people in school. I mean I would show up to school every day, but I wouldn’t go to class. I’d like check people's notes and show up for class and expect to do… do… do well on a test. I didn’t study cause I had the same bad habits in high school. I never studied cause I could just show up for class and get a passing grade the easy way. It’s easy right? Yeah, it wasn’t that easy…(chuckles).

Jack was placed on academic probation after his second term. When he considered enrolling in classes again the following fall, he had to meet with a committee regarding his poor academic record.

…they sat me down in front of 7 people who are all looking at your grades and saying, “You’re not showing up, but you came here to spend your money again and not show up [for class]. why?” I just remember thinking like, “I don’t know?!....Why am I here?” I was just going through the motions and not really thinking about it. Everybody’s going to college, so that is what I am going to do...they’re all [his friends at school] …were all going to college and you have to go to college to get a good job, so that is what I am going to do. At that point I’m like, “uh okay. Let's just not do this [go to college] for a while.”

After leaving college, Jack obtained work as a waiter in a restaurant making approximately $100 in tips each night. He describes the excitement of having “cash in my pocket” and felt that he was doing well financially at that time. Three years after he left the community college, Jack began thinking again about college since he didn’t want
to be a waiter for a career, decided to try to attend the community college again. He had saved up a lot of money and didn’t want any loans for school. He felt he could work his way through school and not assume debt that way.

Jack still had aspirations in the medical field and was determined to work on a degree that he wanted, not necessarily one that a counselor recommended. When he returned to the college, he met with a college advisor. Jack was advised that he should consider other options (than medical) due to his previous poor academic performance.

I never went to see that counselor again. I’d write [counselor’s signature] and go fill out the schedule and check the classes to see if there were available seats, just like they [the counselors] did. When I first went back, they immediately made me take all the classes that I failed [the first time he attended] over again, so when I started getting to the point where I had extra classes to add to my schedule, I would say, “I want this science and this and this class because it goes in with the medical things.” I worked hard to get my GPA up so I could get into the [medical] program I wanted [at a different school].

Jack retook all of the courses in which he had failed his first time and earned his Associate in Science degree before going on to complete his bachelor’s degree. Jack was admitted into the medical program he desired and works as a chiropractor in his home town.

Sandy Richardson summary. Sandy Richardson is a 22 year old Caucasian woman who is employed as a full-time retail employee at a major department store near her hometown. The city is a mixture of sparsely and moderately populated rural
farmland and is a popular tourist destination in the summer months. The area is approximately made up of 90% Caucasian, eight percent African American and two percent other races.

**Background.** Sandy currently resides in her hometown with her husband and father-in-law. She is the youngest of 4 children with two brothers and a sister. Her parents are married. Her mother has received disability benefits since Sandy was a young girl and until recently, her father worked full-time as a maintenance worker in addition to various part-time jobs in order to supplement the family income. Sandy describes her early years as being financially difficult for her family. Her parents declared bankruptcy when she was 6 years old, which led to several housing moves for the family.

Like, we always found a way to survive. Like, I have always had a computer. We may not have money to do a lot of other things, but we always had a computer. My dad would let things drop off. He and my mom had poor financial planning and organization skills.

When I asked her to describe what it was like for her growing up, she described her family life in this way:

It was hard work. It was always hard work, but it was always happy. Our family was happy and had a happy outlook on life no matter what we would get thrown at us. Like we… I went months without electricity. Like we went nine-months and some of it was in the winter without electricity. Without any way of cooking or baking. We lived on PBJs, but it was still one of the best times of my life. We always had a happy outlook on life.
Until her studies reached the equivalent of tenth grade, Sandy was privately home-schooled, along with her 3 siblings, by their mother. Sandy’s father was an avid electronics collector with an affinity for learning the latest technology with computers or other devices according to Sandy, and he would often bring them home to repair and to supplement their home-school curriculum.

**Salient characteristics.** After talking with Sandy, I realized that she is an intensely independent and hard-working young woman. She cares deeply for her family, values their opinions, and readily assumes responsibility for their care when called upon. She possesses a strong work ethic and believes in setting goals, especially financial goals, and remains focused as she pursues them. These qualities have served her well, but have also impacted furthering her education and continues to do so as she has not returned to higher education despite her desire to earn her degree. In addition, her social skills were impacted due to several housing moves between the ages of two to fifteen.

**Independent.** Sandy recounted times when she made decisions in order to be different and to obtain something she desired. Below she describes how she persuaded her mother to let her attend high school after all other siblings had completed their home-schooling and moved out of the home:

I even wrote an essay about it to my mom about the pros and cons about why it would be good for me to try out high school and if I don’t like it, I can always go back to homeschooling and all that, even though I wasn’t going to do that [resume homeschooling]. I just said that to make her feel better. I would have never (stressed word) let myself fail (laughs).
In line with the independent streak, Sandy seeks opportunities to learn new things. She recounted a time when she decided she wanted to learn about religion, so she began to attend a service at a church that she passed as she walked to work:

I had always wanted to go to a church to see what it was like. And I was like, “I am going to go to this one,” so I was 16, and I went in one Sunday and sat down... After I while, I began going to Bible study...everybody loved that I went and started voicing my opinion on things. Everybody loved me being there because they liked how I voiced my views and everybody loved that and said, “well, that is a different way of looking at things.” I went to church every Sunday I could all through high school when I didn’t have to work.”

Family. Sandy often shared how her life was impacted by family events and her strong sense of responsibility for her family. Due to their disabilities, Sandy often cared for her parents and father-in-law. While in college, Sandy’s sister experienced serious health issues that required Sandy to assist in her care. During this time, she also transported her parents to visit her sister in the hospital, all while juggling a job and school responsibilities. Her father-in-law also had health issues, so Sandy and her husband moved back to her hometown in order to be able to care for him. In addition, Sandy felt a strong sense responsibility to perform the functions she believes are important in her role as a wife, as well. She described what it was like being a married college student and trying to juggle her roles as a wife and a college student:

I would go home and work on studying and make dinner for my husband to eat when he got home from work. He worked from 4-12, so I never saw him. That
was hard because I was used to having him around. It helped me study I guess cause it motivated me to get [my studying] done, so I could spend time with him.

*Strong work ethic and debt avoidance.* Throughout our conversations, Sandy demonstrated examples that exemplified her strong work ethic and desire to be financially stable while attending school. While she “loved the classes,” she felt she needed to also become employed after the first term to meet expenses. She soon found that attending college classes, caring for her ill sister, shuttling her parents to see their ill daughter, and working took its toll on her. She got behind in her studies and was missing class often. She felt she had to withdraw from her courses in order to preserve her GPA and to care for her sister and earn money to pay for living expenses. At that time, she was working approximately 32-40 hours per week in addition to her other responsibilities.

Sandy and her husband remained living near the university after she withdrew in order to fulfill the conditions of their rental apartment agreement. When I asked Sandy if she considered enrolling for her third term, she indicated that she was working two jobs at the time in order to be able to make student loan payments that were about to begin due to her withdrawal:

I knew that after 6 months I would have to start paying my student loans, and so I wanted to stay there (living near the university) until I had that all worked off [what she owed from her OU attendance]. It seemed like a bad idea to take on more debt when I already had debt… I had to pay that on top of rent, bills, utilities.
Social skills and peer relationships. Sandy experienced significant life changes that affected her abilities to form her social skills and education among other things. For nearly 10 years, Sandy’s living arrangements changed four times as her father transitioned to various part-time positions. After her parents’ bankruptcy, the family was forced to move from a “beautiful home in a middle class neighborhood” to a trailer in a “rough” neighborhood that significantly impacted her early social experiences and friendships:

The main difference between living in the trailer versus the house in town was the crime rate was really high in the trailer park, and my mom wouldn’t let us out of her sight anymore. We couldn’t go like to a park or someplace else to play if she couldn’t be at the site to watch us. The trailer park was in a really bad area, but, like, even bad people have good kids, so they would be the kids that I would have as friends. She [Mom] just didn’t want to let us out of her site or far from the house. Like we couldn’t play hide and go seek in the trailer park because she didn’t want us to go missing. I mean like every trailer in that park had been like a meth lab or a drug dealer’s house. One of our neighbors on the street behind us murdered his girlfriend there. It was a really rough neighborhood. When we moved to a campground, we had all these friends [staying at the campground for the summer], like, that we could go to, like, we never kept the same friends because not everybody would go to the park every day. So, like, friends were actually hard to stick with when I was there.
**Education.** Sandy began her homeschooling when the family lived at a park when she was six or seven years old. Her mother set the curriculum with the approval of a school representative and Sandy could work at her own pace and generally Sandy liked to go through the material quickly as she was an avid learner. When the family moved to the trailer in the in the poor neighborhood, she spent even more time indoors reading and working on her studies.

After she convinced her mother to let her try going to high school, Sandy found the material much easier than her homeschooling curriculum. She succeeded in accumulating the required number of credits needed to graduate in three years by taking mostly AP and college preparatory courses. She finished her high school requirements with a 3.6 overall GPA all while working part-time at K-mart the last 2 years she was in high school.

Sandy discussed her plan to attend college in the future and looked into assistance from her guidance counselors. She felt that she wasn’t really supported in her decision to pursue education:

Really in my school it was more like you are on your own. Like, I had to go ask for stuff like the paperwork. I took the ACT and all that…I got the feeling that they were more concerned about making the school look “nice”. My school was really bad about that. Like they cared more about appearances than the students. They looked good on paper more than they did…I had conversations with Mom and Dad about going to school [college] and what their thoughts were, was, “We are happy to help you with anything,” but I organized everything, but like…
basically I wanted…. everything I did was basically up to me. They could help me with a lot, like move, and plan, and all my paperwork, but I did most of the rest on my own.

Sandy says despite fact that she had always wanted to attend college, she didn’t know what areas she wanted to pursue, so she planned to take a year off after high school to consider her options:

I wanted to go to college, but I didn’t know what I wanted to do at college. I like to learn new things always, so I wanted to go. That was always an idea I had in my head, but initially what my original plan was was that I was going to graduate high school and then the decide what I wanted to do and then go to college, but my mom and my sister didn't want that. They did not…. and so I didn’t want to let them down, so...they said if I waited I would lose all my drive and everything, so I went right after high school after I graduated after and well, I went there and like I was planning on a double major in mathematics and accounting… yeah it was fun. My sister wanted me to go [to college] because she knew…Like, my sister thinks I am so much smarter than her. Her and my mom both thought it would be a crime if I didn’t go to college, even though I didn’t know what I wanted to do, and I was like “OK” basically. Well, I mean, I didn’t want to disappoint them, and that was my biggest thing and I didn’t want to break their hearts. Applying was easy. I just had to write the essay and apply for the financial aid.

The decision to attend college sooner than she originally planned also affected other life plans that she had with her boyfriend:
We planned on getting married anyway… like we already planned it because we knew we were going to get married anyway and it was in our future, but like, had I not gone to school [college] I would have probably waited until the next summer. I would have given myself more time to plan it and get ready financially. Also, I made everything for the wedding. I stayed up late the night before and made everything, the cake, the decorations, I altered my wedding dress, my mom made the bridesmaids dresses, and everything was made from scratch [to save money].

After the wedding, it was time to move to the university. Sandy described the move as somewhat chaotic. Her parents and husband loaded up a borrowed pick-up truck and Sandy, who did not yet have her driver’s license, purchased her first car with the money she had saved from working:

The day before we left, I bought my first car. It was a 1997 Cutlass Sierra. And my dad borrowed a pickup truck to help with the move. We had the car all piled up with stuff, too. We had car trouble getting there, so it took 12 hours to make a 5 hour trip. The next day I had to use the money I had saved up to fix my car… We arrived to our rental apartment with about $100.

Despite the rough start, Sandy spoke positively about her experiences at the university:

Well, for like the first week, it was just trying to get to all of them [classes]. I kept getting lost, but I always ended up finding them… I loved the classes. The more time I spent going to them, I loved them. I regret not being able to spend time with them… they were good cause I felt like we could get in depth with some of the material like in history, but sometimes I thought they went too slow.
Like, I was homeschooled, so my mom made the curriculum, and I could work at my own pace. But I liked learning new things like in my world history class.

Between classes, Sandy liked to go to the library to read or study. If she had a little spending money, she would meet her husband for lunch. But most of the time, she walked the 2 miles to her apartment after classes were over for the day since not only was she a college student, she was also a wife:

I would go home and work on studying and make dinner for my husband to eat when he got home from work. He worked from 4-12 so I never saw him. That was hard because I was used to having him around. It helped me study, I guess cause it motivated me to get done so I could spend time with him.

Sandy shared that she finds it difficult to “warm-up” to people, so she spent a lot of her time outside of classes with her husband or older sister who was attending the same university. Sandy and her husband would often attend campus events with her sister.

Oh yeah. I am really close with my sister….We’d [Sandy and her husband] get together with my sister and hang out. We’d go to dinner or go hang out at my sister’s house. She lived in a party house. We went to a speaker for the LGBT. I got really involved in the LGBT club down there since my sister is a lesbian. I would go to their meetings every week with my husband and sister and her friends. We’d sit there and talk. My husband helped put together the float for the parade.
At other times, Sandy and her husband would spend time with her husband’s co-workers. She describes how she felt like they never really fit in with people she met, both on campus and off:

He had his friends from Walmart and they’d do things. I dunno. It was kinda awkward cause we didn’t really fit in either way because we were …like we were like people from [there, residents], but we weren’t. We also seemed like college students, but at the same time, we were living off campus and everything, so it was really confusing for people.

Near the end of Sandy’s first term on campus, she got a job in order to help pay the expenses she and her husband were incurring. Sandy had received financial aid through grants, scholarships and loans and applied any overage amounts to rent and other living-related expenses, but as Sandy stated, “the overage checks only covered two month’s rent” leaving her and her husband to generate income to cover all remaining expenses. At the time, her husband was averaging 32–35 hours per week. Sandy worked 40 hours over the holiday break between terms and continued to do so after the next term began. She describes the difficulties she experienced during her second term:

I took my first accounting class and she [the instructor] was tough. My accounting class was really, really, bad because I was working 40 hours and going to school full time. I ended up with strep throat and bronchitis in January, and so I missed class there. My sister ended up in the hospital, and I fell behind in my classes between being sick and spending all of my waking time shuffling my parents around town to visit my sister. I [was trying] to help with my sister’s
problems, too, so I made the choice to withdraw rather than ruin my education [by failing classes].

The decision to withdraw from all of her classes was difficult for Sandy. Her parents and husband supported her decision, but stressed that she should plan to go back to continue her education. She described how she felt when making the decision to withdraw from the university:

It broke my heart. It really did. I felt like I was giving up. It took me a month to decide to drop out. My sister finally had to convince me that it would be better to withdraw then fail, but it still broke my heart. I didn’t want to quit. It was so hard. It made me feel like I was giving up. I can’t do this. It was so bad. I didn’t think I could handle it.

Although Sandy had hoped that she would be able to resume her studies the next term, she was not able to go back to the university, so Sandy acquired a second job anticipating that she would have to start paying back her student loans in addition to paying the bills they had already accumulated. She describes her complex situation:

I ended up not being able to go back to school again. I couldn’t afford it because I had to keep paying rent. I was working 40 hours and he was working 32-40 hours and we were still scraping by. Rent was 800 bucks (per month) and we were barely pulling that in with our paychecks.

Sandy was unsure of the status of her grants and scholarships:

With my grants and scholarships? I had no idea what was going on with those.

What happened was I was trying to pay for rent and stuff with my overage check
and it wasn’t covering it cause it covered only 2 months and that’s it. And since I wasn’t in school I wasn’t getting that… I wanted to [go back to the university], but I knew that it would be way too hard to do everything because I just couldn’t afford it.

Sandy and her husband chose to remain in their apartment even though Sandy was no longer taking classes at the university:

We stayed because we still had a contract with our landlord and didn’t want to be sued for what [money] that we still owed. I guess we could have packed up and left, but that wouldn’t have been fun. Plus, I knew that after 6 months I would have to start paying my student loans and so I wanted to stay there until I had that all worked off [what she owed from her college attendance]. It seemed like a bad idea to take on more debt when I already had debt.

Sandy was not familiar with the financial aid terms and options of her student loans and didn’t realize that she could defer the loan payments. She never contacted financial aid or other departments once she withdrew from her courses. She had received a letter that she had to begin paying her student loans six months after she left the university. Sandy also shared additional reasons for her decision to not return to the university:

Well [the university location] wasn’t good for me. It had bad air, and I was always fighting bronchitis or something like that and would have to go to the hospital. Which is really bad when you don’t have insurance. I am the youngest in my family on both sides of my family, and I started thinking that they are all
really old, and I’m thinking my whole family is going to be all gone, and I won’t have spent time with them. Then, my father-in-law was getting really behind on his bills. His other son was moving away, and we were like, “You can’t move away; He is in trouble.” So, we moved back and got him (her father-in-law) all caught up (on his bills). We moved in with him and are living there now.

**Future plans.** Currently, Sandy and her husband are living in their home town and both are working for the same employer on the same shift. Sandy has set future goals that she would like to accomplish, including higher education:

Oh yeah. To this day, I still want to [go to college]). I want to get more comfortable financially and then go back to school and have the ability to work part time and go [to school] half time...[I want to] get my cars all working, pay off my bills, one day have kids and have a St. Bernard (chuckles). I hope that I don’t have to live with my father-in-law.

Sandy thought about how she felt about her plans for college not working out as she had hoped. She expresses some regrets:

I wish I had waited a little bit like I wanted to, saved up some money to live off of. I probably would have stayed [in school] longer that way...so I had time for my husband to look for a job to make money. We went down there and had probably $100 to our name, so that was bad... I am afraid of failure. I am afraid to fail at anything I do. If I feel like a failure, I get so depressed until I prove myself wrong. What motivates the most is my fear of failure. I do everything for my family which is weird that I worry about that. I mean I never failed a test or
anything like that. I don’t know why I feel that way? My parents have failed, too, but they always came out of it, like bankruptcy and selling their car and looking for food and all that…I think maybe [I’ll] go into teaching. Schooling is like what I know.

In each of the participants’ stories, I found rich, thick descriptions of what their lives were like and their experiences with learning and education as they reached adulthood and entered higher education. I feel that their openness and willingness to share these stories was beneficial as I examined commonalties and developed themes as evidenced in next chapter.
Chapter Five

The participants in this study were first-generation Appalachian students who withdrew from college during the first academic year. They withdrew for a variety of reasons that were related to their backgrounds, experiences, and family members as well as personal goals. In addition to describing the more prominent themes, I illustrate the themes with personal reflections from the participants that demonstrate how they made sense of their decision to attend and subsequently withdraw from higher education. In addition, I address additional discoveries made through the data analysis process.

Several themes emerged from this study highlighting what Appalachian first-generation students experienced when continuing their post-secondary educations. Like all college students, the participants’ pre-college practices and backgrounds played a large role in their college expectations and experiences. Collections of experiences that came together as themes include the following: Integrating into the social fabric of higher education, managing the academic side, spending money and accumulating debt, and taking care of family. Other areas which are addressed in this chapter describe how the participants found their paths after their withdrawal from higher education, where they are now, and unintended and additional finds in regards to the less salient themes.

Integrating into the Social Fabric of Higher Education

Ali and McWhirter (2006) assert that individuals from rural Appalachia are a distinct cultural group with especially close familial relationships. This uniqueness manifests itself in the more distant social relationships found on university campuses where the cultural differences may be markedly different. Participants described the
phenomenon of social fit from three differing viewpoints: 1) those who had concerns about social fit before entering higher education, 2) those who were caught by surprise due to their inability to fit into the social fabric at the college or university and 3) those who relied on social fit as a way to be comfortable in higher education when they felt uncomfortable with another aspect of their attendance.

**Contending with pre-college concerns.** Many of the participants, but not all, were active in high school co-curricular and extra-curricular activities to some degree, which may have led to confidence in attending higher education. Shelley and Drew are examples of the opposite sides of the spectrum. Both indicated that they had some anxiety about how they would integrate into the university’s social setting prior to attending.

Shelley was an outgoing young woman who had been involved in many team activities in high school. Her concerns about the social atmosphere at the university stemmed from the absence of individuals whom she knew attending the university. She also had roommate concerns prior to attending the university that proved to be unfounded. While Shelley did minimally attempt to integrate into the social atmosphere, her lack of confidence in being able to establish relationships impacted her persistence.

Drew on the other hand had a background of being a loner in elementary and high school and considered himself something of a “geek” as he preferred playing on his computer or video games to spending time with others. He indicated that he did not know of anyone in his school that was attending the same university he was attending. I suspect that the perceived absence of people he knew attending the university may have
stemmed from his lack of social connections in high school, particularly since the university he attended was located within 15 miles of his high school. When Drew attended the university, he continued his isolating behaviors:

That [making friends] was the furthest thing from my mind. I am not really much of a social...I’m a geek kind of guy, I guess...I guess I was concerned about fitting in. I think that was my big one [concern about going to college]...(pause) yeah just fitting in pretty much. Not the classes really, just fitting in. A bunch of new people. A social anxiety kind of thing.

It is ironic that Drew expressed that he had concerns about socializing and whether he would feel any social acceptance, but made no effort to pursue any social interaction. His focus seemed to be centered entirely on what he knew and where he felt accepted, computers, both his own and at his mother’s place of employment. He could say he spent time on campus; however, the computer world absorbed his interests. He noted that he did not even form relationships with his peers who also maintained an interest in computers.

*Experiencing marginalization.* Appalachians are among the cultural groups for whom it is common to experience marginalization when they interact with mainstream populations and institutions (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Billings & Blee, 2000; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Some of the participants in this study were not aware of their marginalization until they experienced these institutions that represented not only vastly different cultures from their home cultures, but also either implicitly or in some cases explicitly, demeaned the places and social identities that formed them.
Carol’s awkward feeling of not fitting in socially was unexpected. She was popular and active in many school programs in high school. Carol never considered that she would not fit in at the university as she excelled academically and athletically and had many friendships with peers and adults alike. However, when she began attending a small, private liberal arts college, Carol’s lack of social fit surprised her. She was a married woman, yes, but that was the expectation for her in her town when one had a serious boyfriend. As a married woman on a private college campus where elite students attended, this factor affected her ability to integrate with her peers. She began experiencing feelings of awkwardness around her peers who represented in her words: “these very preppy East Coast, proper, you know, student population.”

…..it was a bit of an oddity for me because, of course, I walked out [onto campus], and I was the same age as the students there, but my life was so different and my responsibilities were so different. The one thing that stands out in my mind, sometime within the first couple of months I was there…. so there was this TA (teaching assistant) in one of our labs. Really nice, funny guy and you know I was a pretty good student, and so like any college student he said, “Ya know, you should come to, come to a party at one of the frat houses,” whatever ATO or wherever it was. I was… like doesn’t? …he doesn't?… I can’t do any of that because it's… well, first of all I’m married, and would that be right? And, and, I would like have to drive home and drive back or have to hang out [on campus] and find something to do and you know, at or, you know, I can't because today I was working [the day of the party] but that…. all those kind of things often came
up. I had to leave campus because I get to get to work, which was a half hour away, so it was an oddity. Socially, it was kind of odd. There were a couple of, a couple of girls that I connected with there, but they seemed so young. Although they were the same age, but that I felt like the old experienced person compared to this kid, so I didn't do a lot of things on campus.

Family closeness is a dominant characteristic of Appalachian culture. Girls often marry their high school sweethearts and begin family life immediately after high school. As witnessed by Carol and Sandy, the marginalization they felt at attempting to merge family life as married women and attend higher education at residential campuses seemed incongruous and led to their decisions to withdraw from the university.

While a few of the participants felt confident in their social skills or did not consider the social integration aspect of transitioning into higher education, Jack used his social skills to his advantage when he went to college. Jack was extremely adept in new social situations and developing rapport with whomever he met through his time on a travelling soccer team where he met new people at each stop on the tour. When Jack realized that he did not much care for the classes he was taking and his grades were poor as a result, he escaped into the area where he was most comfortable – socializing with others:

Basically after that, that, that first semester I just went [to class] for maybe like a month, then I was playing cards and having a good time talking to people in school. I mean I would show up to school every day, but I wouldn’t go to class. I’d like check people's notes and show up for class and expect to do, do, do well
on a test. I didn’t study cause I had the same bad habits in high school. I never studied cause I could just show up for class and get a passing grade the easy way. It’s easy right? Yeah, it wasn’t that easy (chuckles)...I never liked school. I was good at it, but I just didn't care for it at all (stressed words).

As the research on Appalachian first-generation indicates, individuals from marginalized cultures often consider assimilating to the university setting to be difficult (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 2012). Many of the participants in this study indicated to some extent the inability to socially navigate the environment contributed to the eventual withdrawal from the university.

**Clinging to the familiar.** As previously indicated in the literature, Appalachians are often considered place bound due to their desire to remain in the familiar. Moving outside one’s comfort zone may be a frightening experience for some. Sandy is a good example of someone with the desire to remain place-bound.

Sandy originally planned to marry her high-school sweetheart after high school graduation, take some time off to work and save money and then continue her higher education, probably at a local university. However, at the urging or her mother and sister, she decided against taking a gap year and attended a university the academic year following high school graduation. Consistent with her family’s urging, she chose to attend the university her sister was attending, nearly four hours from her home. Sandy was close to her sister, had been on the university campus before, and felt that she would be able to succeed at the university since it was familiar. She anticipated support as her sister was nearby and her new husband would accompany her.
It was her reliance on the familiar that led to an isolation of sorts and kept her from integrating into the institution. Sandy would attend classes on campus, then leave to spend time with her sister or go home and prepare for her husband to arrive home.

I would go home and work on studying and make dinner for my husband to eat when he got home from work…I was used to having him around. It helped me study I guess ‘cause it motivated me to get done so I could spend time with him… If I had any extra money, which was a rarity, I would call my husband and go to lunch, but I usually didn’t have that luxury, so I would read a book or do my math homework ‘cause I had that daily.

Sandy was frank about her tendency to be shy in new situations, so she remained with what she was comfortable doing. Sandy described how she spent time on campus more engaged in her sister’s life and activities than those that were of interest to her:

Oh yeah. I am really close with my sister. We’d get together with my sister and hang out. We’d go to dinner or go hang out at my sister’s house. We went to a speaker for the LGBT. We went to see Toy Story 3 when my mom and dad came down…it takes me a while to warm-up to people, so I had like maybe one or two friends that I knew down there [on campus], but I had little contact with them, since I freeze up around people (chuckles nervously)...I have gotten better with that, though…I got really involved in the LBGT club down there since my sister is a lesbian. I would go to their meetings every week with my husband and sister and her friends. We’d sit there and talk.
Sandy had positive memories of her classroom experiences, as she loved learning. When she spoke about life outside the classroom, she only spoke of experiences she had with her family. Despite loving the classes and having her husband and sister nearby, Sandy ultimately did not feel that she bonded with the university and, if she had to choose to do it over again, indicated that she would not have attended college right after high school or at a distance from what was familiar to her.

**Managing the Academic Side**

One factor often cited by low-income, first-generation students regarding attending an institution of higher education is their perception of academic preparedness. Similar to navigating the social environment at the university, Appalachians may enter higher education with a sense of confidence based on their positive high school academic experiences.

Not unlike social preparedness, the participants in this study believed that they were academically prepared to pursue post-secondary education, and rightly so. Five of the eight participants, were accepted into the Talented and Gifted (TAG) programs at their elementary schools, and of those five, three (all women) were valedictorians of their respective graduating classes. Interestingly, all four of the women in this study also performed well in their academics while attending higher education; however, of the four men, two of them (one of them a TAG member) were placed on academic probation before choosing to leave their institutions and the other two withdrew primarily out of a sense of boredom and lack of or disinterest in the requirements for his degree goal. Andy summed it up in this way:
I did not like that class at all [Western Civilization]. I don’t think I was prepared for the amount of studying required for college courses cause I just breezed through high school. You can’t really do that in college...I am gonna do all this computer stuff. And then Western Civ. I mean do I really need that? I mean I understand the whole breadth of knowledge kinda thing, but holy cow. That doesn’t really have anything to do with computers…at least I don’t think. I never really paid attention to that anyway.

Andy and other participants expressed a lack of interest in required courses, primarily in liberal arts, which made them question not only their degree goals, but their decisions to attend higher education at all.

Uninspiring experiences. A few in this study expressed that they lacked clear career goals for themselves and many of them felt their academic experiences were similar to high school. Kevin and Joey expressed this feeling when they entered higher education. Neither really had an idea of what academic area to pursue. While both men performed well academically in their college courses, neither had a clear direction for his future; they both felt the courses were too similar to high school and found the general education courses uninspiring. Joey expressed his frustration this way:

...I just didn’t feel like it was giving me what college should. High school is mandatory and yes you can quit, but college is not [mandatory], and I went in with the idea that I was expected to go and had to go, but knowing that I really didn’t [have to go], so when I got there and I wasn’t finding what I hoped for and I wasn’t happy with the things they were teaching…
Choosing a degree goal is a common concern among all college students. A degree equates to a future job with financial benefits to the working-class student; therefore, the degree goal decision seems to bear a unique level of importance for this study’s population.

Some of the participants did express clear degree goals for their higher education and yet did not persist in higher education. For some, the liberal arts requirements contributed to a lack of interest in their courses and therefore the degree itself. Drew, who was considered gifted in elementary school, did not perform well in the courses that were outside of his interests (i.e. computers). When asked if he was bored with his courses, Drew explained it this way:

I wasn’t bored...I think my mind just wasn’t in school, I guess… my mind wasn't captured by school. I wasn't in love with the idea. I wasn't enamored by, you know, what it had to offer ….what I had to do…. just …it wasn't…. it seemed like a continuation of high school. And I really didn’t care for it… why do we have to take this class….I don’t even know why I am here…

Even when a student enters with a degree goal, it often changes after spending time in some of the courses related to that particular goal. This was the case for Jack. He had entered the criminal justice program at the suggestion of his high school guidance counselor who felt that Jack’s desire to become a chiropractor seemed unreasonable given Jack’s GPA. Jack described his criminal justice degree declaration in this way:

When I told my guidance counselor that [he wanted to be a chiropractor], he goes through my list of grade point averages in all the classes I've taken, and he tells
me that I would be better suited to be a fireman or a policeman, so taking this “God of wisdom's” advice I thought, (pause) okay. So I went into the criminal justice [major] as my first declared major…most of my family is in jobs related to criminal justice, so why not? [But] I didn’t like it. I… I didn’t want to be that guy that was deciding the fate of other people. Even though they were doing wrong in that sense, but is…. still I have to catch them in the act in question and I didn’t really…..and that really…. that wasn't me….. I didn’t like that… At that point I wanted something I could count on…One job that pays well, make a decent living.

*Linking the degree to employment.* Joey had similar views regarding some of his courses. The inability to see course relevance and the lack of a clear degree goal based on his interests led to a sense that he was wasting his time when he could continue working full-time instead and earning an income. It is interesting to note that Joey has little recollection of the process of entering the university, so the fact that he was not interested in his courses comes as no surprise to me. Joey had stated often that his family, especially his grandfather, expected him to attend college; Therefore, that is what he was doing, at least physically, if not mentally:

…. I don't remember being pushed like “you have to figure out a major!” No, as long as I was doing it [going to college] everyone was pleased. Now, my grandfather did give my mom the same opportunity, and she started [college]…she grew up down south, and she started school somewhere in Alabama or Georgia. She started in college, but partied hard and studied light
(chuckled) and didn’t go far, which was a big contention and I think it was a little bit of a redemption factor for my mom like, “I, I, I (mimicking his mom speaking) screwed up and he [grandfather] only gave me one chance and he [grandfather] told me that too, “I will give you that one [chance]. I will help you through; I shall pay whatever tuition I need to [and] whatever else one time, but if you screw it up, you’re done!” So, I think that all of that combined with me thinking no one cares as long as I’m doing it [going to college] and I am doing it, then it will all be fine. And I didn’t know what I was doing, but I was going [to college] and doing it. (laughs) and I hated it! [going to college] (laughs again).

As stated previously in my review of the literature, rural, Appalachian first-generation students are often from low-income families. The desire to be lucratively employed and the importance of supporting one’s family are overriding factors in determining success (Spohn, 1992). Being able to see a direct link between a degree and a job that provides is critical to achieving the American dream (Hoshchild, 1995). Many of the participants grew up in situations in which there was not enough money to meet basic living expenses and the family relied on government assistance. Suffice it to say that the lack of interest in courses and its impact on financial debt and earnings is a serious impediment for those working-class students who decide to pursue higher education, yet who are keenly aware of the financial implications.

**Spending Money and Accumulating Debt**

For many families and individual students, the thought of risking substantial amounts of money or accumulating debt on the chance that the investment will yield a
great return is a risky one. Appalachian first-generation students may have a unique perspective on how the effects of debt relate to their families. All of the participants mentioned the financial implications that their attendance would have on for them and their families. Most of the participants had faith that the result of earning the degree would far surpass the cost of obtaining the degree. For others, the idea of spending money on a less clear future was unnerving. In the Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) study, 73% of respondents indicated that making more money was a primary motivation for their attendance in college. This motivation is closely related to the desire to get a good job because one important characteristic of “good jobs” is their relatively high pay. If the student is unable to see the good job as a result of college attendance they are less likely to persist.

Wasting money. Kevin, Joey and Jack all mentioned that they felt they were “wasting” money going to classes when they were not sure where their futures lie. Jack stated it best when his college advisor asked him about why he was registering for more classes when his grades were so poor:

Yeah…even though I didn’t want to do it [register for the next term]...I had like a 0.88 GPA…my advisor sat me and down asked me if I was serious about school. “You are not showing up for class and you are paying for this” … so…., so I thought about and said, I guess I am not [serious about it]. He’s telling me about my grades and saying, “you’re not showing up but you came here to spend your money again and not show up [for class] why?” …at that point I’m like, uh, okay, let's just not do this [go to college] for a while.
Many participants described financial reasons, including the cost of higher education, as a significant factor in their decision to not pursue higher education, mirroring what research has shown in the past for this student population (Spohn, Crowther & Lykins, 1992). According to Eitel & Martin (2009), the widening income gap in the past decade, combined with the recent recession, likely put these families in worse straits than previously experienced as tuition costs have increased exponentially. Such strained financial circumstances, of course, have a significant bearing on the college choices of all students (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Hogarth & Hilgert, 2002; Merrow, 2007), but they obviously bear down more heavily on working-class students.

Shelley left the university as a result of the impact of the 2008 recession on her parents’ independent businesses. Both of Shelley’s parents experienced a decline in their respective businesses as many small, individually owned companies did at that time. Shelley teared up as she recalled the phone call that she received indicating that her parents were not able to support her financially at her current university:

My mom told me she said, “We can’t afford”… she called me to say, “we can’t afford for you to go there anymore,” and I was like I was bawling my eyes out, like this is the school I chose! I can’t believe this is happening to me! So no, not fun to deal with. I was really upset and I went to my room and my friends would say, “it’s OK, maybe you may even come back after a year or you go somewhere else, maybe to a community college” they say. But I want to stay here! I thought [I] haven't had the best time completely, but I mean this is the school I chose for
myself. I feel like it’s is gonna get better from here, so I kinda had that mindset.

So (she sighs a big sigh) that was no fun (a crying laugh sound).

Shelly did return to higher education as a transfer student to a less expensive school closer to her parents’ home. She is currently finishing her bachelor’s degree.

**Being able to pay for what you want.** Several of the participants shared how the choice to accumulate debt as well as the weight of accumulating that debt while participating in higher education influenced their decisions to withdraw. As stated previously in the literature, accumulating debt is a serious concern. The lack of high paying jobs in many areas of Appalachia along with an upbringing that often dictated that one save money in order to purchase an item is deeply instilled into the personal framework for Appalachians and continues into their higher education decision-making.

Sandy and Kevin described financial situations and considerations that impacted their decisions to withdraw.

Sandy experienced extreme poverty while growing up.

Well, I knew I was…. that I that I didn’t have things that other kids did, but then again people had less than I did, so I didn’t really dwell on it….It [life] was hard work. It was always hard work, but it was always happy. Our family was happy and had a happy outlook on life no matter what we would get thrown at us, like, we… I went months without electricity. Like, we went nine months and some of it was in the winter without electricity, without any way of cooking or baking. We lived on PB&Js…My dad like has a way, like, we are all survivors. Like, we always found a way to survive. Like, I have always had a computer. We may not
have money to do a lot of other things, but we always had a computer. (pauses)
My dad would let things [bills] drop off. He and my mom had poor financial
planning and organization skills
Sandy’s impoverished environment was the often the result of her father’s passion
with new technical gadgets. His affinity for them led to bankruptcy and other financial
tribulations. She indicated that growing up in such pronounced poverty made her
determined to set and achieve personal goals that would allow. She began working when
she was in high school in order to have money for what she wanted: I worked while in
high school. I worked for Kmart for 3 years before I left [for college]. I am very
resourceful with money. I don’t like to spend it.”
Her debt aversion carried on into college. Utilizing scholarships, grants and
student loans, Sandy and her husband hoped to be able to make ends meet. Her husband
was working full-time and Sandy focusing on her studies as a student pursuing a double
major in mathematics and accounting. Sandy had entered her first semester without the
pressures of working while attending classes, but by the end of the term she realized that
she would need to obtain employment in order to “make ends meet.” A few months into
her second semester, Sandy realized that part-time employment would not be enough to
meet their financial obligations and she withdrew from the university to be able to work
full-time:
I ended up not being able to go back to school again. I couldn’t afford it because
I had to keep paying rent. I was working 40 hours and [her husband] was
working 32-40 hours and we were still scraping by. Rent was 800 bucks and we
were barely pulling that in with our paychecks. What happened was I was trying
to pay for rent and stuff with my overage check and it wasn’t covering it cause it
covered only 2 months and that’s it. And since I wasn’t in school I wasn’t getting
that [the overage money]…I wanted to [return to her studies at the university], but
I knew that it would be way too hard to do everything because I just couldn’t
afford it.

Misunderstandings about the practices and policies of higher education are a
problem common to first-generation students. Sandy wrongly believed that she had to
pay back her federal loans before she could return to the university. Students of college-
educated parents would learn that they have options for deferring financial aid obligations
upon returning to higher education.

Similarly, Patty learned financial lessons from her parents’ experiences:
We lived in a double wide house, it wasn’t the best, but it was a safe place. When
I was in kindergarten our house burnt down and we lost everything including
baby pictures and such…That was a really bad time…I don’t know if we had
insurance or not, but knew that our stuff was gone and we were poor. I always
knew I had to go to college to have a better life than I did growing up. There
really wasn’t a choice of if I was going or not.

Patty expressed that she often thought about becoming a teacher or a nurse when
she grew up and she knew she would need to continue her education in order to be
successful. Patty had juggled going to college with being a single mom and living off of
governmental assistance, so the journey toward her dreams was difficult as she reflected in a recent email:

So on my way home from town today I cried. Not because I was sad, but because of years gone by. Many people do not know my story or how far I have come. Three years ago, my boys had no Christmas at my house; the following year [two years ago], my boys had no Christmas at my house. It is unbelievably hard to not be able to provide even a small Christmas for your children. Today, I cried because these 2 kids will never experience that again. My hard work and sacrifices have made all the difference!

Kevin also felt that accumulating debt without a clear path to recouping that money was not what he wanted to do. When I first met Kevin, he explained that he was trying to sell his car in order to pay off the loan he had taken out on it. He explained that it had been an impulsive buy and that he did not want to have any debt, so he planned to sell the vehicle and purchase one without assuming a loan to pay for it. Kevin felt the same way about his experience with higher education:

So I am not sure if I am going to go back to school or not. Back to school or going down there [moving] and start working immediately or… That probably is what I am going to do, cause I am not, still not a hundred percent sure what I want to go to school for. I have better ideas now than I did going out of high school, but still not exactly what I wanna go for… But so that is my plan to just go, get down there, and get a job right away and maybe start looking for a better job and you know, I hope that I find something, but I also wanna get back into school, too.
You know save up some more money working here, move down there get a job and living in something kinda cheap and then have enough money saved up to go back to school ya know, so that’s my plan, and as we both know, nothing ever goes as planned, so that is what a planned so far (laughs).

With respect to Appalachian first-generation students, Spohn and colleagues (1992) investigated the influences associated with the rural high school students’ low rates of pursuit of higher education in central Appalachia. They found that the costs associated with college were the major obstacle for students. Debt management is a condition that influences persistence and completion. Student loans are common for the majority of students attending higher education (Eitel & Martin, 2009); however, one study (Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004) implies that, in general, first-generation students are debt-averse; they avoid accumulating debt at any educational level. This aversion is likely a rational choice, but in some cases it might be due to family experiences of debt as the case with Sandy or limited knowledge of financial options related to higher education in particular (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) such as terms of repayment.

**Taking Care of Family**

Rodriquez (1982) wrote of his personal experiences in attempting to balance an academic life while being an active member of his family. He found that he could not manage all of the responsibilities the juggling entailed. Another researcher, London (1989) expressed surprise at the impact that family possessed over individual decision-making for first-generation students. Unlike other studies, however, this study found that
the participants made their withdrawal decisions not at the recommendation or input of family, but rather from a sense of responsibility for family. Carol, Sandy, Patty and Kevin all had the support of family to attend the university, but when family situations arose that the participants felt warranted more of their attention, they withdrew from higher education.

**Caring for siblings.** Sandy and Kevin both shared with me happy experiences with siblings, but for each of them, there was a special bond with one sibling. As described below, the close relationship with the sibling was a factor in the decision to withdraw from higher education.

In addition to the financial reasons described previously, Sandy’s sense of obligation to family also contributed to her withdrawal from higher education when her older sister, who attended the same university, became seriously ill. Since the university was located nearly four hours away from other family members, the responsibility for her sister’s care fell upon Sandy. At one point, Sandy was trying to complete courses, earn money through employment, and take care of her ill sister. Her withdrawal from higher education seemed to be unavoidable considering her circumstances.

I loved the classes. The more time I spent going to them I loved them. I regret not being able to spend time with them. I did, and I wanted to, but I knew that it would be way too hard to do everything.

Kevin, as described previously, was unsure of his goals for higher education. Ever since his brother was diagnosed with a visual disability that led to eventual blindness, Kevin assumed the role of caretaker for his brother at school, sporting events,
and other activities. As Kevin and his brother are the only full siblings in a large blended family, it does not surprise me that there is a special bond between the two brothers that was likely strengthened by his brother’s diagnosis.

Several times throughout my meetings with Kevin, he would answer the questions about his experiences and also include the experiences of his brother as well. I found it interesting that his brother, despite being nearly blind has a keen interest videography. When Kevin was describing his brother and his work with film, he became very animated and then admitted that by helping his brother, he, too, was developing an interest in the work. Interestingly, when Kevin’s younger brother expressed an interest in moving away in order to pursue his educational interests, Kevin was willing to discard his plans and move out of state with his brother in order to assist him with his education and visual disability. Kevin’s desire to take care of his brother contributed to the decision to withdraw from higher education.

**Expanding family situation.** Carol and Patty both experienced a family situation that drew their attention away from their studies – unexpected pregnancies. Each processed the information differently and chose different paths in response to the pregnancies.

While Carol married prior to attending a private four-year institution, she had not planned on beginning her family while in college. Even when she discovered her pregnancy, she, like Patty, did not plan for the situation to derail her from her educational goals:
It [finding out she was pregnant] was, “alright, I am a married woman and we are starting our family.” It was happy and sad, you know? I found out I was pregnant my first semester. I was not sick. ...I was kind of in denial that first semester, “nah that can’t be what it is…it must be something else, that there's something else [happening]”….but in my head, I made this… this… this block or separation…this fence between who I was and what my role was compared to what everybody else there [other students]….what I perceived their roles to be and it also, you know, started introducing these questions about future and it was…. in my head… it was “do I have to choose… choose one or the other…I can't do both, can I?” …and so that's why the second semester…. I ended up…I started my second semester and by the time I was probably six weeks into it, I was “I… I don't think I can you know? I just wanna stay inside [and sleep]…I can't make it [to college today].”

In addition to already feeling awkward socially at the private college, Carol now felt another degree of separation for herself and her peers which, in addition to starting her family, resulted in her withdrawing from college. However, she did return to higher education 17 years later.

Sandy and Carol both demonstrated that being a married college student comes with a certain level of family life expectations. For many young women from Appalachia, the expectation that one will have children is a matter of course with or without the benefit of a supporting partner.
For Patty, the desire to leave behind the stark poverty of her youth remained her focus even when she learned of her unexpected pregnancy. Patty was driven to meet her goals of pursuing a degree in nursing and being financially stable, so she made plans for managing her new responsibilities:

Well, I knew I was going to become a mother no matter what. I dropped out of the nursing clinical rotations so that I could finish all my generals [education courses] before I had [my son]. That way when I returned to nursing school after delivering I would only have the core nursing classes to take. This lessened the amount of credit hours I would have as a new mother. No matter what, I was going to become a nurse, because at that time it became not only a life dream of mind, but a solid foundation for a future and stability for my son.

For Appalachians, familial commitments and responsibilities are especially strong as discussed in previous chapters, often circumventing even their strong desire to attend and complete higher education.

**Finding Their Paths after Their Withdrawal from Higher Education**

The summative part of this study was two-fold – 1) to learn how the participants conceptualized their experiences as they connected to their withdrawal from higher education; and 2) to determine the experiences and status of the participants since they withdrew from the university setting. As described in the four themes: managing the social aspects of higher education, managing the academic responsibilities of higher education, spending money and accumulating debt, and taking care of family, the decision to withdraw from higher education was a complex one. Also complex are the
paths that the non-persisters followed in order to thrive when they were no longer attending higher education.

**After withdrawal.** Interestingly, all but one of the five participants who returned to higher education post-withdrawal, Shelley, was a transfer student. Shelley, with her parents, made financial arrangements with an in-state university that included work-study, scholarships and grants to ease their financial burden and allow her to transfer to another university.

Well I still wanted to stay in school. I knew right as soon as she [her mom] called me, she’s like, “It’s up to you…what you want to do. I said, “I want to transfer. I want to get a degree. There's no sense in me leaving and not doing anything, so she [her mom] said, “okay”, so I mean, we talked about schools and like for the next month and I thought about schools I had applied to which was here [her current school] and [named a few others], so I looked at those, and some, close to home because my parents were like let’s look at something close, but you know really should consider prices and stuff cause it won’t make sense to look at going to an expensive school that's more expensive than [names college] even if it is closer, and a lot of the ones I wanted to go to were kind of in that range [more expensive]. This [where she is now attending] was cheaper, [and] closer to home so this is the only place I applied to.

Shelley continued with her studies after our interviews and is preparing for graduation with a bachelor’s degree in public relations. Despite her first attempt at
higher education not working out the way she planned, she is happy with the choices she has made:

It [attending her first university] was experience, highs and lows, but I don't regret going there, like part of me wishes I would've come here [her current school] in the first place, but at the same time I’m like, you know, I experienced someplace else. I had highs, lows, you know, but I…I got to go to the school of my choice. I wouldn’t say I chose wrong, but it didn't really work out (pause), so I mean I came out of it with a positive attitude even though there was so much negativity associated with it and people like here [her current university], they'll want to know why’d you go there. I’m like, well, good question. I’ll tell ya all about it. But yeah, it wasn't particularly bad, it wasn’t particularly good, it was somewhere in the middle but I don't regret anything really.

Of the remaining participants, Kevin, Jack, Joey and Sandy chose to enter the workforce. They all had been employed while in higher education and increased their working hours after leaving higher education.

Jack possessed a strong work ethic and was determined to earn as much money as he could:

I began working at the Olive Garden again waiting tables. I had many jobs at that point in time when I dropped out. I worked at Olive Garden, a grocery store bagging groceries, a go-kart place in the summers…I worked a lot and it was all mine. I got tips and that was cash in MY pocket. At that point, I just made it [money] to, to be able to save enough money to pay for school [when he
returned]. I would keep half in and spend half. So half the money I used to pay for gas and car, food, whatever fun I wanted to have from one [half] and out of the other half, well I saved it for school.

And Jack did return to school where he completed his associate degree [accumulating no debt from his education] before going to another college to become a chiropractor. Jack is a good example of a rural Appalachian first-generation student who “did all the right things” in both of the worlds he traversed – Appalachian and the middle-class professional. As an Appalachian, Jack stuck to his convictions to create a better life for him and his family and trusted in his ability to work hard and get what he wanted. He was extremely debt-averse and graduated with an associate degree with no incurred debt. Jack was able to follow his dream to become a chiropractor and provide a stable life, financially and otherwise, for his family.

Carol and Patty took time off from their studies to care for their respective newborns. Carol chose to be a stay-at-home mother and Patty resumed her education few years after her son was born. Drew continued to be a loner after his withdrawal from the university. He continued living with his parents, without procuring a job.

**Where are they now?** One of the questions of this study involved determining in what types of career paths the participants were engaged after their they left higher education. While future plans may not be clear to participants immediately after withdrawal, the plans and accomplishments a few or maybe even several years post-withdrawal may be significant.
All of the participants took some time to reconsider their decisions whether that was a few months as in Shelley’s case or several years as was the case with Carol, Joey, and Jack. This time of discernment was likely necessary to evaluate priorities and goals for their futures. For Patty and Carol, the path was clear - family first, then education. In Jack’s case, his time off working several types of odd jobs, led him to the realization that he did indeed want to become a chiropractor and his resolve grew stronger to complete his studies. For Drew, the situation was different. At first, he spent about a year sheltered away with his parents until he felt like the right thing for him was to find some type of job to support himself as he had a girlfriend at that point. Although he tied to earn some more college credits, it took around three years for him to locate a job that interested him. Drew’s motivation was external rather than internal as it was with the other returning participants.

**Returning to higher education.** Several of the participants returned to higher education three or more years after they withdrew from the first college or university they were attending. Of the eight participants, five (Carol, Jack, Joey, Patty, Shelley) have completed their bachelor’s degrees. Two of those participants (Carol and Jack) have completed graduate degree programs.

Of the remaining participants, Kevin and Sandy have plans to re-enter higher education (after their family obstacles are remedied and they have saved money) and while Drew attempted to return to higher education at a community college, he withdrew again due to disinterest in his courses. He is currently employed full-time and is married with two children.
As mentioned above, Carol and Patty both eventually resumed higher education after their pregnancies. Carol chose to wait 17 years to return to college when all three of her children were of an age that she felt she could handle her schooling, work and mothering. Patty completed her RN credentials and is currently working full-time while pursuing her bachelor’s degree online, all as a single mother of two young boys. She plans to pursue a master’s degree in the future.

Jack and Joey chose to return to the work-force full-time until they had clearer pictures of where they saw themselves in the future. Both returned to higher education a few years after withdrawal feeling better financially and with better visions of their futures than the first time they attended higher education.

Debt, employment and financial stability. With the exception of Drew, who had a tuition waiver benefit, all of the students accumulated debt related to earning their educations. For the majority of the participants, financial stability was a major motivator for attending higher education and for choosing employment after withdrawal. At the time of this study, all of the study participants were employed full-time, except for Shelley who was working part-time while she completed her degree. All but one of the participants (Drew) began or continued employment immediately after withdrawal from high education. Sandy and Kevin are currently working full-time in addition to caring for family, and hope to be able to secure positions that will allow them to pursue higher education as a benefit of their employment. Of all of the participants, Sandy and Kevin were the most debt adverse which may contribute to their delay of returning to higher
education. Kevin and Sandy as well as Jack mentioned saving money to pay for their educations.

**Family caretaking.** Several of the participants mentioned family support in their interviews. Despite their lack of higher educations, the families of these participants were all supportive in their loved one’s pursuit of higher education. While the families may not have been able to financially support their child’s education, one or more of the participants’ family members were there to support their education endeavors. Carol recounts her experience with her mother when the time neared for Carol to attend her private college:

> My mom, bless her heart, she was…… she was very excited [about me going to college] and I think I mentioned she took me school shopping and we went and bought these clothes, which now I look back and I think, I would probably do that for my kids too but it seemed like such a weird thing to me that here I am and independent, out on my own… moms going and buying me clothes (chuckles) and you know, I can even, in my head, I can even still visualize the colors and some of the outfits that we bought…. it just made that big of an impression….

While maybe not as distinct as Carol’s story, many of the other participants also indicated that their parents had a sense of pride and hope for their offspring to succeed and have a better life than they did growing up.

Patty always knew she would return to her efforts to become a nurse in order to escape the extreme poverty and to provide a stable life for her sons as she indicated earlier. Much like Patty, Carol remembered how much she loved to learn and this
passion was evident for her in the occupations she worked after her children became school-aged. She was learning new things, like computers, at her jobs, so the decision to return to higher education was an easy one. Although she was apprehensive about being “different” than her peers, she felt she had the tenacity as a mature adult to succeed despite the fear.

Joey and Jack felt similarly to the women. Returning to college was not an option for them; Deciding on a career path or reaffirming it in Jack’s case, was the reason for the return to higher education. Joey learned through experience that there were options for him and his interests at an academic institution and once he found that spark for a career, he was adamant in his pursuit.

**Key participant.** In this study, I sought to determine whether or not college was for everyone. Drew proved to be the one case which exemplified that indeed a college education was not the key to his dreams the most. Drew had all of the benefits someone would appreciate who desired attending higher education – a strong family support system, an avid interest in a particular area, a familiarity with a college setting, and the ability to attend higher education without incurring significant debt. But Drew did not have that desire to earn a bachelor’s degree. Keeping in mind that Drew’s initial degree goal was directly related to his avid interest in playing with computers, Drew eventually looked for work where he could pursue his interests:

[About a year after withdrawal] I decided to get a job ‘cause I couldn’t like just slum around the rest of my life, so I got a job at the 911 [emergency center]. I dispatched there for a while. I had to take a test, kinda like in law enforcement. I
didn’t stay very long. It wasn’t for me… it was honestly… the burden up there on the 911 operator there is unbelievable. I mean you got the entire County fire Department, and you got to transfer line control. And the EMS and you have to issue warrants and (pause) use a computer and, oh my gosh… It was just not for me.

Despite the extensive exposure to a university campus and non-restrictive financial conditions, Drew determined that higher education was not necessary for him to be able to do what he loved and be able to support his family. He is now employed in a position that he enjoys that required a technical certificate, but not an academic degree.

**Unintended Findings**

I became aware of gender-related characteristics as I combed through my data although I had not intended to look for a correlation between genders. As mentioned previously, financial consideration and family connectedness are two strong themes in the findings of this research; however, the strength of these two traits varied across gender lines.

**Males.** The men in this study shared certain prominent characteristics that related to their approach to higher education. All the men indicated a lack of interest in their courses, and they all emphasized the importance of financial security and not wasting time on something they were not interested in doing at the time. All four men in this study indicated to some degree that they were disenchanted with the college coursework and felt that it was unnecessary for their career goals. Joey related several times when he felt he was not being served by his university experiences. He was particularly upset
when he was able to use his background knowledge on an assignment, but then he was rejected:

I had a couple of classes that I really did not like and I felt really had nothing to do with what I wanted to do and that irritated me (pause)...I remember some sort of history class where I did a paper on a topic on Amish that was controversial, so I used that as an example as how to do “real” farming. And I got ripped by the instructor who said that putting calves in cages was inhumane. It is not necessarily saying that I was entirely OK with it, but I was taking the stance that you raised a calf in a pen [and] that is what they know. They are not higher thinking animals. They do not know that other calves were in the wild field. So I took that stance and really got beat up for it. That and among other things and it kinda turned into “screw you guys.” I am not here learning what I want to know. and I don’t need this. And you know I am not getting out of it what I expect and on top of it getting things like that [incident]. So I got pretty jaded pretty quick or tired of it after that [going to college]. There is one aspect or part of my life that I really do enjoy which is the farm, so why would I go through this [attending university classes] which is hell instead of riding around on a tractor?

Joey’s expectation was that if he was taking courses, they should relate to his interests, and he should be able to communicate his background knowledge to the courses. When that did not occur, it was a definite strike against attending higher education. He, like the other men in this study, also equated course interest into direct jobs and careers.
Another interesting gender fact that I noticed was that the two participants that were on academic probation were males who had expressed that they were disinterested in their courses, but chose to stay at the university despite the negative impact on their accumulative grade point averages that was occurring until they were left with the options to do better or withdraw. I am not sure that if they had not been placed on academic probation, that they would have left of their own accord as they admitted to “going through the motions” of attending higher education. The other two men, however, despite not enjoying their courses did remain in good academic standing prior to their withdrawal from higher education.

The men in this study all indicated that they were attending higher education and taking courses because that was what one did after high school, despite not really having a goal for their higher education. They also felt they were wasting time, and squandering away opportunities for making money in addition to not really knowing what they wanted for their future careers. Jack shared these thoughts in his interview:

I wasn't fearful of the classes really being so hard or anything. I suppose I expected it to be a continuation of high school… No. I just remember thinking like, “I don’t know! Why am I here?” I was just going through the motions and not really thinking about it Everybody’s going to college, so that is what I am going to do...they’re all [his friends at school] going to college and you have to go to college to get a good job, so that is what I am going to do. And I just didn’t know if I wanted to apply myself [to college courses] at that point in time. ….when you get steered a couple of different directions….by my guidance
counselor….and all that kinda stuff, so… At that point I wanted something I could count on…one job that pays well, make a decent living and that I can have a family and support , you know, you know…I don't care what I’m doing. You just gotta get out there and make some money. Go support your… you and whoever else you think you [are responsible for supporting].

Supporting one’s family financially is one aspect of support and generally the one area that falls upon the man in the family. The areas of emotional support and healthcare often fall into the concern of the women in Appalachia.

**Females.** Although family impact was mentioned by nearly all of the participants, only the women indicated responsibilities such as care of family members and responsibility to family-life as strong contributors to their withdrawal. In this study, one of the women (Shelley) left the university to be closer to her family, but three of the women, Carol, Patty and Sandy, experienced immediate, personally impactful family situations that led to their withdrawal from the university – Carol and Patty’s unintended pregnancies and Sandy’s sister’s illness.

Carol and Patty both had strong family roots growing up where they spent hours with family members attending family dinners with grandparents, caring for others’ children and assuming other family responsibilities as needed. Each woman, however, became aware of her pregnancy early in their college attendance. As stated previously, there was no doubt in either one’s mind that they would delay their studies after the birth of the child.
Sandy, however, felt a different type of responsibility toward family members—healthcare. Sandy considers her mother her best friend and confidante. Her mother has been disabled since she was young, and so the burden of caring for her mother is all that Sandy has ever really known. This sense of caring also manifested itself more than once when Sandy was attempting to succeed at higher education.

As described previously, Sandy had a close relationship with her sister who was also attending the same university. When her sister ended up being hospitalized for several weeks, it was Sandy who took care of her and visited her daily. Sandy was trying to juggle her courses, her full-time job and her sister’s care all at the same time. In typical Appalachian form, the two primary responsibilities remained while the third—education—was removed from her challenges at the time.

Sandy had anticipated that the time away from her studies would be short-term; however, when her father also became disabled and her father-in-law became ill and indigent, Sandy also assumed care for them and moved back home.

I ended up taking care of everybody. Like, it was me, I was cooking food and making sure everybody got up and showered. I was working at Kmart making about $350 every two weeks.

As demonstrated with several of the participants, sense of family is an important cultural value that is ever-present in Appalachian communities (DeYoung & Rademacher, 2004). The sense of responsibility in taking care of family before all else is not only a challenge in making choices relative to higher education, but also a challenge to balancing all of the important cultural values of rural Appalachians with family and
finances taking the forefront not only in this study, but as well-known traits of this population as well.

Another area in which the females excelled was in regards to academics. As mentioned in the section with the men, two of them were on academic probation at the time they withdrew. The women, however, had excelled academically. Three of the four women graduated valedictorians of their high school graduating classes and all of the women left the university with a B average or better as reflected by accumulative GPAs over 3.0/4.0.

While the findings of this study on higher education performance of Appalachians are in alignment with many similar studies of Appalachians who struggle with post-secondary education, there is one area where the findings may be unique. Due to a lack of follow-up of non-persisting students by colleges and universities, there has been no data to see where these non-persisters end up in their lives. The results of this study will contribute to the conversations that revolve around whether or not academic higher education should be an expectation for all of a nation’s citizens as detailed in the beginning of the study.

Additional Findings

Previous research on first-generation students and work ethic reveals that the desire to feel a sense of accomplishment and the ability to see results are qualities often associated with those from working-class environments (Berry, 2010; Crawford, 2009). For many first-generation students, obtaining a university degree is considered to be a direct link to an eventual job that pays well and that will provide stability. According to
Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) nearly 75% of respondents indicated that getting a better job was their primary reason for attending college. The participants in this study also felt that the reason for obtaining higher education was for the purpose of financial security and employment opportunities. Jack often referred to earning a higher degree as a path to a better life for his family, better than what he witnessed with his father and with his sister:

[I was] motivated to go to college to get a job where I didn’t struggle and have to worry about if I lost my job…having to go through that transitional period of unemployment and money [like his dad did]… I think mainly because a lot of the stuff that my father went through during his time where he was laid off was…it was always he needed two-year college degree just [to] even be seen for an interview. My dad always told me that “diggin’ ditches never got you anywhere…you have to get a degree to get a job” (mimicking his dad’s voice). Jack also learned a valuable lesson from his sister when it came to planning ahead for a better life than what he experienced growing up. When Jack was 13, his older sister, who was 15, became pregnant, and dropped out of school. Jack saw how she struggled to attend school, work and take care of her young son, who lived with Jack and his family. These experiences played a significant role in how Jack conducted himself:

I was very careful about things and like…pregnancy (pause) and…you know…about school in general and the pregnancy influence. But like, in general, that I want to go to college so I don’t end up like [her]… I always knew that I would have a job to support myself and not have to be like her and struggle the
way that she did starting off….He [his nephew] lived with us most of time since my sister worked and was trying to go to school on the side. Same thing repeats itself… my parents took care of her child while she was trying to go out and get an education like my grandmother took care of us so my mom could finish her education when she got pregnant so young.

In this study, some of the participants’ mothers needed to enter the workforce and required some type of post-secondary education in order to become employable similar to what Jack was saying previously. Jack’s mother went back to school to become a licensed practical nurse as did Patty’s mother and Sandy’s mother, also licensed practical nurses, when their respective husbands were unable to financially support the family on their income or when they became unemployed.

Not only did those participants see that their father’s incomes were not sufficient without post-secondary education or that manual labor jobs could disappear, they also watched their mothers go back to school to attain the specialized education. It is not surprising that for many of the participants, a strong work ethic was developed as a result of what they experienced growing up. Jack, Patty and Sandy are all embodied a strong work ethic, developing out of adversity. For these participants as well as most of the others, life events shaped how they proceeded to utilize that strong work ethic.

Sandy indicated in her interviews that she had developed a strong work ethic from her father and from witnessing so much poverty, due in part to her mother’s disability and her father’s obsession with obtaining the newest gadgets. She credited her father with demonstrating his own diligent work ethic despite his inability to manage money well:
My dad was hardworking and always believed no matter who you are you should always be self-sustainable. Like you can be married with kids, but you should be able to…if the worst happened, you should be able to think for yourself and always be on outlook (for ways to advance).

Not only did Sandy invest a lot of work into her studies in order to earn scholarships to attend college, she also worked diligently to earn money to avoid financial hardship. By her own admission, she shared that she never wanted to live paycheck to paycheck as she witnessed with her own parents, but at times since her withdrawal from higher education, that she thought maybe living that way was unavoidable for her without going back to school.

The participants in this study were no strangers to hard work, either their own or that of their parents. In all of the participants’ interviews, comments regarding the importance of having to work hard, whether through formalized education or work experience, were made that gave me the impression that all of the participants expected to work hard in one fashion or another to be successful.

As the participant’s stories illustrate, there is no one template or set of conditions that contribute to a student’s decision to withdraw. For example, Carol excelled in her high school both academically and socially and possessed a strong work ethic and desire to obtain a degree. She maintained an attitude that nothing could stop her if she set her mind to it; yet she withdrew from higher education because she had made the decision to marry and begin a family at a young age as is common with Appalachians, and postpone
her education since all of her responsibilities were too much to handle at once. Carol did return to higher education, however, when the time was right for and her situation.

Appalachians who prefer to remain place-based often choose to do so for family reasons according to the participants in this study. Closeness to parents and siblings was often cited by the participants and for those who participants who have completed their degrees, including advanced degrees, the choice to remain local was one that they had planned for when pursuing their degrees. Only two of the participants ventured out of their local areas after withdrawal and for both of them it was to return to higher education and earn their degrees. One of them, Jack, moved back to serve his community as a doctor and to keep his children close to their grandparents and cousins, while the other, Joey, had to seek employment outside of his local area in order to utilize his degree and provide stability for his family.

Joey moved approximately 100 miles away and described how he missed rural life while living in the suburbs:

I miss it (chuckles). I …even right now when I am outside and it's not completely dark because of all the city lights around and it’s never completely quiet (pause). [When] going back I really crave to be back in that quiet, almost slower pace, you know. Easier going, you know, you’re driving up and down [the road] and whether you know person from the other direction or not, you kinda throw your hand up off the steering wheel [in a waving motion] and that’s just what ya do. It was that way where I grew up. Yeah, yeah, I miss that. I really, really cherish having grown up in that little setting.
Joey also reflected that his son will never get to know that type of existence growing up other than when he visits with his grandparents.

Two of the participants mentioned plans to someday move away from the local area. Patty believed that once she was able to complete her education locally by attaining a Master’s of Science in Nursing degree, she would have a wealth of job opportunities almost anywhere she went. Kevin felt that he needed to move away in order to be able to determine what types of jobs were available outside of his local area and use that knowledge to inform his career choice before returning to higher education. Kevin planned to do his exploring of other places with his younger brother, however, which at some level will bring a sense of “place” along with him on his journey.

Many of the participants in this study experienced similar stories of not being prepared, for one reason or another, for higher education immediately after high school—the time typically designated for attending higher education. Certainly, the participants shared many transitional issues as their non-Appalachian counterparts. Chickering’s (1969) theory of student development, which was revised with the help of Linda Reisser (Chickering & Reisser) in 1993 provides a valuable lens for understanding the challenges and developmental tasks these participants share with non-Appalachian students.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggested that identity development was the central task of young adulthood. He furthermore noted that there were six other tasks that were important for most students and were related to students’ identity. Those seven tasks were: 1) developing confidence, 2) managing emotions, 3) moving through autonomy
toward interdependence, 4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, 5) establishing identity, 6) developing purpose, and 7) developing integrity (p.8). Some of these vectors are relevant to the Appalachian students and will be described next. The following points were salient for some, but not all of the participants displayed these characteristics. I believe that they warrant some consideration as they connect with Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory of student development. The seven areas are integral processes of development often contribute to student success, but when even a few are lacking, the will to persist in higher education may be compromised. I will discuss the applicable tasks with their example cases in the following analysis.

Jack made several references to acting in correspondence to what other’s thought of his abilities. He blindly accepted that he would not be successful academically in the heavy science curriculum he wanted to follow in college. After he tried to follow the criminal justice degree plan advised by his high school guidance counselor and also experienced dislike of a retail security job, he withdrew from college to pursue what he was familiar with. Jack felt comfortable working manual labor in restaurants and other jobs. His confidence in being able to work hard and be successful led, in my mind, to his confidence in returning to higher education to pursue his initial intention – chiropractic care. This confidence in one’s abilities is an example of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vector of developing competence.

Learning to become independent (i.e. the autonomy vector) in addition to establishing one’s own identity are additional examples of Chickering’ and Reisser’s (1993) areas that were exemplified in this study. Joey moved out of his parent’s home
soon after high school to live with friends while he attended the university. His time working at the farm over the past three years had enabled him to save money to be able to move out on his own and to experience some freedom. While Joey was able to continue to balance work and study time, the independence also gave him confidence to pursue what interested him. When college was not providing that avenue he withdrew. Joey continued working full-time at the farm and then moved in with his girlfriend who was attending the university. While she encouraged him to resume his studies, it was not until a chance meeting with a wildlife official that Joey discovered the area that he wanted to pursue. Despite the decision forcing a break up with the young woman and the risk involved in moving away to a different university, Joey made the effort to following his new passion and become successful.

Joey also was the only participant who discussed his experiences with those who were different from him exemplifying tolerance for diversity and managing mature interpersonal relationships with those who were different from him. Even at a young age, Joey enjoyed a close friendship with his young friend from Canada. Additionally, he developed an interest in getting to know diverse individuals when he befriended an African-American man and his girlfriend while in college. I believe it was Joey’s desire to be independent and learn about things outside of his local purview that led him ultimately to attend a university away from home and to explore new avenues. Interestingly, Joey is the only participant who is currently living away from the area where he was raised.
A few of the participants exemplified strong work ethics that led them to their career goals despite encountering obstacles, including not persisting at their institutions of higher education. Jack, as mentioned previously, was no stranger to working hard for what he wanted; Patty conducted herself similarly. She had worked while in high school, took time off to attend college, and became pregnant, but she never let obstacles get in her way of working to support her child and resuming her education. Patty’s tenacity has led to success for her and her children and shows that her clear purpose for her studies made her strong enough to overcome adversity. Patty also possessed a strong sense of identity and understanding of the purpose for her studies which contributed to her tenacity.

Overall, I believe that the time away from higher education helped the participants to clarify some of the future paths they wanted for themselves. Without clarity of who they were and where they wanted to go, success in higher education would be difficult for any student. Ultimately, for these participants, higher education did prove to be difficult the first time around. After gaining confidence and a clearer focus for the future, I believe all of the participants are currently experiencing their version of success with or without the degree. Perhaps post-secondary expectations need to be adjusted for some cultures, such as the Appalachians, where the priorities of family and financial stability take precedence over education. The findings in this study seem to indicate that a delay in pursuing higher education was appropriate for the majority of the participants.

The importance of matching one’s education and training to a specific career or job opportunity also presented itself as a common thread. This reflects findings in studies
The desire to remain place-based often presents itself as a barrier to higher education as jobs in the local areas often require skilled labor which often requires post-secondary training that is technical and not academically based. In this study, the majority of the participants chose to return to higher education once their family and/or financial obstacles, perhaps seen as controllable by the participant, were removed. The participants who have not returned to higher education chose to devote more time to determining their career interests and settling family issues and for them the choice to delay their educations was a rational one.

The analysis of the data for this study seems to indicate that while some first-generation working class students attend the college or university as higher education policy and norms have suggested they should, there are other factors to consider when entertaining the idea of pursuing the credential, especially for the first-generation Appalachian individual.

In this chapter, I presented the findings of the study that contributed to the non-persistence of the participants. I also presented findings that were less pervasive across cases. The findings are organized by themes, developed through the analysis of the interview transcripts. While the experiences for the participating individuals were each unique, many of the contributing factors for withdrawal manifested similarly across participants, specifically in regards to social integration, academic management, financial considerations and family responsibilities. The importance of these factors, whether in isolation or in combination, directly related to their decisions to withdraw from higher education. Additional, less common findings, relating to characteristics and phenomena
such as gender, work ethic and identity formation were reflective of the complexity of not only each individual circumstance, but also of the uniqueness of the rural Appalachian culture in setting priorities for the participant and family which varies from populations who do not persist in higher education.
Chapter Six

Purpose of Research

A substantial amount of research has been conducted on first-year student persistence. The extant research has highlighted first-generation students’ struggles to assimilate and succeed in higher education. However, information specific to rural Appalachian, first-generation, first-year students’ non-persistence and their paths after withdrawal is near negligeable. This study seeks to supplement the scant amount of empirical information regarding this marginalized population of non-persisters investigating the sense-making that led to their withdrawals, and to learn the paths that these individuals took post-withdrawal from their institutions of higher education.

Scope of Study and Data Gathering

I collected information from eight rural, Appalachian, first-generation, working-class, first-year non-persisters. Through a process of snowball sampling and utilizing key informants, I was able to identify eight participants who agreed to discuss their experiences related to education and the significant events they encountered leading up to and after the time period they attended higher education. The interviews were conducted through combinations of in-person meetings in mutually agreed upon locations or through Skype. After each interview, I transcribed the interview in expedient fashion in order to prepare for the next interview and have appropriate follow-up questions prepared. Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, I began the process of coding and analysis based on the recommendations of other qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Seidman, 2006). From this analysis, I
developed participant profiles to illuminate the rich, personal stories of the individuals who had volunteered for this study.

**Constructivist Theory**

The goal of this study was to explore the reasons non-persisters left their respective institutions. I also investigated the paths they took after withdrawing from the university setting. My interest in this area relates to the quote by President Barack Obama and uttered by many United States presidents before him that the people of this nation should strive to have the “highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (Kirwan, 2009, p. 28). I posited that there were occupations that were a necessary part of a developed society that required no college degree, so I sought to understand this near mandate in relation to a marginalized population that historically had low graduation rates in higher education. I was familiar with this population in part through my own rural, first-generation upbringing and my work as a college instructor and advisor for Appalachian college students.

While many newly minted first year students pour into universities each autumn, I suspected that there may be significant differences in the experience from the view of the rural Appalachian first-generation student and other first-year students with more knowledge of college owing to their family’s experiences. During the initial interview, I first sought to learn what those experiences were and then followed up by asking the participants additional questions in order determine how their experiences developed into the decision to withdraw from the institution. As I was unable to find empirical research on former college students’ activities post-withdrawal, I was intrigued by the thought of
being able to introduce a new research avenue to the growing accumulation of research on Appalachian first-generation students.

Seidman (2013) describes the role of the researcher in qualitative research as “an instrument of the study” (p. 214). Lave and Kvale (1995) describe the human instrument role of the researcher in this way, “I think the most general view is that the only instrument that is sufficiently complex to comprehend and learn about human existence is another human” (p. 220). Grounded theory is “derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data” (Glaser & Strauss, 2009, p. 225), and these participants have provided rich data for illuminating the phenomenon of interest in this study.

Through my experiences as a rural, first-generation college student and my work with Appalachian first-year students, I was able to immerse myself in their stories and identify common themes as grounded theory provides the approach to better understand the stories. Along with grounded theory, my findings were also based on the constructivist theory of Lincoln and Guba (2000) who contend that knowledge helps make sense of the truth and builds on the insight that individuals construct knowledge based on previous experiences. Several of the participants commented that they had not thought about situations “in that way” before the time of the interviews and were making sense of their decisions as we discussed the events in more detail, thereby leading me to believe that the participants were indeed telling the truth of their perceptions of the experiences as they related to their eventual withdrawal and post-withdrawal experiences.
Research Questions

The questions that guided this study were designed not only to learn about the experiences that the participants encountered while attending higher education, but also what paths they had taken after withdrawal and their current status in society. I wanted to demonstrate that whether or not an individual had attained educational credentials, they could still be productive citizens in the path that they chose.

The research questions that guided this study were the following:

1. What were the experiences of first-year, working-class, Appalachian students who did not persist during the time period they attended the university?

2. How did these students conceptualize the connection between their college experiences and their decision to leave the university within or after the first year of attendance?

3. What are the former students doing now that they are no longer attending the university full-time?

My quest was to understand, from the participants’ point of view, how they felt about their attendance and subsequent withdrawal as it related to their current life status. I also hoped to also learn how they felt about their decision to withdrawal as it relates to their current status.

Summary of Findings

The themes generated from this study seem to stem directly or indirectly from the rural Appalachian upbringing. One theme, taking care of family, emerged from this study
was that the participants preferred to remain close to family and obtain employment in their local areas. The place-bound parameter for their lives then restricts the employment and money-making opportunities for these individuals as many of the occupations in rural Appalachia are blue collar, technically based, and do not require the academic credentials, which are often difficult as described in the theme *the academic side of the professional, typically considered white collar occupations* (Burnell, 2003). The conundrum that is sometimes not considered by Appalachian individuals is that despite the national push to attend the university and obtain the four-year degree, the education they receive may not be useful to their circumstances and employment opportunities.

Often the push to attend higher education is the mantra that a college education will have a consequence of a “good job” (Johnson, 2006; Leef, 2006; Rosenbaum et al, 2010). Another commonly held belief is that one may earn a significant amount of money with a bachelor’s degree (Hennessy & Fisk, 2006; Katz & Autor, 2005). For some Americans, particularly the middle and upper class, the return on investment in higher education does indeed benefit them (Brewer & Ehrenberg, 1996; Thomas & Zhang, 2005), but for individuals from a lower socio-economic status, the picture may be quite different as low-income students are more likely to drop-out of college (Glass & Nygreen, 2011; Stokes & Wright, 2010), thereby accumulating debt rather than benefitting financially from the “good job” they originally anticipated as outlined earlier with the theme, *spending money and accumulating debt*.

Another theme, integrating into the social fabric, and again, one that some participants did not consider, is whether they would “fit in” to the typically middle-
income social environment of the university. Participants who participated in high school activities and were popular did not consider themselves marginalized nor question their ability to assimilate into the social atmosphere of higher education. As Carol put it, “It never crossed my mind.”

Social status is considered by some as a reason to attend college (Brown, 2001; Collins, 2000; Thomas, 2010). Although some individuals may consider obtaining the higher education credential as a means to “move up” in a social hierarchy (Born, 1996; Collins, 2000; Glass & Nygreen 2011; Johnson, 2006), and a route for lower-income individuals to gain opportunities for respect and stature (i.e. “become somebody”), the difficulties in assimilation may prove to be too difficult as evidenced by the participants in this study.

Briggs’ (2010) research indicated that often students from Appalachia do not persist in higher education in order to obtain full-time employment, raise families or explore other opportunities. This results of this study support Briggs’ findings. All but one of the participants, Shelley, who transferred to another institution, left the college environment in order to pursue other options or fulfill other commitments considered a higher priority: Joey, Jack and Kevin all pursued full-time employment opportunities; Carol, Patty and Sandy opted to pursue family obligations that made themselves present during their time at the university; and Drew chose to take time off to reconsider his future options. These choices made more sense to the participants than attending college at that time, seemingly a rational decision for them and their responsibilities.
These themes related to student non-persistence appear to be in line with the idea that withdrawing from the university may be a reasonable alternative with obvious benefits for young Appalachians. The five returners to college – Carol, Joey, Jack, and Patty all demonstrated that college was an integral part of their career plans albeit at a later stage in their lives. But for the non-returners – Drew, Kevin and Sandy – who attending college post high school, the decision may not have been in their interests. In addressing the answer to the one of the guiding questions of this study – is college appropriate for all individuals after high school and to lead to success in adulthood? – the answer is, “no.” A life devoted to place and family is often considered tantamount to success (Burnell, 2003; Briggs, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); I can see why the local opportunities made more sense for the participants in this study.

Discussion

The United States is comprised of a multitude of diverse ethnicities and cultures unlike many of the countries mentioned earlier in the European Union and Africa. The anticipation or expectation that all citizens should have a bachelor’s degree is simply not an attainable goal in my opinion, nor should it be presumed to be the best goal for all individuals at all times, specifically immediately after high school.

The rite of passage from high school to adulthood, whether that is higher education or entry to the workforce, is considered one of life’s major transitions. This study addresses that transition. The discussion of this transition and its relevance and impact on high school graduates from rural Appalachia, is necessary to determine the plausibility of the national goal for this population and to discern the applicability of this
study in relation to current literature. I address the following discussion points: a description of Schreiner’s (2013) Thriving Principle as it relates to three areas of assimilation for individuals who enter higher education – social, academic and emotional thriving; the notion of college being the right thing, but at the wrong time for some individuals; and the idea that an academic education may not be the best option for a portion of our nation’s workforce.

**Schreiner’s thriving principle.** Schreiner (2013) referred to a successful transition into new situations as thriving, where she defined transitions as situations in which one experiences a significant event that requires change and inevitably creates a stress reaction. A successful transition is one in which the individual sees the transition as a positive opportunity for growth personally. She then considered a student’s higher education experience from the view of what she described as thriving in higher education. Thriving, according to Schreiner is a combination of three areas that impact new students as they transition into the university environment. She posited that there are three areas that are involved in thriving a transition: 1) Academic - which includes engaged learning and academic determination; 2) Social - which includes and social connectedness and 3) Emotional - which includes possessing a positive perspective. These areas will be discussed in relation to the results of this study and the perspective of thriving the transition from high school to college.

**Academic thriving.** Schreiner (2013) described two key components of academically thriving the transition into higher education. One area is engaged learning which she defined as meaningful processing, focused attention and active participation in
the learning process. The male participants in this study (Drew, Jack and Joey) did not experience academic thriving. These participants sought meaning in their courses that they felt would apply to their future career interests, but when they became disinterested, they chose to withdraw rather than engage. Drew and Joey specifically mentioned liberal arts courses that they felt were unrelated to their lives as a major factor in their decision to not persist. Jack described how he did not like the information he was learning, so he stopped going to classes.

Similar to the lack of engaged learning, the men also lacked academic determination to forge through the courses that did not appeal to them in order to achieve their degree goals. Academic determination requires effort, self-regulated learning, coping skills and goal directedness according to Schreiner (2013) and for these men there was no interest in overcoming these academic challenges since they could not envision a positive outcome from learning the material and their futures.

*Social thriving.* Schreiner (2013) described social thriving as the appreciation of a diverse environment and its differences and development of a social connectedness with the university through positive relationships with others. The diversity of the higher education environment may have different meanings for different people and while not necessarily considered a negative, there was an impact, nonetheless, to viewing different populations or being considered different from others on campus.

During our conversations, Joey experienced two types of diversity growing up: international and ethnic. When he was a child in the sixth grade, Joey had a best friend from Canada. He was intrigued by the subtle differences in speech patterns and
entertainment interests. He embraced the knowledge as a young man and his interest in diversity continued in higher education when he became acquainted with a peer of African-American descent. Rather than shying away or making disparaging remarks about the man as did his classmates, Joey chose to befriend the man and take the opportunity to learn more about him, eventually helping him obtain employment at the farm where Joey worked. Joey described these areas when asked about his feelings about his own social integration and did not mention any sense of feeling like he was different than his college peers, likely due to his attendance at a local university where he attended with many of his former high school classmates.

Carol, on the other hand, described a pronounced sense of awareness early in her post-secondary academic career at a private liberal arts college. Carol was a married woman among a field of enterprising young East Coast students who were not married and who were involved in much different social circles. Sandy described the same type of awkwardness and sense of being out of place as an undergraduate married woman at a public university. The diversity these two women felt was not accepted by their peers and was a contributor to their withdrawal.

Others expressed a lack of social connectedness as a reason for their inability to persist. Drew and Shelley both expressed worries about being able to fit in socially when they reached their respective universities. Drew was a loner in high school who found it hard to make friends and his concerns about being able to successfully establish relationships in college were justified. Like Joey, Drew attended a local university where many of their high school peers attended, but for Drew, he felt out of place since he did
not know the peers in high school and did not make the attempt to get to know them in college.

Shelley was involved in many school activities in high school, but she expressed concerns about going away to college since only one other person from her large high school would also be attending the same university. Shelley was determined to make the best of her new experience and connected with her soon-to-be roommates prior to arriving on campus in order to facilitate a smoother transition, however, discontent with her roommates and her inability to make personal connections on campus contributed to her withdrawal as it also did for Drew.

**Emotional thriving.** Schreiner (2013) describes emotional thriving as possessing optimism and a subjective sense of well-being. In my study, only one participant, Patty, seemed to demonstrate the most enthusiasm, optimism and yearning to complete what she started. Patty entered her nursing program intent to earn an associate degree at first, then pursued her bachelor’s degree while she worked. Despite the long drive she made to the college each day, she maintained the vigor required to be successful and optimistic that she was doing the right thing. When she became pregnant and a single mother, she did not let it deter her from goals; she persevered, earned her associate degree and is currently completing courses toward her bachelor’s degree, all while being a single mom to her now two sons. Her example is not just one of academic thriving, but also of emotional thriving that she was able to conquer her personal obstacles in order to continue her pursuit of education.
For the three other participants who were considered stop-outs (Carol, Jack, Joey), emotional thriving might be considered in a different way. All three of those participants waited to return to higher education until they were “ready” to accomplish their goal of a bachelor’s degree. For Carol, it was raising a family first; For Jack, it was finding the determination to reject the advice of his advisors and pursue his interests; and for Joey, it was discovering the career path that was right for him before engaging in higher education, all forms of emotional thriving.

I agree with Schreiner (2013) that transitions are positive opportunities for growth for an individual, but I contend that the terms “successful” and “thriving” may vary from individual to individual. When one initially considers a transition to higher education, the positive or successful gauge would be likely whether that individual graduates from the institution within the 5 or 6 year mark for undergraduates indicated by most institutions. I would agree that the completion of one’s degree would be considered a success by society’s standards of success. I contend, however, that the following individual is successful, despite not considered thriving by Schreiner – An individual enters higher education, as did the participants in this study, determines that the university is not a good fit, finds success elsewhere, such as with family or employment, is a successful individual who thrived in an alternate arena.

By Schreiner’s (2013) definition, successful transitions often result in a positive perception of one’s self, demonstrating healthy coping skills as he approaches rather than avoids a situation and where he finds personally significant growth as a result of his decision. The student who withdraws from higher education, but experiences personal
satisfaction and happiness in the area he is now be experiencing should be considered as successful as the individual who remains in higher education and graduates.

For these eight participants, persistence in higher education was not appropriate at that time in their lives (immediately after high school); however, the reasons for their withdrawal were real and impactful on their lives. Several of the participants left for a combination of issues related to social, academic and family situations. For many of the participants, the indirect influences of money and family played a large role in their decision to withdraw. For Appalachians, these two areas – family and money- are of high value and typically guide any decision-making, not just in higher education (Howley & Howley, 2006). The notion that the individual did not thrive the transition to higher education when they would be considered successful in their Appalachian culture would be misconstrued. Rather, I view the participant’s decision to transition away from higher education to a situation that had a better fit a successful and thriving transition for that individual. The majority of the participants found that when the time was right for them, they thrived in higher education and earned their degrees.

Right Thing, Wrong Time

It is no secret that the completion rates of undergraduate students across the nation are falling. According to Carnevale and Rose (2011), only 44% of US college students complete a degree in five years (p. 239). One recent national report determined that at this rate, “today’s young people will be the first generation in American history to be less educated that their predecessors” (Complete College America, 2011, p.2). What this report failed to consider, in my opinion, is the large number of non-traditional
students who are returning to higher education to complete their bachelor’s degrees. One study by Jones, Mortimer and Sathre (2007) reported on the attainment of degrees by adult students:

[The] U.S. will likely be unable to regain its place of primacy [international comparisons of college completion] by 2025 if it relies solely on strategies focused on traditional-age students [referring to 18–24 years of age]. Attention will necessarily have to be directed at enhancing the education attainment levels of adults who have fallen into the cracks of the education system somewhere along the way. The low-hanging fruit are those individuals who started, but did not complete, a college education. There are 32,266,000 adults age 25–64 who fall into this category. (p. vii)

Kasworm (2011) posits that American higher education needs to be mindful of the “significant responsibilities and life conditions influencing adult involvement in higher education” (p. 216). Statistics reveal that for adult students in general there is a significant amount of impact on one’s studies from outside sources such as work and family, like the Appalachians who withdrew and whose unique Appalachian culture supports employment and family at a young age, generally right out of high school.

The participants in this study appear to closely mimic the statistics mentioned. When the time was “right” for the five returning participants to higher education, all were employed while attending college as demonstrated by Carol, Jack, Joey, Patty, and Shelley. Two of the returners were married when they re-entered the university (Carol and Jack) and two of the participants, Carol and Patty, had children to support when they
decided to resume their educations. As indicated by the previous research on non-
traditional students, the participants had multiple roles and responsibilities while
attending higher education. For these individuals who handled multiple responsibilities,
correct timing was essential.

Five of the participants returned to higher education after withdrawing – Carol, Jack, Joey, Patty and Shelley. Three of these participants (Jack, Joey and Patty) completed associate degrees prior to pursing the bachelor’s degree. While Jack did not assume financial debt from earning the associate degree, he did utilize financial aid while completing his bachelor’s degree as did the other four participants. Financial aid for all of the participants was necessary in order for them to attend higher education whether or not they completed their educational journey.

While it is true that adult students have many responsibilities that they must juggle while attending college, it makes me wonder if the reason behind rural Appalachian first-generation students not persisting is because of their priority of higher education in relation to their other life options (i.e. employment, finances and aversion to debt, marriage, and family) and they choose to return to higher education once they feel they have controlled for the external variables in their lives as much as possible.

First-Generation Appalachian Contexts

According to Choy (2001) and Chen (2005), first-generation students are less likely to have earned a bachelor’s degree than their continuing-generation counterparts. Ishitani (2001) found that the risk for withdrawal of first-generation students to be 71% higher than for those who had at least one college educated parent. Many other studies
also indicating such findings as Ishitani (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Quinn, 2004).

Several challenging issues often confront the Appalachian first-generation student once they have set foot on campus and these shall be examined – social relationships, academic preparedness, and financial constraints. While these issues are common to a wide variety of cultures, each issue also inserts additional challenges based on Appalachian culture.

**Social relationships.** Bateau (1991) studied the culture of Appalachians. He posits that Appalachians form particularly close social relationships in rural communities. For those born and raised in Appalachia, the significance of relationships with family and others are entrenched with connections to place, religion and an inclusive identity (Burnell, 2003). While the participants in this study had supportive families, the connection to families and the participants’ sense of obligation and commitment to care for family members outweighed the opportunity to attend college. When the participants attended the college or university, they often encountered individuals who were unlike themselves, which contributed to the desire to return to their “home place” as a few of the participants called the area where they were raised.

As mentioned previously Joey embraced diversity and Jack was comfortable with all types of people from his younger days, but for the majority of the participants, the attempts to integrate into the social atmosphere were met with resistance as they felt markedly different from their same-aged peers as Carol and Sandy described about their
status as married women. Other participants either tried and failed to establish meaningful relationships or did not attempt to create relationships as in the case of Drew.

**Academic preparedness.** One factor often cited by low-income, first-generation students regarding attending an institution of higher education is their perception of academic preparedness. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) studied high school students in rural Appalachia and determined that there were preconceived notions of what students believed that factors influenced their decisions to attend college which primarily revolved around: their high school curriculum, perceived intelligence and confidence of being prepared to handle college coursework.

**High school curriculum and perceived intelligence.** In this study, five of the eight participants were enrolled in the Talented and Gifted (TAG) programs at their elementary schools and three of the participants were class valedictorians indicating that their academic abilities were high in relation to their local peers. However, the quality of education and the resources available to small, rural, community schools is often far less than suburban communities, for example. A study by Reid and Moore (2008) illustrated how high achieving students in high school felt about their academic preparation once in college. One of their participants described how she thought she was prepared until she saw that many of her peers had already used many of the tools in the science labs. Her high school did not have the resources to provide the types of instruments and lab experiments as many of her middle class peers in college, therefore, she felt less competent.
While none of the participants in this study indicated that they felt the course requirements were too difficult for them, two of the participants were on academic probation at the time of their withdrawal. Both Jack and Drew expressed that they thought college was a continuation of high school, yet they both were placed on academic probation which may indicate not only disinterest in the courses, but also difficulty with the material in the courses.

**Financial constraints.** Strained financial circumstances, of course, have a significant bearing on the college choices of all students (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Hogarth & Hilgert, 2002; Merrow, 2007), but they obviously bear down more heavily on working-class students. With respect to Appalachian first-generation students, Spohn and colleagues (1992) investigated the influences associated with the rural high school students’ low rates of pursuit of higher education in central Appalachia. They found that the costs associated with college were the *major* obstacle for students.

In this study, all of the participants came from working-class backgrounds. With the exception of Drew who had a tuition waiver, all of the participants mentioned the cost of higher education as a serious consideration in their decision to pursue or continue their higher education. For Shelley, the impact of the recent recession on her family’s business was significant and required that she relocate to a less expensive school. For Carol, Patty, Sandy and Jack the responsibility for paying for the college expenses fell directly on them as their families were all utilizing some sort of government subsidies and were not able to contribute financially. When the cost of education and living expenses became too much for Sandy and her husband, she had to withdraw from the university in order to
work full-time. Jack preferred to pay for his education each term and not assume any
debt; so after he withdrew from higher education the first time, he worked several jobs in
order to be able to save money to return to higher education at a later date.

Typically, most individuals would agree that education is always worthwhile;
However, the costs of higher education make it an issue of great magnitude for many in
the working-class. With the recent recession, opportunities for college graduates are
scarce; therefore, it may be a rational choice for some to forgo their higher education
until such a time as they can afford to navigate the outside forces that impact their
attendance as did several of the participants in this study who withdrew in order to attend
to other responsibilities.

Educational Goals

Some of the participants in this study had developed specific goals for their
studies, but others blindly attended higher education as they felt it was a rite of passage
and the next natural step in the educational order. For the men in this study, in particular,
it seemed that the lack of a goal was the primary reason for their withdrawal. Without a
specific goal for their educations, they felt they were floundering in classes that were of
no interest to them and they sought no value in expanding their horizons in learning about
the liberal arts, which are the foundation of academic degrees. This is not surprising
since individuals from the working-class environment often seek direct correlations
between the work that they perform and the finished product or goal (Crawford, 2009;
Willis, 1981).
Appalachians, males in particular, view learning as the means to an end. One learns how to do something in order to master it in a job, so that he or she can support others (i.e. family members). What this study pointed out quite candidly is that if there was no specific goal for learning, then the opportunity to learn was stopped until such a time that the connection to employment could be made. For example, this was the case with Joey.

Joey worked as a farm-hand and enjoyed what he was doing immensely, but when he learned the impracticalness of own his own farming operation, he did what all of the other academically skilled peers did and he attended college. Joey was doing what others expected him to do. During his time at the university, he still worked on the farm. He discovered early on, and after some critical feedback from instructors that he would much rather be doing what he liked as opposed to what he didn’t like; Therefore, he withdrew from higher education. After working on the farm full-time and enjoying his favorite fishing past-time, Joey met an individual who worked in natural resources in the game ward. This type of work interested him and it wasn’t long before Joey was seeking out a degree in which he could spend time working with animals and be outdoors while he worked, similar to the farm. Now that Joey was a little older, more sure of himself and his interests and had a goal, he could see how a college education would help him attain his goal, he enrolled once again in higher education.

As previously mentioned, a clear goal for one’s education is important to the working-class as the ultimate goal for one’s education is gainful employment. For Appalachians, the ability to realize a goal for employment in their local area is
paramount. Patty, despite the obstacles she faced as a single mom, persevered in her studies. The importance of family and gainful employment is so engrained in Appalachians, that there was no questioning that she would continue her studies at some point. After she had her child, she worked for a brief time to provide for herself and her son before resuming her education to become a nurse. In typical Appalachian fashion, Patty formulated her goals in the following order: (1) family, (2) finances, (3) education. With those three goals on mind, she was able to arrange her life in such a way as to meet the three goals that were important to her and her future.

As mentioned previously in the section, *Right Thing, Wrong Time*, many students do not persist for various reasons, but for the participants in this study, college proved to be the right thing for five of them, but right after high school was not the right time for them to attend higher education for a variety of reasons, but primarily related to lack of career goals and the importance of family to this specific population.

In Drew’s case, although he required additional education for his career, he found the courses at a technical institution that offered a certificate program rather than an academic one which would have not been appropriate for his career goal, thereby demonstrating that college is not for all.

**College is Not for All**

One of the questions directing this study addressed how the non-persisters made sense of their decision to withdraw from higher education. As demonstrated above, five of the eight participants in this study returned to higher education after they resolved the
obstacles that hindered them the first time they attended; however, three of the study’s eight participants have chosen not to return to higher education.

Kevin and Sandy continued employment after withdrawing from college citing the need to earn an income to support themselves and others. Kevin works as a local vending distributor and Sandy works in retail. While both stated that they would like to return to education, and see the benefit of doing so, neither has returned to their studies.

One participant, Drew, has a different opinion regarding higher education.

Drew grew up spending time with his mother who worked at the university as an administrative assistant in computer services. While Drew had some knowledge of higher education, more than the majority of first-generation students and certainly the participants in this study, he does not aspire to a college degree. When asked how he felt about not earning a degree, he put it this way:

I went to college, college wasn't for me, I tried working…I found a job I really liked, so I stuck with it…you don’t necessarily have to get a degree, but you certainly should get more education,… in probably the technical way to get a better job or whatever… you need some extra information about more than what high school will provide you, but as far as the degree. I don't know that's entirely necessary to make you happy, and you can live with[out a degree]…so I guess be happy…do what you think, you know, go much as you want…and if you don't…you find something else you'd rather do…Whatever that is…you can get into trade school, technical school…
Even when Drew tried to attend a technical school, he withdrew after taking two courses that interested him; he then entered the workforce. Drew is now married with two children and is working full-time in his hometown as a medical technician – a much needed occupation that requires technical training and no degree.

When I began this dissertation process in 2008, no one knew that an economic recession was forthcoming, which caused many policy-makers, including the President of the United States, to rethink their position, or perhaps their framing of the initial goal of a four year degree for all (see Kirwin quote in beginning of Chapter 1). As President Barack Obama noted in his address to a joint session of Congress on Feb. 24, 2009:

In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity - it is a prerequisite. … I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school, vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma (http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-of-President-Barack-Obama-Address-to-Joint-Session-of-Congress).

The amending of the original goal from a four year degree to one year of additional training is noteworthy and seems more in line with these findings in that a four year degree may not be practical for all individuals and certainly not for all professions.
Implications for Practice

The findings in this study may be beneficial for stakeholders in higher education and otherwise. There is a wealth of information for higher education practitioners and policymakers regarding the need to increase retention levels of current students and institutional efforts to retain them (Burnell, 2003; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998, 2005; Rosenbaum, Stephan, & Rosenbaum, 2010; Tinto, 2012); however, there is scarce research studying those former higher education students and the choices they made after withdrawal from higher education. As a result, student withdrawal is typically viewed as an attrition issue rather than an opportunity to re-enroll students at a later date.

Individuals such as the rural working-class Appalachians who withdraw and seek lives outside of education may be considered drop-outs rather than possible stop-outs, perhaps due to the assumption that they are a lost segment of their student population and their unique culture. As evidenced in the findings of this study, not all traditional-aged college students follow a continuous and linear path in higher education. The findings in this study will add to existing research regarding non-persisters and may shed light on what drew some of them back to higher education.

The findings of this study may also contribute to how secondary institutions guide students in rural Appalachian high schools. In particular, guidance counselors may consider amending or providing the traditional information disseminated to students to include options for different timeframes for additional learning as well as the types of institutions and programs available. Traditionally, guidance counselors have discussed
post-secondary options as immediate to high school graduation, but I propose that guidance counselors also consider the benefits of suggesting the possibility of considering higher education later in life as an acceptable viable option and stress the importance of lifelong learning as valuable to meeting one’s goals and aspirations.

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2006), “professional school counselors implement academic and career planning based on student’s abilities, interests and goals with the hope of reducing inequalities based on stereotypes or special needs as an important step toward equal access to post-secondary opportunities” (p.1). While working to reduce disparities among various college student populations in order to equalize the playing field for all students to attend higher education, perhaps the pendulum has swung too far. One study by Bryant and Nicolas (2011) suggested that there were differences between the aspirations of first-generation college students and their counterparts – continuing generation students. They contend that perhaps information specifically oriented for first-generation students is deficient in the areas of academic preparedness, college knowledge, and the college selection process. The information garnered in this study seems to indicate that there are variances among these two student groups that would indeed warrant the notion of separate, but equally informative, post-secondary options based on the circumstances of students and their priorities for life post-high school. There several responsibilities and priorities and options for high school graduates, but for those who have strong ties to family and community, the decision to delay college until later may be one that should be considered and perhaps even suggested as reasonable for some students, especially those with
unclear career goals. The males in this study in particular indicated that they felt
unprepared to make career decisions right out of high school and blindly attended higher
education as the expected route after high school. Perhaps the findings could contribute
to resources that would aid in occupation discernment and determination of appropriate
avenues for post-secondary education as many paths in higher education exist outside of
academia. Policy-makers should consider that not all people will want to attend higher
education, no matter how much they are encouraged, and, therefore, we must strongly
consider and appreciate the aspirations of those who choose not to do so as rational and
practical. In addition, they should appreciate the fact that college is important to many
individuals; however, the traditional timeline for attending higher education immediately
after high school may not be appropriate for some individuals and respect that stopping-
out of college and returning later is not the same as quitting or dropping out. Policies that
that provide the same respect to apprenticeships, certificates and continuing education,
none of which earn college credit, are practical for employment in plumbing, carpentry,
retail, hospitality, and service positions.

Implications for Research

While conducting my study, ideas emerged for future research in the areas of
drop-out, stop-out and persistence in higher education. Little research has been conducted
in differentiating the possibilities for students post-withdrawal from higher education and
whether they returned to education in the future. While the majority of my participants
did return to higher education or plan to in the future, my small sample may not be
indicative of larger populations. Student withdrawals have been viewed as an attrition
issue with little to no follow-up from the institution of higher education. More investigation into non-persisters’ plans may be beneficial in predicting who may return to higher education at a later date or would help determine individuals who chose military service for the educational benefits before returning to higher education, for example. One area that may also warrant additional research is the attendance patterns of diverse populations (i.e. minority, low SES, urban, middle class)

One area that I noticed with the participants in my study is that many attended an academic college or university without considering other options for higher education, specifically technical and vocational options. First-generation students in particular would benefit from more information regarding the various educational opportunities available and differences in post-secondary education options especially since many rural Appalachians prefer to remain close to their families and home communities where jobs may require specific skills sets and knowledge. Research that investigates the college knowledge possessed by first-generation students prior to enrolling in an academic setting may be beneficial.

In addition, this study could be replicated with other populations such as middle-class or continuing generation non-persisters. Another possibility would be to study those first-generation non-persisters who did return to higher education in more depth to determine if there are specific variables that would indicate if an individual would return to higher education. Such research may assist universities in viewing withdrawals as a retention possibility rather than an attrition issue. Studies that followed up with non-persisters would benefit the university in several ways. One option would be to try to
have the non-persisters return to their original institution as non-traditional students, perhaps as online students if they cannot attend on campus. Another way would be to understand how many non-persisters return to higher education later in their lives and what types of education they earn and how they learned (i.e. other institutions, types of degrees, certificates, online). Information from these types of studies may change the way attrition and retention are defined and considered in the future as many institutions receive funding based on these numbers. In addition as institutions look for additional ways to increase attendance, the returners may generate an additional source of previously untapped revenue.

**Reflections**

While conducting the interviews with the study’s participants, I found myself relating to many of the situations and feelings that the participants expressed – anxiety in new situations and with new people, enjoyment of particular classes and dislike of others, and the unsettled feeling of being out of place in the university setting. While I was a rural, first-generation college student and now graduate, I am not Appalachian and so the particulars of their closeness to family and place were different from my experiences where I was eager to leave and try new things.

I began this study by suggesting that the reality of the national call to become the world’s leader in the number of students who graduate from higher education is not a reasonable one as suggested in the beginning of the study. My thought was that many occupations do not require a college degree, but rather some other form of post-secondary education such as a technical degree or certificate. What my findings did reflect was a
need for all types of higher education, with the majority of my participants earning the bachelor’s degree and one earning a certificate later in life and not immediately after high school. My findings overwhelmingly indicated that the post-secondary education was necessary for their careers, but also that for these participants, immediately after high school was not the right time for them to attain the education. Whether it was for external reasons such as family or financial reasons, or internal reasons such as the need for a period of discernment, the delay in returning to school was productive for the individuals.

Also, I began this study intending to focus on non-persisters, but instead it became a story of persisters for many of the participants. Five of the eight participants returned to higher education and two of the participants plan to return to higher education. What I sought out to find was true, but with a twist. I believe that my suspicions that college is not suited for all individuals, was justified by the number of non-persisters that colleges and universities lose each year; however, I was surprised by how many of the participants returned to higher education a few or even several years later. There is not much research on how many students who leave higher education return later in life and finish their degree; however, knowledge that many, perhaps a majority of, non-persisters actually return to higher education is important and should be viewed as opportunities for increasing retention rates in the future perhaps.

The most poignant finding to me was the story of Jack who was raised in very poor circumstances, who learned that hard-work was not a choice, but a requirement for success, and who struggled so often with all stages of his education and is now a doctor.
His story, to me, is remarkable and a testament to the determination of individuals from the Appalachian culture. Likewise, Patty’s perseverance and drive to achieve her goals is an inspiration as I complete my doctoral requirements.

This research has also allowed me to secure employment and be successful in my current position in online student retention services. Through my findings, I am able to use the information I have acquired to help design services for my students that provide options for their studies. I see the importance of helping them understand university procedures, policies, services and more that aid in the retention of online students, many of whom are non-traditional adults. The non-traditional student also captures, in part, what I also have experienced in my return to higher education several years. I was thirty-five years old when I began graduate school and felt, like many adult students, somewhat out of place in higher education. A clear vision of my career goals, financial stability and family support encouraged me to continue my studies, but my immersion into the research for this study, confirmed my decision to continue this work despite obstacles. Without support and understanding of the obstacles by my mentors, my future as a first-generation graduate student may have looked a lot different also.
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Appendix A: Introduction Letter

Dear (Name),

My name is Ginny Cottrill, and I am a doctoral student at Ohio University in the Educational Administration Program. I am currently in the process of conducting a dissertation study on first-generation university students from Appalachia as part of the requirements for my degree. The purpose of the study is to understand what led a group of Appalachian, first-generation college students to decide to discontinue their studies at Ohio University during or after their first academic year. The findings of the study will be published in my doctoral dissertation and may be presented at professional conferences or published in professional journals or texts.

I have identified you as a possible candidate for participation in my study. If you are the first person in your family to attend college, meaning that neither of your parents graduated from a 4 year university or college, then I would like to hear from you!

The study will involve a series of three 60-90 minute interviews to be scheduled at a convenient time and place for you. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Please know that your name, the name of the university and of all participants will be changed on the transcripts and final copy in an effort to maintain confidentiality. All interviews will be audio recorded and the recordings, as well as all transcriptions, notes and other related material will be securely stored.

Please read enclosed consent form for more information about my study. If you would like to participate, please contact me by email at the following address: cottrilv@ohio.edu. Please include your preferred phone number and email address in your email.

I hope to hear from you soon. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact me at (740) 336-0323 or cottrilv@ohio.edu. Thank you in advance for your assistance with this project. I look forward to hearing about your university experience!

Sincerely,

Ginny Cottrill
Doctoral Candidate
Appendix B: Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Working-class, Appalachian Dropouts: Life After Leaving the University
Researcher: Virginia (Ginny) Cottrill

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 seeks to understand the educational, social and personal experiences of first-generation, first-year, Appalachian former students of Ohio University prior, during, and post attendance. Selected participants will be asked to participate in three 60-90 minute interviews.

**Risks and Discomforts**

There are psychological risks associated with disclosing perceptions about controversial issues and the subject matter for this dissertation may be controversial for participants. To minimize these risks, all participants will be given pseudonyms and will not be referred to by name in the final manuscript. Also, all interviews will take place in private locations and in locations acceptable to interviewees.

**Benefits**

University students are rapidly becoming more diverse. As student populations change, universities are challenged to address issues relevant to diverse cultures, including Appalachians. This study may prove to be useful to institutions of higher education experiencing increased populations of Appalachian students.

**Confidentiality and Records**

All participants will be assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities and views expressed during this study. In addition, audio records from the interviews will be stored securely on the researcher’s computer, transcribed, and will be destroyed after completion of the dissertation study. The names of participants will not be used on the transcriptions to further protect confidentiality. 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
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Ginny Cottrill at 740.336.0323 or cottrilv@ohio.edu.

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 stop participating in 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: 4/6/12
Appendix C: First Interview Questions

1. Please tell me some things about yourself.
   a. Where do you live now?
   b. Have you always lived there? If not, where else have you lived?
   c. Where were you born?

2. Has your family lived in this area for a long time? If not, where else have they lived?
   a. Tell me about the area where you grew up.
   b. How would you describe your life growing up?

3. What was your elementary school experience like?

4. What was your middle school experience like?

5. What was your high school experience like?

6. What particular people or experiences come to mind when you think about your elementary, middle, and high school years?

7. What did you want to become when you grew up?

8. When did you begin thinking about attending a college or university?
   a. With whom did you discuss college plans?
   b. How did those discussions go?

9. How did you choose Ohio University?

10. What did you think you would like (or not like) about Ohio University?

11. Did you know anyone else who was attending Ohio University?
Appendix D: Second Interview Questions

[[Briefly review the previous responses for accuracy and explain that in this interview, we are going to discuss what the time he or she spent at Ohio University.]]

1. What did you expect college to be like??
   a. How were you feeling about attending the college?
   b. How did you feel about living away from home? (if applicable)
   c. What did you think college classes would be like?
   d. What did you think social life at college would be like?

2. What were your actual experiences in your first quarter?
   a. What experiences stood out to you during that time?
   b. What were your experiences with the academic side of college?
   c. What were your experiences with the social side of college?

3. As the academic year progressed, what did you experience??
   a. How did you feel about your courses?
   b. How did you spend your time outside of class?
   c. How did you interact with friends?
   d. How often did you go home for visits while attending Ohio University?

   What were those visits like?

4. Tell me about when your thoughts about attending Ohio University began to change? (Tell me when you first started to consider leaving the university?)

5. What are your thoughts now about your time spent at Ohio University?
Appendix E: Third Interview Questions

1. Describe what your life has been like since you left Ohio University?
   
   a. How did your attendance at the university influence your current situation and the decisions you now make?

2. What work experiences have you had since attending Ohio University?
   
   What changes have occurred in your family life (e.g., have you married, had children)?

   What changes in your social life have taken place?

3. What are your plans for the future?

4. Looking back on the decision to attend Ohio University and your experiences, what are your overall thoughts and feelings?

5. How do you fit the college experience—both the choice to go to college and the choice to leave college—into the story of your life thus far?